

## Epigraphy, Buddhist Historiography, and Fighting Monks: The Case of The Shaolin Monastery

In the winter of 1513 a scholar named Du Mu 都穆 (1459–1525) journeyed to Shaolin 少林 Monastery in Henan province. Established during the late-fifth century, the Buddhist monastery was situated on the slopes of the sacred Mount Song 嵩, some thirty-five miles southeast of Luoyang (see map, following page). The monastery was renowned centuries before Du's visit, due in part to the hagiographic literature of the Chan school. Legend had it that the founder of Chan Buddhism, Bodhidharma (Damo 達摩) (fl. ca. 500), meditated nine years in a cave overlooking Shaolin Monastery. Indeed, the saint's figure, which had been cast as a shadow on the cave's wall, was supposedly visible a thousand years later, when it was shown to such visitors as Du Mu.<sup>1</sup>

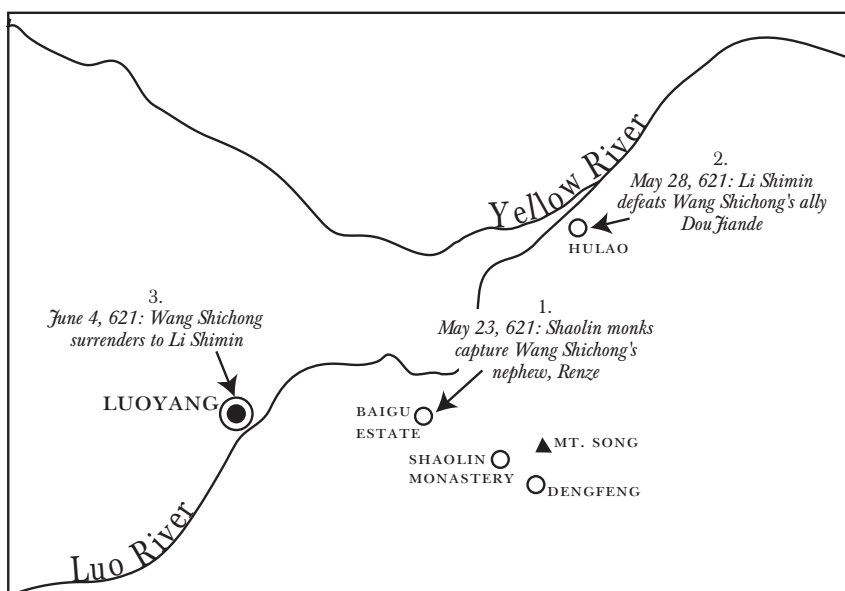
Du Mu traveled to Shaolin to examine the monastery's ancient inscriptions. The Shaolin Monastery boasted a large collection of medieval steles, which were bestowed upon it by such powerful patrons

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<sup>1</sup> See Du Mu, *Jin xie linlang* 金蓮琳琅 (Ming edn.; copy Beijing Library) 20, p. 8a; cf. his *You mingshan ji* 遊名山記 (preface 1515), in *Baoyantang miji* 寶顏堂秘笈, ed. by Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558–1639) (1606–1620 edn.; copy Harvard-Yenching Library) 1, pp. 18a–23a. On Shaolin Monastery, see Fu Mei 傅梅, *Song shu* 嵩書 (preface 1612; copy Naikaku Bunko) (the *Song shu* chapters relevant to Shaolin Monastery history have been reprinted under the title *Songshan Shaolin si ji zhi* 嵩山少林寺輯志 in series no. 2, vols 23–24 of *Zhongguo Fo si zhi hui kan* 中國佛志彙刊 [Taipei: Mingwen shuju, 1980]); Jing Rizhen 景日珍, *Shuo Song* 說嵩 (preface 1721; copy Harvard-Yenching Library); and *Shaolin si zhi* 少林寺志 (preface 1748), comp. Ye Feng 葉封 et al., revised Shi Yizan 施奕簪 et al. (copy Harvard-Yenching Library).

The best modern history is Wen Yucheng's 溫玉成 *Shaolin fanggu* 少林訪古 (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi, 1999); see also Xu Changqing 徐長青, *Shaolin si yu Zhongguo wenhua* 少林寺與中國文化 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji, 1993); Dengfeng xian bangong shi 登封縣志辦公室, ed., *Xin bian Shaolin si zhi* 新編少林寺志 (Beijing: Zhongguo luyou, 1988); *Shaolin si ziliao ji* 少林寺資料集, ed. Wu Gu 無谷 and Liu Zhixue 劉志學 (Beijing: Shumu wenxian, 1982); *Shaolin si ziliao ji xu bian* 續編, ed. Wu Gu and Yao Yuan 姚遠 (Beijing: Shumu wenxian, 1984); and "Shōrinji" 少林寺, in Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信享 ed., *Bukkyō daijiten* 佛教大辭典 (Kyoto: Sekai seiten kankō kyōkai, 1954–1971), vol. 3, pp. 2806–7. On Shaolin martial tradition, see Tang Hao 唐豪, *Shaolin Wudang kao* 少林武當攷 (1919; photographic reprint, Hong Kong: Qilin tushu, 1968); Tang Hao, *Shaolin quanshu mijue kaozheng* 少林拳術秘訣考証 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guoshu xiejing hui, 1941); and Meir Shahar, "Ming-Period Evidence of Shaolin Martial Practice," *HJAS* 61.2 (December 2001), pp. 359–413.

as empress Wu 武 (r. 684–705).<sup>2</sup> Du was interested in the Shaolin inscriptions both as masterpieces of ancient calligraphy and as sources of the monastery’s history. His examination yielded unexpected fruits – evidence that as early as the medieval period some Shaolin monks



were renowned as warriors. He found that Shaolin monks assisted Li Shimin 李世民 (600–649) in the campaigns that led to the founding of the Tang dynasty (618–907). This discovery, Du concluded, “could rectify an omission in the [official] *Tang History* 可補唐書之缺.”<sup>3</sup>

The Shaolin inscriptions discovered by Du Mu are the subject of this essay. As he himself pointed out, they unravel an untold story in the official Tang histories, one of Buddhist monks who assisted a future emperor in the battlefield. Moreover, the events they record are not mentioned in Buddhist historiography either. The monks that compiled the voluminous section of the Buddhist canon that is devoted to history were loath to discuss monastic involvement in warfare, for it contradicted their religion’s prohibition against violence. Buddhist authors preferred to ignore instances, such as those attested at Shaolin, in which monks resorted to arms. Thus, Shaolin epigraphic sources

<sup>2</sup> For a list of Shaolin’s extant steles, see *Xin bian Shaolin si zhi*, pp. 83–88.

<sup>3</sup> Du, *You mingshan ji*, p. 19a.

shed invaluable light on a topic ignored by Buddhist historiography: monastic warfare.

#### THE “SHAOLIN MONASTERY STELE” OF 728

The evidence that Du Mu found concerning Shaolin military activities consists of seven texts authored between 621 and 728. Despite their diverse dates, the seven texts were engraved in 728 on one stele, which has remained in the monastery to this day.<sup>4</sup> The large stele – 11.3 feet tall and 4.2 feet wide – is usually referred to in the scholarly literature as “Shaolin si bei” 少林寺碑 (“The Shaolin Monastery Stele”). It has been studied by such scholars as Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), Wang Chang 王昶 (1725–1806), Niida Noboru 仁井田陸 (1904–1966), and, most recently, Tonami Mamoru 礪波護 (1937–).<sup>5</sup> Tonami, like Niida, highlights the Shaolin Monastery Stele’s economic and legal significance. In contrast, this essay examines its implications for the study of early-Tang monastic warfare.

In Changan in 618, when Li Yuan 李淵 (566–635; emperor Gaozu 高祖) proclaimed the establishment of a new, Tang, dynasty, he was far from the only contender to the throne of the defunct Sui dynasty. Before Tang rule was firmly established, Li Yuan had to overcome several military leaders who vied for power. One was the Sui general Wang Shichong 王世充 (?–621), who in 619 declared himself emperor of a dynasty named Zheng 鄭. Wang, like his Sui predecessors, established a capital at Luoyang and at the height of his power controlled virtually all of Henan province.

Li Yuan’s second son, Li Shimin, was charged with the war against Wang. At the time, Li Shimin was titled prince of Qin (Qin wang 秦王).

<sup>4</sup> Du, *Jin xie linlang* 12, pp. 1a–8b, transcribed only one of these texts. However, his comments on it attest that he had read the other six as well; cf. *You mingshan ji* 1, pp. 18a–23a.

<sup>5</sup> See Gu Yanwu, *Jinshi wenzi ji* 金石文字記 (SKQS edn.) 2, pp. 29b–30a; 3, pp. 34b–35b; Gu Yanwu, “Shaolin seng bing” 少林僧兵, in his *Rizhilu ji shi* 日知錄集釋, annot. by Huang Rucheng 黃汝成 (1834; photographic rpt., Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1984) 29, pp. 21a–22b; Wang Chang, *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 (1805 edn.) 41, pp. 1a–7a; 74, pp. 1a–8b; 77, pp. 15a–23a; Niida Noboru, *Tō Sō hōritsu bunsho no kenkyū* 唐宋法律文書の研究 (Tōhō bunka gakuin, 1937), pp. 830–33, and Tonami Mamoru, *The Shaolin Monastery Stele on Mount Song*, trans. P. A. Herbert, ed. Antonino Forte (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 1990). Tonami’s thorough monograph includes accurate transcriptions of the inscriptions as well as English translations by Penelope Herbert with Tonami’s aid. In the following I use my own translations, except where otherwise noted.

See also the stele’s partial transcriptions in Wen, *Shaolin fanggu*, pp. 80–81; Xu, *Shaolin si*, pp. 98–104; and *Xin bian Shaolin si zhi*, pp. 61–67, and the references to it in Denis Twitchett, “Monastic Estates in T’ang China,” *AM NS* 5.2 (1956), pp. 131–32, and Paul Demiéville, “Le Bouddhisme et la guerre: Post-scriptum à l’ ‘Histoire des moines guerriers du Japon’ de G. Renondeau,” rpt. *Choix d’études Bouddhiques* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 362–63.

Five years later, after a successful coup in which he eliminated his elder brother, he was to succeed his father to the imperial throne. As an emperor, Li Shimin laid the foundation for Tang civil bureaucracy as well as the dynasty's military might. He rationalized the administration, implemented a new legal code, and led the Tang army to unparalleled military victories in Central Asia. In the traditional histories, which refer to him by his posthumous temple-name Taizong 太宗, Li Shimin's reign is portrayed as a golden age of civil virtue and military supremacy.<sup>6</sup>

Li Shimin's war against Wang Shichong lasted almost a year – from August, 620, to June, 621. Li instructed his generals to refrain from attacking Wang's capital outright. Instead, they were to disrupt the food supply to Luoyang by occupying strategic junctions along the waterways leading to it. Only after several months of fighting did Li Shimin gradually tighten his siege of Luoyang, which by the spring of 621 was reduced to famine.

At this point another Sui rebel, Dou Jiande 竇建德 (?–621), came to Wang Shichong's rescue. Dou, who had established his power base in the Shandong-Hebei border region, feared that a victory by Tang forces would be detrimental to his own imperial ambitions. Therefore he accepted Wang's plea to form at least a temporary alliance against the Tang and in May, 621, marched his army towards Luoyang. Li Shimin decided to confront Dou Jiande first and deal with Wang Shichong later. On May 28 he personally led his armies to a great victory over Dou Jiande at Hulao 虎牢, some sixty miles northeast of Luoyang (see map, above). Following Dou's defeat, Wang Shichong had no choice but to surrender, and on June 4, 621, Luoyang fell into Li Shimin's hands. Shortly afterwards Dou Jiande was executed and Wang Shichong was murdered en route to exile.<sup>7</sup>

The Shaolin Monastery Stele reveals that Shaolin monks participated in Li Shimin's campaign against Wang Shichong. The texts inscribed on it attest that shortly before the Hulao victory, Shaolin monks defeated a contingent of Wang Shichong's army that occupied

<sup>6</sup> See Howard J. Wechsler, "T'ai-Tsung (Reign 626–49) The Consolidator," in *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1979) 3, pp. 188–241; see also Zhao Keyao 趙克堯 and Xu Daoxun 許道勳, *Tang Taizong zhuan* 唐太宗傳 (Beijing: Renmin, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> See Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995; hereafter *ZZTJ*) 189, pp. 5913–24; see also Wang Shichong's and Dou Jiande's biographies in Liu Xu 劉煦 (887–946) et al., comps., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975; hereafter *JTS*) 54, pp. 2227–43, and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72), Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061) et al., comps., *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982; hereafter *XTS*) 85, pp. 3689–3703; for general background see Howard J. Wechsler, "The Founding of the T'ang Dynasty: Kao-tsu (Reign 618–26)," in *Cambridge History* 3, pp. 162–67, and Zhao and Xu, *Tang Taizong*, pp. 39–44.

the strategic Mount Huanyuan 輾輳, where the monastery's Cypress Valley Estate (Baigu zhuang 柏谷莊) was situated (see map). Moreover, the monks took as captive Wang Shichong's nephew, Wang Renze 王仁則.<sup>8</sup> In gratitude, the future emperor Li Shimin bestowed upon them anew the estate they liberated, and appointed one of them general-in-chief 大將軍 in his army.

The seven texts inscribed on the Shaolin Monastery Stele include a history of the monastery, a letter of thanks by Li Shimin, and several Tang legal documents. They shed light on the monks' military activities from different angles.

*Text 1: Pei Cui's Shaolin-Monastery History*

The longest of the seven texts is a detailed history of the monastery written in 728 by a prominent official under emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–755), the minister of personnel (*libu shangshu* 吏部尚書) Pei Cui 裴灌 (ca. 670–736).<sup>9</sup> Pei alludes to two instances in which Shaolin monks resorted to arms: the first, in the last years of the Sui dynasty, when their monastery was attacked by bandits; the second, approximately a decade later, when they participated in Li Shimin's war against Wang Shichong:

During the last years of the Daye 大業 reign period (605–616) the empire disintegrated. Bands of robbers plundered the population, clergy and laity alike. This monastery (that is, Shaolin) was pillaged by roving bandits. The monks resisted them, whereupon the bandits set fire and burned the stūpas and courtyard. Within an instant all the buildings in the court perished in the flames. Only the Numinous Stūpa (Lingta 靈塔) remained, visible afar, as lofty as ever. The heavenly beings protected it. The mountain spirits blessed it. What divine power was able to accomplish [in this case] surpassed anything known before.

Fifty *li* (approximately seventeen miles) to the monastery's northwest is the Cypress Valley Retreat (Baigu shu 柏谷墅). Crowded peaks are arrayed there together. Deep valleys curve to and fro. Piled-up stone steps lead to the clouds' edge. It overlooks the imperial capital (that is, Luoyang). Its highest peak reaches the sun. Its slopes preside over the birds' route. During the Jin period (265–

<sup>8</sup> Wang Shichong ennobled Wang Renze as "Prince of Tang" (Tang wang 唐王); see *JTS* 54, p. 2232.

<sup>9</sup> Pei's history occupies one side of the stele. The remaining six texts were inscribed on its other side. On Pei, see *JTS* 100, pp. 3128–29, *XTS* 130, pp. 4487–88, and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 42–45, 50–52.

420) a fort 塢 was built there. During the Qi period (479–502) it served as the site of a commandery 郡. When Wang Chong 王充 (Wang Shichong) usurped the imperial title he established there a prefecture called Yuanzhou 豫州. Taking advantage of the site's strategic location, he placed a signal tower there as well as troops. He assembled an army at Luoyi 洛邑 (Luoyang), and was planning to seize the Buddhist Temple (Shaolin).

The august Tang dynasty resonates with the halcyon days ordained by the Five Phases. It is blessed with the grand mandate of a thousand years. It wipes out the calamities caused by the evil tyrant's insatiable avarice. It delivers the people from disasters of extreme adversity. Emperor Taizong Wenhua 文皇 (Li Shimin) majestically arose at Taiyuan 太原.<sup>10</sup> His army encamped at Guangwu 廣武.<sup>11</sup> He opened wide the commanding officer's tent [for counselors' advice]. He personally led his troops.

The monks Zhicao 志操, Huiyang 惠瑒, Tanzong 曇宗, and the others examined to which of the contending parties divine grace was directed. They realized who deserved hymns of praise. They led the multitude in fighting the rebel army. They petitioned the emperor to express their complete submission. They captured [Wang Shi]-chong's nephew, Renze, thereby pledging their allegiance to this dynasty.

Taizong commended the monks' loyalty and courage. He repeatedly issued official documents expressing his support [of the Shaolin Monastery]. He graced the monks with a royal letter of praise, at the same time that he patronized the monastery with imperial almsgiving. He bestowed on the monastery forty *qing* of land (approximately 560 acres), and a water mill. These constitute the Cypress Valley Estate (Baigu zhuang 柏谷莊).<sup>12</sup>

Pei's history highlights the significance of the Shaolin Cypress Valley (Baigu) Estate as the location, the cause, and the reward for the monks' participation in Li Shimin's campaign. Medieval monastic estates were usually situated not in the intensely cultivated alluvial plains but rather in the highlands. In addition to arable lands, they comprised "woods, copses, pastures, mountain gardens, and orchards."<sup>13</sup> The Shao-

<sup>10</sup> The Tang revolt began, in 617, at Taiyuan, Shanxi.

<sup>11</sup> Guangwu was near Hulao, where Li Shimin defeated Wang Shichong's ally, Dou Jiande.

<sup>12</sup> My translation follows Wang Chang's transcription in idem, *Jinshi cuibian* 77, pp. 16b–17b; cf. also Dong Gao 董誥, *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (1814; photographic rpt., Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1990) 279, p. 1252, and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia U.P., 1995), p. 117.

lin farm was no exception. Bestowed on the monastery by Sui emperor Wendi 文帝 (Yang Jian 楊堅; r. 581–604), the estate was located in the mountains southeast of the Eastern Capital, Luoyang (see map, above).<sup>14</sup> The steep Winding-Path Mountain (Huanyuan shan 輾轅山) – so named because of the curved trail leading to its peak<sup>15</sup> – towered above the estate. To Pei, then, there was strategic significance in the alpine location: “Crowded peaks are arrayed there together ... It overlooks the imperial capital (Luoyang).”

The estate was named after a deep valley, lined with cypress trees, which ran across it. The road from Luoyang to Dengfeng passed through this valley, which was so narrow and overgrown with trees that, according to medieval sources, vehicles could not turn around in it.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Shaolin’s estate commanded a crucial pass on the road to the Eastern Capital. Indeed, its military significance had been recognized centuries before it was bestowed on the monastery. We have seen, in the text above, that during the Jin a fort was established at the estate, and it was the site of bitter warfare all through the seventh century.<sup>17</sup> To this day the local village is named Cypress Valley Fort (Baigu wu).<sup>18</sup>

The strategic significance of Cypress Valley Estate explains why both Wang Shichong and Li Shimin were eager to capture it. Pei Cui emphasizes that Wang “took advantage of [the estate’s] strategic location 乘其地險,” establishing a signal tower and troops. In addition, the Sui rebel employed Cypress Valley for local administration – Huanyuan 輾轅 county.<sup>19</sup> It was this military and administrative center that the Shaolin monks conquered, earning them the gratitude of the future Tang emperor.

<sup>14</sup> On the Sui-period origins of Shaolin’s estate, see Pei Cui’s history as transcribed in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 77, p. 17a.

<sup>15</sup> See Yue Shi 樂史 (fl. 980), comp., *Taiping huanyu ji* 太平寰宇記 (1803; photographic rpt., Taipei: Wenhai, 1963) 5, p. 7a.

<sup>16</sup> See *Taiping huanyu ji* 4, p. 2a.

<sup>17</sup> The fort is first mentioned in the *History of the Jin*, and according to Pei Cui it was established during that period; see Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 et al., comps., *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982) 119, p. 3011; see also Shen Yue 沈約, comp., *Songshu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982) 45, p. 1372; Linghu Defen 令狐德棻, *Zhou shu* 周書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982) 15, p. 246; and *ZZTJ* 117, p. 3694; 170, p. 5291.

<sup>18</sup> During the medieval period the Shaolin estate itself was sometimes referred to as Cypress Valley Fort (rather than Estate); see for example Li Shimin’s letter to the Shaolin monks (Text 2, below).

<sup>19</sup> *JTS* (54, p. 2234) refers to Huanyuan as a county (*xian* 縣); Pei Cui, like the Shaolin government document of 632 (Text 4 below), refers to it as a prefecture (*zhou* 州); Li Shimin’s general Wang Junkuo 王君廓 passed through Huanyuan (i.e. through the Cypress Valley Estate) as early as October 620. However, he did not station there troops; cf. *JTS* 54, p. 2234, and *ZZTJ* 188, p. 5889. This enabled Wang Shichong to recapture the strategic mountain estate, which consequently he lost to the Shaolin monks, on May 23, 621.



Pei Cui does not allude to a Tang-government request that the monks confront Wang Shichong. His chronicle suggests that it was their initiative to attack the Sui rebel. The monks certainly resented Wang, who had robbed them of their estate. However, strong as their resentment was, political calculations also contributed to their military action. Pei notes that “monks Zhicao, Huiyang, Tanzong, and the others examined to which of the contending parties divine grace was directed.” The Shaolin clerics probably did not debate the respective spiritual merits of the Tang rulers and Wang Shichong, but rather who was more likely to win the war. Had they wagered on the wrong party this would have been detrimental to their monastery. Instead their choice of the Tang dynasty guaranteed the prosperity of the Shaolin temple for centuries to come.<sup>20</sup>

*Text 2: Li Shimin’s letter of May 26, 621*

Li Shimin himself confirmed that Shaolin monks had contributed to his campaign. On May 26, 621, three days after the monks captured Mt. Huanyuan,<sup>21</sup> he addressed to them a letter of thanks. Li was in the field then, marching his armies towards Dou Jiande, whom he was to meet in battle five days later. Presumably he dictated the letter to one of his secretaries. The prince of Qin did sign the letter though, and his autograph was later copied onto the Shaolin stele (see figure 1):<sup>22</sup>

[From]: The defender-in-chief (*taiwei* 太尉), director of the Department of State Affairs (*shangshu ling* 尚書令), director of the Branch Departments of State Affairs in Shaandong 陝東 circuit and Yizhou 益州 circuit, metropolitan governor of Yongzhou 雍州, military marquis of the left and the right (*zuoyou wuhou* 左右武侯), general-in-chief (*dajiangjun*), area commander-in-chief (*zongguan* 總管) commissioned with extraordinary powers (*shichi* 使持) for Liangzhou 涼州, Supreme Pillar of State (*shang zhuguo* 上柱國), prince of Qin 秦, [Li] Shimin.

To: The Cypress Valley Fort (Baigu wu) Shaolin Monastery’s dean (*shangzuo* 上座), and abbot (*sizhu* 寺主), and their disciples, as

<sup>20</sup> Shaolin monks have not been always as successful in their political choices. Fourteen-hundred years after lending their assistance to Li Shimin, they joined forces with general Fan Zhongxiu 樊鍾秀 (1888–1930) only to be defeated by the superior army of another warlord officer, Shi Youzan 石友三 (1891–1940). On March 15, 1928, the furious Shi set fire to the monastery, destroying some of its ancient halls, and partially damaging the Shaolin Monastery Stele; see Wen, *Shaolin fanggu*, pp. 357–60.

<sup>21</sup> The date of the monks’ victory is provided by the vice-magistrate verdict of 632 (Text 4, below).

<sup>22</sup> Careful scholars, such as Gu Yanwu (*Jinshi wenzi ji* 2, p. 30a), Niida Noboru (*Tō Sō hō-ritsu bunsho*, p. 833), and Tonami Mamoru (*Shaolin Monastery Stele*, p. 3), have concluded that the autograph is Li Shimin’s own.





*Figure 1. Li Shimin's Autograph, "Shimin"*

*As copied onto "Shaolin Monastery Stele"; photograph by the author.*

well as to the military and civil leaders, officers, common people, and the rest.

Recently, there has been chaos under heaven. Nowhere in the land is there a lord, and the world is falling apart. The Way of the Three Vehicles (that is, Buddhism) is declining. This has caused the Jambudvīpa (Yanfu 閻浮) Continent to disintegrate. War-horses sweep through the land. The Central Kingdom is boiling, and the devils are all contending.

This court (that is, the Tang dynasty) has received the heavenly omens of government. It upholds the correct Buddhist dogma (*di* 諦). Riding the phoenix and turning the wheel 輪 (*lun*; Sanskrit: *cakra*), it glorifies the Great Treasure [of the Buddhist faith]. Therefore, virtue will reach the common folk, and education will instruct the monastic community. Thus, the people will enjoy the grace of release from suffering, and all will be favored with the benefits of the other shore.

Wang Shichong usurped another's position. He dared oppose the heavenly principles. He coveted the Dharma-Realm (the Cypress Valley Estate). He acted recklessly, disregarding the laws of karma (*ye* 業).

Now, the winds of virtue are blowing far, and the beacon of wisdom is glowing near. The Buddhist eightfold path<sup>23</sup> is being opened, and throughout the land the Buddhist sanctuaries are being restored. Shaolin's Master of the Law (*fashi* 法師), together with the other monks, deeply comprehended the changing circumstances and adapted to them. The monks immediately realized which action would yield the Buddhist fruit, and they succeeded in drawing an excellent plan. Together, they returned to the blessed land (*fudi* 福地). They captured that evil bastard (Wang's nephew, Renze 仁則), and they cleansed the pure land (*jingtu* 淨土). The results of their respectful observance and expressed loyalty have become known at court. Their way of attainment and self-cultivation adds further glory to their Buddhist temple.

We heard [of Shaolin's contribution] with pleasure and appreciation. It surpasses imagination and words. The monastery should be supported, and its monks generously rewarded. Regardless of changing circumstances, the monastery should be provided with fixed income.

The crisis at the Eastern Capital will be resolved shortly. At the same time we should urge people to exert themselves and make a contribution, so that they provide example to future generations. Everyone should peacefully resume his previous vocation, forever enjoying heavenly blessings.

Therefore I am sending to you the Supreme Pillar of State, the dynasty-founding (*kaiguo* 開國) commandery duke of Deguang 德

<sup>23</sup> The Buddhist eightfold path, here referred to as 八正之塗, consists of: right views 正見, intentions 正思, speech 正語, conduct 正業, livelihood 正命, effort 正精進, mindfulness 正念, and concentration 正定.

廣 [Li] Anyuan 安遠 (?–633),<sup>24</sup> to express my appreciation. You may send here one or two commanders who made a contribution, so that I meet them. I will elaborate no more.

The thirtieth of the fourth month [of the Wude 武德 reign period; fourth year] (May 26, 621).<sup>25</sup>

On the face of it, Li Shimin's letter expresses nothing but gratitude. In ornate parallel prose, characteristic of his later writings,<sup>26</sup> the prince of Qin elaborates on the monks' courage and loyalty, which, he promises, would be amply rewarded. However, a closer reading reveals a subtler tone in the prince's dispatch. Even as he was praising their heroic spirit, Li Shimin warned the monks to desist from further military action. "Everyone should peacefully resume his previous vocation 各安舊業" is a reminder to the Shaolin clerics that their specific vocation is Buddhist learning. The prince of Qin, who was absolutely certain of his coming victory – "the crisis at the Eastern Capital," he writes, "will be resolved shortly" – was preparing for peace, in which context he could not tolerate the unauthorized military activities of Buddhist clerics. Thus the future emperor's letter served a dual purpose, simultaneously praising, and restraining, the Shaolin monks.

### *Text 3: The Prince's Donation of 625*

In his letter of May 26, 621, Li Shimin vowed to reward the Shaolin clerics. "Regardless of changing circumstances," he noted, "the monastery should be provided with fixed income." Four years later, on March 28, 625, the Tang prince fulfilled his promise and endowed the monastery with the Cypress Valley Estate. Although the latter had been bestowed under the Sui, its lands were confiscated by the Tang regime following the Sui disintegration and the war against Wang Shichong.

<sup>24</sup> There is an error in the inscription. Li Anyuan, who participated in several of Li Shimin's campaigns, was ennobled as commandery duke of Guangde 廣德 (in today's Anhui), not De-guang 德廣. He also served as commander-in-chief at Luzhou 潞州 (Shanxi), and prefect of Huaizhou 懷州 (Henan); see *XYS* 88, pp. 3746–47.

<sup>25</sup> My translation is based on an original rubbing obtained on a visit to the monastery in 2000 (see appendix). Compare also the transcriptions in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 41, pp. 1a–2a; Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, p. 11, *Shaolin si zhi* 2, pp. 1b–2b; and *Quan Tang wen* 10, p. 44.

Li Shimin's letter, sharing space on the "Shaolin Monastery Stele" of 728 with six other texts, had also been inscribed on another, recently discovered, Shaolin stele dating from ca. 680; it is written in a different calligraphic style but the imperial signature is identical; see Cui Geng 崔耕, "Tang Qin wang gao Shaolin si jiao bei kao" 唐秦王告少林寺教碑考, *Zhongyuan wenwu* 中原文物 (1983.3), pp. 88–90, and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 12–14.

<sup>26</sup> Li Shimin's extant prose is included in *Quan Tang wen* 4, p. 13–10, p. 51, and his poetry in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1960) 1, pp. 1–20; On his writing, and calligraphy, see Zhao and Xu, *Tang Taizong*, pp. 392–403.

In order for the Shaolin monks to enjoy it, the estate thus had to be conferred upon them anew.

The prince's donation should be evaluated in the context of his anti-Buddhist policies. On June 5, 621, a day after he captured Luoyang, Li Shimin decreed the closure of all Buddhist monasteries in the Eastern Capital, and the dispersal of the city's entire clergy, with the exception of sixty eminent monks and nuns.<sup>27</sup> There is some evidence that this blow to the church was felt also in localities outside of Luoyang, where the administration proceeded to confiscate monastic property and defrock the clergy.<sup>28</sup> In 622, the Shaolin Monastery itself was closed and its monks sent home under the pretext that its lands had been illegally acquired. The monastery was allowed to reopen two years later only because of the military service it had rendered the dynasty.<sup>29</sup>

After he became emperor, Li Shimin's antipathy to the church did not abate. Even though he was careful not to stir opposition by an outright suppression of the religion, Li Shimin did issue a series of unprecedented anti-Buddhist laws. In 629 he ordered the execution of illegally ordained monks; in 631 he forbade monks and nuns from receiving the homage of their parents; and in 637 he decreed that Taoist priests be given precedence over Buddhist monks in all state ceremonies.<sup>30</sup> In his later years, the emperor did befriend one Buddhist monk: the renowned pilgrim Xuanzang 玄奘 (596–664). However, he sought Xuanzang's counsel primarily on foreign affairs rather than on spiritual matters. During his celebrated journey to India, Xuanzang gained an in-depth knowledge of the western lands between China and India, for which reason the emperor implored him (unsuccessfully) to join his administration.<sup>31</sup>

Li Shimin's patronage of Shaolin Monastery therefore was the exception rather than the rule. It probably resulted not from pious sentiments, but from the emperor's obligation to reward Shaolin monks for their military support. The Tang ruler's suspicion of institutional Buddhism underscores the significance of Shaolin's military activities as the key to the monastery's prosperity. In a climate of hostility to-

<sup>27</sup> See *ZZT* 189, p. 5918.

<sup>28</sup> See Daoxuan 道宣, *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (ca. 660), in *T*no. 2060, vol. 50, p. 633c; see also Demiéville, "Le Bouddhisme et la guerre," p. 361.

<sup>29</sup> See Text 4, below.

<sup>30</sup> The prohibition on monks' receiving homage from their parents was revoked in 633; on Li Shimin's policy towards Buddhism, see Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the Tang* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1987), pp. 11–27, and Wechsler, "T'ai-Tsung," p. 217–19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

wards the church, the military assistance the monastery had rendered the emperor was the only assurance of its welfare.

Li Shimin's donation to the monastery took the form of an order, which has attracted the attention of legal historians. As Niida Noboru has shown, Tang-period legal vocabulary distinguished between orders in accordance with the person who issued them: an emperor's order was termed *ling* 令, an imperial prince's *jiao* 教 ("instruction"), and so forth.<sup>32</sup> Since Li Shimin's donation was issued when he was still a prince it was titled "instruction." As inscribed on the Shaolin Monastery Stele, this "instruction" includes not only Li Shimin's original command, but also the communication of the officials who carried it out.<sup>33</sup>

The monks' decision to engrave the prince's donation in stone was not unique. During the Tang, as well as in later periods, it was common practice to inscribe letters of patronage on steles. Such inscriptions, often specifying the exact location and size of the bequeathed land, were intended to protect it from infringement.<sup>34</sup> Occasionally, the inscription included curses on future violators. In Shaolin's case the inscription specified that, in addition to approximately 560 acres of land, the monastery was granted a water mill 水碾, which must have contributed to its income. During the medieval period, monasteries charged rent fees (usually in flour) on the usage of their mills.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Text 4: The Official Letter of 632*

The legal woes surrounding Cypress Valley Estate did not end with Li Shimin's donation of 625. As early as 626 the Shaolin property became the subject of a lawsuit which concerned its size (40 *qing* or 100 *qing*) and legal status (should it be classified as "personal-share land 口分田" or as "permanent monastic property 常住僧田").<sup>36</sup> The case is

<sup>32</sup> See Niida, *Tō Sō hōritsu bunsho*, pp. 830–38.

<sup>33</sup> Li Shimin's "instruction" is translated in Twitchett, "Monastic Estates," pp. 131–32, and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 17–18; transcribed in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 74, pp. 1a–2b; Niida, *Tō Sō hōritsu bunsho*, pp. 831–32; and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> See Twitchett, "Monastic Estates," pp. 126–30; and Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, p. 123; on similar Ming inscriptions, see Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, 1993), p. 174. According to Brook, the inscriptions were sometimes meant to prevent the monks from selling the estate.

<sup>35</sup> See Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, pp. 142–50.

<sup>36</sup> In the former case the land was intended for the support of an individual monk, after whose death it reverted to the state; in the latter it was used for the upkeep of the monastery; see Niida, *Tō Sō hōritsu bunsho*, pp. 832–33, Twitchett, "Monastic Estates," pp. 133–34, and Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, pp. 66–73, 133–34. Niida considers the 632 official letter as evidence that the *koufen tian* system had been implemented in seventh-century Henan.

summarized in an official letter (*die* 牒) signed by the Dengfeng county vice-magistrate and dated July 21, 632.

The letter enriches our understanding of the war that preceded it by eleven years. In order to assess Shaolin property rights, Dengfeng county officials examined the monastery's military record. As conscientious judges (and historians) they gathered all the documents pertaining to the monks' participation in Li Shimin's campaign. Thus, they ascertained the date (May 23, 621) of the monks' Cypress Valley victory; they verified that one monk (Tanzong) was rewarded as a general-in-chief in Li's army; and they collected testimonies of the monks' military action:

Following this testimony, we contacted Yanshi 偃師 [county] by despatch, asking them to cross-question [Liu] Wengchong [劉] 翁重 and received a report from there to the effect that they had followed up Liu [Weng] chong for questioning. We received a report to the effect that: "The fact that previously, in the fourth month of Wude 4 (May 621), the monks of Shaolin Monastery turned Huanzhou 輓州 over to legitimate rule is verified ..."

We went on to find Li Changyun 李昌運 and the other man concerned and questioned them. We are in receipt of a document to the effect that their testimony corroborated that of [Liu] Wengchong.

We further questioned Sengyan 僧彥 and his fellow monks [concerning whether] if, as they say, the monks of Shaolin [Monastery] received awards for the merit they showed in their action of returning [the fortress] to legitimate rule, why nothing was known of the monks receiving offices. In the testimony [regarding this matter] they stated:

"We monks, previously on the twenty-seventh day of the fourth month of Wude 4 (May 23, 621) overtook the fortress and submitted it to the state 翻城歸國. On the thirtieth day of the same month (May 26), we were honored to receive a letter containing a decree thanking us for our efforts. The letter containing this decree is still extant. Furthermore, in the second month of Wude 8 (625), we received a decree returning forty *qing* of monastic lands. The letter containing this decree is also extant. At that time, awards of offices were conferred on some monks, but the monks only wanted to pursue the religious life, to follow the [Buddhist] way and hold religious services to recompense the favor accorded by the state, so they did not presume to take up those official posts."



The [Shaolin] Monastery monk Tanzong was awarded the title general-in-chief; Zhao Xiaozai 趙孝宰 was awarded the title upper-prefecture-officer [dignified-as-general-in-chief]; and Li Changyun was awarded the title dignified-as [general-in-chief].<sup>37</sup> Moreover he is still here today.

Furthermore, we have obtained the imperial decree, the [prince's] instruction, the certificates of land-return to the monks, etc. We have examined and verified them.<sup>38</sup>

*Texts 5 and 6: The Emperor's Gift of 724*

The Shaolin monks' assistance to Li Shimin guaranteed them the support of his successors. A hundred years after the Cypress Valley victory, the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–755) bestowed upon Shaolin Monastery a caption, in his own calligraphy, for the "Shaolin Monastery Stele." This symbolic act of patronage created a link between Xuanzong and his venerable ancestor Li Shimin, whose letter to the Shaolin monks was to be engraved on the same stele.

Two brief official letters (*die*), which were themselves to be inscribed on the Shaolin stele, announced the bestowal upon the monastery of emperor Xuanzong's handwritten caption, along with Li Shimin's autographed letter, a copy of which had been kept in the imperial archives.<sup>39</sup> The second letter, dated Kaiyuan 11, twelfth month, twenty-first day (January 21, 724), is noteworthy for the high-ranking official who signed it: president of the Secretariat (*zhongshu ling* 中書令) Zhang Yue 張說 (667–730).<sup>40</sup> Zhang issued his letter to the Shaolin Monastery in his additional capacity as director of the Academy in the Hall of Elegance and Rectitude (Lizheng dian xiushu yuan 麗正殿修書院). His letter attests that the caption of the Shaolin Monastery Stele was handwritten by Xuanzong.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, it verifies the authenticity

<sup>37</sup> The abbreviated forms *shang kaifu* 上開府 and *yitong* 儀同 stand respectively for the honorary titles *shang kaifu yitong da jiangjun* 上開府儀同大將軍 and *yitong da jiangjun* 儀同大將軍; see *Zhongguo lidai guan zhi da cidian* 中國歷代官制大辭典, gen. ed. Lü Zongli 呂宗力 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1994), pp. 51, 272.

<sup>38</sup> This is Penelope Herbert's translation in Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 24–25 (slightly revised). The original is transcribed in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 74, pp. 5a–5b, and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> The letters are transcribed and translated in Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 16, 18, 22, 25; The second is transcribed also in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 74, pp. 6a–b. Tonami (*Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 49–52) suggests that the renowned monk Yixing 一行 (673–727) contributed to Xuanzong's decision to patronage the monastery. Yixing, who is mentioned in the first letter (dated December 6, 723), was serving at the time as court astronomer.

<sup>40</sup> See Zhang Yue's biography in *XTS* 125, pp. 4404–12; also Denis Twitchett, "Hsüan-tsung (Reign 712–56)," in *Cambridge History* 3, pp. 338–40, 376–79, and 387–89.

<sup>41</sup> Written in elegant clerical script (*lishu* 隸書) the caption reads "Taizong Wenhuan di yu shu 太宗文皇帝御書" ("Emperor Taizong Wenhuan; Imperial Letter").



of Li Shimin's letter, which was examined by a team of experts working under his supervision.<sup>42</sup>

It is noteworthy that Xuanzong's patronage of Shaolin, like his ancestor's benefaction of it, did not result from Buddhist piety. Xuanzong "acted with greater determination than any of his predecessors to curtail the power of the Buddhist clergy."<sup>43</sup> In 714, for example, he issued a ban on the construction of all new monasteries, and in 727 he decreed the dismantlement of all village chapels. Evidently, his support of Shaolin Monastery was due to the monks' military assistance to his predecessor.

The emperor's benefaction of Shaolin was not merely symbolic. In addition to his imperial calligraphy, Xuanzong granted it property rights. In 722 he exempted the monastery from a confiscation order, which was applied to all other monastic estates.<sup>44</sup> As Tonami Mamoru has suggested, it was probably this confiscation order – which they so narrowly escaped – that convinced Shaolin monks of the necessity to engrave in stone their military exploits. The Shaolin Monastery Stele was erected to ensure that future rulers would be as mindful as Xuanzong had been of the monastery's contribution to the dynastic founding.<sup>45</sup>

*Text 7: The List of Thirteen Heroic Monks*

The last text examined by Du Mu was a list of thirteen Shaolin monks whose distinguished service in battle had been recognized by Li Shimin (see figure 2). One monk, Tanzong, is already mentioned as a general-in-chief in the official letter of 632. This monk-cum-general is also cited, along with monks Zhicao and Huiyang, in Pei Cui's history of the monastery. Here is the complete list of his companions:

List of Shaolin Monastery Cypress Valley Estate monks who, during the Tang, Wude reign period, fourth year (621), were cited by emperor Taizong Wenhua for meritorious service:

Dean (*shangzuo*), monk Shanhu 善護.

<sup>42</sup> The latter included Xu Jian 徐堅 (?–729) and Zhao Dongxi 趙冬曦 (fl. 720), whose signatures appear on the letter. Xu's and Zhao's respective biographies in *XTS* 199, p. 5663, and 200, p. 5702, attest that they worked under Zhang Yue in the Academy in the Hall of Elegance and Rectitude, which name was changed in 725 to the Academy of Scholarly Worthies (Jixiandian shuyuan 集賢殿書院); on Zhang Yue's directorship of the Academy, see *XTS* 125, p. 4408.

<sup>43</sup> Weinstein, *Buddhism*, p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> The confiscation order is included in *Tang hui yao* 唐會要, compiled by Wang Pu 王溥 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1955) 59, p. 1028. According to Pei Cui, the emperor expressly exempted the Shaolin Monastery from it; see his inscription as transcribed in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 77, p. 18b; see also Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, pp. 47–48.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47–52.

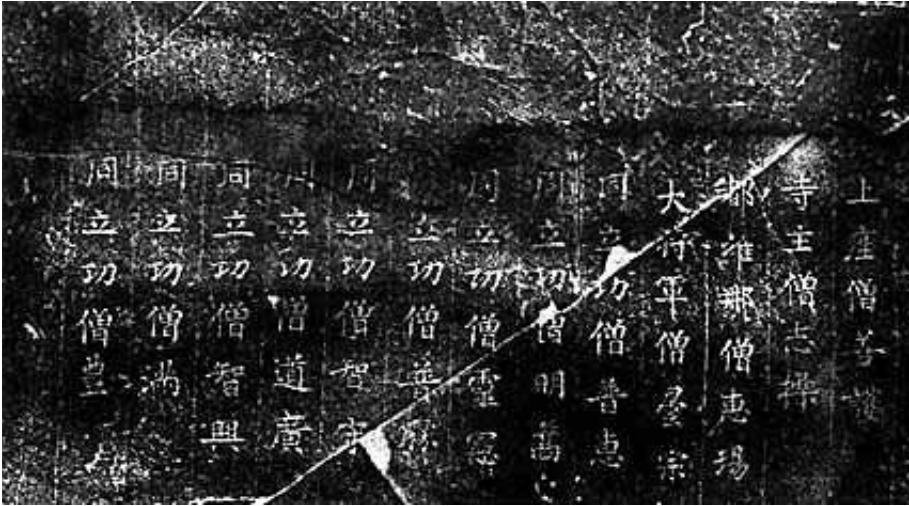
Abbot (*sizhu*), monk Zhicao 志操.

Overseer (*duweina*), monk Huiyang 惠瑒.

General-in-chief (*da jiangjun*), monk Tanzong 曇宗.

With them, were noted for meritorious service: monk Puhui 普惠, monk Mingsong 明嵩, monk Lingxian 靈憲, monk Pusheng 普勝, monk Zhishou 智守, monk Daoguang 道廣, monk Zhixing 智興, monk Man 滿, monk Feng 豐.<sup>46</sup>

The official letter of 632 noted that following their Cypress Valley victory several Shaolin monks had been offered official posts, which, with the exception of Tanzong, they politely declined. It is conceivable that the monks in question are the thirteen listed in Text 7. However, it need be emphasized that the text itself does not date from Li Shimin's



*Figure 2. List of Thirteen Heroic Monks*

*Inscribed on "Shaolin Monastery Stele"; photograph by author.*

time.<sup>47</sup> Neither signed nor dated, the list of thirteen heroic monks was probably compiled when the Shaolin Monastery Stele was erected (in 728), if not later.<sup>48</sup> Thus even though some names in it are doubtless accurate (notably general Tanzong's), others may reflect the growth of popular lore surrounding the monks' victory.

<sup>46</sup> My translation is based on an original rubbing; compare also the transcriptions in *ibid.*, p. 22, and Xu, *Shaolin si*, p. 104.

<sup>47</sup> As is evident from the usage of his posthumous temple-name, Taizong.

<sup>48</sup> Of the seven texts inscribed on the Shaolin stele, the list of thirteen monks appears last.

EPIGRAPHY, BUDDHIST  
HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND FIGHTING MONKS

The legal vocabulary in which the Shaolin inscriptions are wrapped provides precise information: in 621, Shaolin monks went to war for Li Shimin, the future Tang emperor. The circumstances of their monastery's being rewarded by state property permitted no error: officials on all government levels – from the vice-magistrate of Dengfeng county to the president of the Secretariat – examined the details of the monks' military victory, and affixed their signatures to legal documents confirming it. Clearly, during the early seventh century, some monks violated the Buddhist prohibition on the taking of life.<sup>49</sup>

The Shaolin stele attests to the monks' martial heroism as the source of its monastery's prosperity. The Shaolin Monastery benefited from the patronage of successive Tang emperors. The support given it by devout Buddhists such as empress Wu is not surprising.<sup>50</sup> It is striking though that the monastery was championed by such emperors as Taizong (Li Shimin) and Xuanzong, who were far from sympathetic to the faith. Evidently, the monks' military assistance to the Tang founders earned them the dynasty's support.

"Inscriptions," writes Paul Katz, "did not commemorate events but *were* events that served to confirm or even enhance [a temple's] legitimacy."<sup>51</sup> Li Shimin's letter of praise was inscribed on a Shaolin

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Thus conceivably it could have been added later. In particular, the reference to the Tang raises the suspicion that the list of thirteen might have been compiled after Tang. (All the other documents on the stele are dated by reign periods only). Nonetheless, late-Ming scholars such as Du Mu and Gu Yanwu concluded that "thirteen monks had been recognized for their merit"; see Du, *Yōu mingshan ji*, p. 19a, and Gu, "Shaolin seng bing" 29, p. 21b.

<sup>49</sup> However, the Shaolin inscriptions do not allude to the fighting techniques for which the monastery became famous a thousand years later. Thus, although they enable us to date the monastery's military activities to the Tang era, we cannot make that deduction about the monks' martial arts per se. Modern fiction, for example, alludes to Shaolin's "thirteen staff-wielding monks 十三棍僧." However, the staff did not appear in Shaolin-related literature prior to the sixteenth century. Thus its application to Tang-period Shaolin warriors is anachronistic; see Shahar, "Ming-Period Evidence," pp. 362–64.

<sup>50</sup> Empress Wu's first visit to Shaolin took place prior to her formal ascension to the throne, when she was still emperor Gaozong's 高宗 consort; see her poem "Cong jia xing Shaolin si" 從駕幸少林寺 ("Following the Emperor's Carriage as He Graces the Shaolin Monastery"), in *Quan Tang shi* 5, p. 58. She donated money for the construction of the ten-story "Incarnated Maitreya Buddha Stūpa" ("Xiasheng Mile Fo ta" 下生彌勒佛塔), which is still extant in Shaolin's Stupa Forest (Talin 塔林). The empress' letter concerning this stupa was engraved in 683 on a Shaolin stele. The text is transcribed, among other sources, in Fu, *Song shu* 20, pp. 64a–b. On the empress and the Shaolin Monastery, see Wen, *Shaolin fanggu*, pp. 87–90; on her Buddhist policies, see Weinstein, *Buddhism*, pp. 37–47.

<sup>51</sup> Paul R. Katz, *Images of the Immortal: The Cult of Lü Dongbin at the Palace of Eternal Joy* (Honolulu: U. of Hawai P., 1999), p. 112.

stele in order to ensure his successors' support of the monastery. Legal testimonials of the monks' military action were likewise engraved in order to inform visitors of Shaolin's assistance to the dynasty. Contemporary Buddhist policies forced the monks to record in stone these official documents. As Stanely Weinstein has pointed out, "Tang emperors for the most part did not exhibit much enthusiasm for Buddhism."<sup>52</sup> Shaolin monks were left therefore with little choice except to highlight their military contribution to the dynasty.

The construction of the Shaolin Monastery Stele did influence official policies towards the monastery, as its monks had hoped. In 798, seven decades after its dedication, the monastery was granted an official letter which reiterated the stele's import. A senior government official named Gu Shaolian 顧少連 (fl. 800), who began his career as assistant magistrate of Dengfeng county (Dengfeng *zhubu* 登封主簿) and concluded it as regent of the Eastern Capital (*Dongdu liushou* 東都留守), consented to the monks' request and, in celebration of the monastery's renovation, compiled a brief history of it. Shaolin monks, wrote Gu Shaolian, "capture bandits and succor the faithful. They suppress evil troops everywhere; they protect the Pure Land in times of adversity. This adds glory to our Tang dynasty."<sup>53</sup>

Even during the darkest moment in Tang Buddhist history, memory of the monks' heroism guaranteed their safety. On April 6, 845, during the height of emperor Wuzong's 武宗 persecution of the Buddhist faith, the governor of Henan Lu Zhen 盧真 graced the Shaolin Monastery with a visit, which was recorded on a Shaolin stele.<sup>54</sup> The visit meant that the monastery had been spared at least the brunt of the government's Buddhist purge. Even as hundreds of other monasteries were being destroyed, the Shaolin Monastery enjoyed the patronage of high-ranking officials.

Despite their significance in safeguarding the monastery, the monks' military activities are not recorded in the Chinese Buddhist canon. The reason is not its compilers' lack of interest in the monastery.

<sup>52</sup> Weinstein, *Buddhism*, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Gu Shaolian's history is titled "Song yue Shaolin xin zao chu ku ji" 嵩嶽少林新造廚庫記 ("Record of the Reconstruction of the Song-Mountain Shaolin Monastery's Kitchen and Storehouse"). It was inscribed on a Shaolin stele, which today is badly damaged. However, the text in full is transcribed in such late-Ming sources as Fu, *Song shu* 20, pp. 13a-16b. Gu Shaolian's biography is in *XTS* 162, pp. 4994-95; cf. *JTS* 13, p. 396.

<sup>54</sup> The governor was accompanied by two lower-ranking officials, Lu Yin 盧寅 and Yuan You 元繇. His visit is dated Huichang 會昌 5, second month, day 26. The visit was recorded on the narrow side of the same stele as Gu Shaolian's letter. I am grateful to Ade, who drew my attention to this inscription, which, to the best of my knowledge, is nowhere transcribed. On Wuzong's suppression of Buddhism, see Weinstein, *Buddhism*, pp. 114-36.

The Chinese canon includes scores of references to the Shaolin temple: Shaolin monks are celebrated in successive versions of the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳); Bodhidharma's Shaolin legend is elaborated upon in the vast literature of the *Transmission of the Lamp* (*Chuangeng lu* 傳燈錄); and general histories of the Chinese Buddhist church narrate major events in Shaolin's history.<sup>55</sup> Yet none of these texts alludes to the monastery's military achievements.

Even when they allude to Shaolin's early-Tang history, Buddhist authors ignore military actions. Xuanzang's biography is a case in point. In 645, upon his return from India, Xuanzang was summoned by Li Shimin for an interview. Deeply impressed with the monk's thorough knowledge of foreign lands, the emperor suggested that he join his administration. According to his biographer, Xuanzang politely refused. He sought instead the emperor's permission to retire to Shaolin Monastery, which was adjacent to his native village. The biographer, monk Huili 慧立 (fl. 688), alludes in this context to Shaolin's early history, but ignores the monks' martial heroism that prompted Li Shimin's contemporaneous patronage.<sup>56</sup>

Buddhist histories and monastic inscriptions were intended for different audiences. Buddhist historiography was intended to shape the believers' conceptions of their faith across geographical and temporal boundaries. Since it was not merely descriptive, but also – to a certain extent – prescriptive, there was no place in it for the Shaolin monks' blatant violation of Buddhist law. By contrast, monastic inscriptions were never meant to reach large audiences. Indeed they were not intended for circulation. Their prospective readers included visitors to the temple only. In order to guarantee the latter's support of the monastery it was necessary, in Shaolin's case, to highlight the monks' martial heroism.

Gregory Schopen has argued that inscriptions reveal a non-congruency between ideal and actual in the history of Indian Buddhism. "Inscriptional material," he writes, "tells us not what some literate, educated Indian Buddhist wrote, but what a fairly large number of practicing Buddhists actually did."<sup>57</sup> His observation is applicable to

<sup>55</sup> A computer search of *T*, sect. "History," yields some fifty references to Shaolin Monastery.

<sup>56</sup> Xuanzang's request was denied by the emperor, who wished to keep the eminent monk near him; see Huili 慧立 and Yancong 彦棕 (688), *Da Tang da Cien si Sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 in *T* no. 2053, vol. 50, p. 253c. According to Daoxuan, one reason for Xuanzang's choice of the Shaolin Monastery was its proximity to his native village; see his *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, *T* no. 2060, vol. 50, p. 457c.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory Schopen, "Two Problems in the History of Indian Buddhism: The Layman/Monk Distinction and the Doctrines of the Transference of Merit," rpt. Gregory Schopen,

the Chinese case. The Shaolin inscriptions reveal a story untold in Chinese Buddhist historiography, one of Buddhist monks who engaged in warfare. Moreover, the inscriptions show that the monks' violation of the Buddhist prohibition against violence was the source of their monastery's prosperity under the glorious Tang dynasty.

*Appendix: Li Shimin's Letter to the Shaolin Monks*

My transcription is based on an original rubbing that I obtained on a visit to the monastery in October, 2000. Where the characters are today illegible I relied on Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* (referred to in notes, below, as Wang) 41, pp. 1a-2a, and Tonami, *Shaolin Monastery Stele*, p. 11 (referred to in notes, below, as Tonami); the latter's transcription is based on a rubbing made before the stele was partially damaged in 1928; cf. transcriptions in *Shaolin si zhi* 2, pp. 1b-2b; and *Quan Tang wen* 10, p. 44.

太尉尚書令，陝東道，益州道行臺，雍州牧，左右武侯大將軍，使持節涼州總<sup>58</sup>管，上柱國秦王世民，告柏谷塢少林寺上座寺主以下徒眾及軍民首領士庶等：

比者，天下喪亂，万方乏主，世界傾淪，三乘道絕。遂使閭浮蕩覆，戎馬載馳，神州糜沸，群魔競起。我國家膺圖受籙，護持正諦，馭<sup>59</sup>飛輪，光臨大寶。故能德通黎首，化闡緇林。既沐來蘇之恩，<sup>60</sup>承彼岸之惠。

王世充叨竊非據，敢逆天常，窺覷法境，肆行悖業，今仁<sup>61</sup>遠扇，慧炬照臨，開八正之塗，復九宇<sup>62</sup>之跡，法師等並能深悟機變，早<sup>63</sup>妙因，克建嘉猷，同歸福地，擒彼兇孽，廓茲淨土。奉順輸忠之效，方<sup>64</sup>庭。證果修真之道，更弘像觀。聞以欣尚，不可思議，供養優賞，理<sup>65</sup>數。今東都危急，旦夕殄除，並宜勉終茂功，以垂令範，各安舊業，永保<sup>66</sup>祐。

故遣上柱國德廣郡開國公安遠，往彼指宣所懷，可令一二首領<sup>67</sup>功者，來此相見，不復多悉。

四月卅日。

*Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1997), p. 30.

<sup>58</sup> The original character is *zong* 摠; the meaning is the same as *zong* 總.

<sup>59</sup> Character unclear, Tonami reads *feng* 鳳; *Shaolin si zhi* reads *xiang* 象.

<sup>60</sup> Wang and Tonami give *ju* 俱.

<sup>61</sup> Wang and Tonami give *feng* 風.

<sup>62</sup> *Yu* 宇 is written in the inscription in the Large Seal Script (= 寓). Several transcriptions erroneously read this as *yu* 寓.

<sup>63</sup> Wang and Tonami give *shi* 識.

<sup>64</sup> Wang and Tonami give *zhu que* 著闕.

<sup>65</sup> Wang and Tonami give *shu heng* 殊恒.

<sup>66</sup> Wang and Tonami give *xiu* 休.

<sup>67</sup> Wang and Tonami give *li* 立.

MEIR SHAHAR

*LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

- JTS* Liu Xu 劉昫, *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書  
*XTS* Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書  
*ZZTJ* Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑