

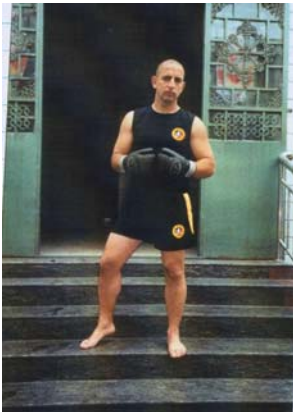
Antonio Graceffo is a martial artist living in Asia. He has written a book called, "The Monk from Brooklyn", the first book ever written by a foreigner who studied at the Shaolin Temple in China. Here you can read a bit about his amazing story.

The Road to the Shaolin Temple - *The Brooklyn Monk's advice on studying in the Shaolin Temple*
By Antonio Graceffo

"A Shaolin priest can walk through walls. Looked for, he cannot be seen. felt, he cannot be touched. This rice paper is the test, clean as the cocoon of the silk worm, fragile as the wings of the dragon fly. When you can walk its length and leave no trace, you will have learned." - *Kung Fu the original TV series.*



I was being raised by my maternal grandmother in New York City. One day, when I was about six years old, she was very upset. She told me someone very important had died, but as a child, I didn't understand who Bruce Lee was. Later, she took me to an all day film festival, commemorating him: four full length feature films, two documentaries and at least two low-budget Hong Kong movies where Bruce Lee was played by a cardboard cutout.



I was on the edge of my seat the whole time. Never had I seen or even imagined that people could jump and kick like that. "EEEEEEEEiiiiiaaaa!" even the language of the Bruce Lee films appealed to me. And best of all, I knew that if I could learn all of those special Kung Fu skills, I wouldn't have to back down to the bullies on the playground. Shortly after, my uncle introduced me to the TV show, Kung Fu, and this became my new religion.

Like every other martial artist of my generation I had dreamed of studying kung fu at the Shaolin Temple. No one dreams of studying Kung Fu at a strip mall, but this is what many of us do. My first, and most important Kung Fu teacher, H. David Collins, talked constantly about the Shaolin Temple and the wisdom that originated from there. We all talked about the temple as if it were some Nirvana that we could never attain.

When I was going to school in Germany I saw a documentary about a fourteen year old German boy who was the first foreign child to study at the Shaolin Temple. According to the film, his parents flew with him to China, took a train to

Henan, and more or less dumped him on the temple's doorstep. That documentary changed my life, because suddenly, I realized studying at the Temple was a real possibility.



It would still be a number of years before I made the decision to go to China. I decided first to learn Chinese and to study more kung fu in Taiwan. Eventually I went to study in Shaolin Temple, near Deng Feng Village, in Henan Province of North Central China. Since then, I have spent more than five years training in various countries in Asia.

I published my Shaolin experience in a book entitled "The Monk from Brooklyn" (available at amazon.com). As far as I know this is the only book ever written by a foreigner who studied at the Shaolin temple. Since the book came out, I have been getting email from people all over the world, asking how they can study at the Shaolin Temple.

Advice: How you can study at the Shaolin Temple



Learn Chinese – I have trained all over Asia, and often in places where I didn't speak the language. Not only does this hinder your learning, but if you lived at Shaolin for a period of months without being able to talk to people, you would go insane. Also, don't kid yourself that you will just "pick up" Chinese while you are living there. Chinese is one of the hardest languages in the world, no one just "picks it up."

Taiwan is a brilliant place to start. It is easy for Americans to get a visa. It is different enough from America that it will seem like a big adventure, but not so different that it would crush your spirit. Living in Taiwan, if you get homesick you can hang out with the more than 60,000 other Americans living there. And when you need some familiar food, you can go to McDonalds or Starbucks.

MONEY – If you have a BA degree you can get a job teaching English in Taiwan. You can actually do the whole application procedure online at ESL websites such as Daves ESL Café. Teaching jobs in Taiwan usually pay about \$1,800 US a month, and many include an apartment and a contract bonus



equivalent to one month's salary. They even reimburse you for your plane ticket. Most foreigners will find that they can save 50% of their salary in Taiwan. So, in Taiwan you can save up for Shaolin much better than you can at home.

Working in Taiwan - You only work about 25 hours a week, so you have plenty of time to study Chinese and to learn more kung fu. (Some jobs require an ESL certificate, but you can earn one in an online course, very cheaply.) Culture – Living conditions at Shaolin temple are terrible. It is dirty, smelly, and the food is bad. But this is the cost of getting great Kung Fu training. Living in Taiwan first will help you acclimate to the Chinese culture, and of course prepare your language skills. Also studying Kung Fu in Taiwan will give you an idea of what to expect when you get to China.

Visas – The Chinese government is constantly changing the visa regulations. When I studied at Shaolin you could get a 3 month tourist visa and renew it twice without leaving China. Last year the best visa you could get was only one month. Don't worry too much about visa rules. The travel agent will know the latest info and can help you. You will enter China on a tourist visa. Once you get to the temple, if you want to stay longer, the temple can help you get a six month or one year student visa.

Where is the temple? – The actual (original) Shaolin Temple is near Deng Feng Village, in Henan Province of China. (Don't confuse this with Yunan province.) There are about 60 monks at the temple. A good number of them are primarily religious monks. Many of them are Kung Fu monks. But they have all studied both Kung Fu and Buddhism. The Kung Fu monks often are associated with schools of students living outside of the temple. When I studied at Shaolin there were nearly 25,000 Kung Fu students at 65 schools around Deng Feng. Many of those schools have been forcibly evicted. They have reopened but are no longer within walking distance of the temple.



BE CAREFUL – The Shaolin Temple in Henan has always been called The Shaolin Temple, and it is the one you have heard about and seen in movies. The Southern Shaolin Temple, in Fujien, was reopened about three years ago. Now that there is a Southern Shaolin Temple again, some people refer to the original temple as The Northern Shaolin Temple. The problem is that the Chinese government opened a fake temple in Northern China, which charges about \$600 a month and only caters to foreign students. The official name of the fake temple is The Northern Shaolin Temple. The Northern

Shaolin Temple has a website and you can even book by email. So, if you are doing research be sure to look only at the Shaolin Temple in Deng Feng, Henan.



Where to study – China is still a developing country, where English and computer literacy is limited. So, if you find a website online, written in English, this is not authentic. The programs advertised online are designed for foreigners. They cost a lot of money. Many of them have students living in three star hotels and training only two or four hours per day. If you want a real experience, go to Deng Feng on your own. Get a taxi driver to take you to a number of schools, and chose one that appeals to you.

What it costs – The programs advertised online are expensive. Some charge \$40 a day. I met a foreigner who paid \$1,500 for a week. I paid \$200 a month, including food, room, and training. The average monthly salary in China is about \$40 a month. Chinese students pay about this much per month to study at the Temple schools. So, there is no reason why you should pay as much per day as they pay per month. Stick to your guns, be firm, and negotiate. Don't overpay.

IMPORTANT: If you are planning to stay several months, only pay monthly. Don't hand someone thousands of dollars the first day. Negotiate as if you were staying ix months and then just pay monthly.

The Training – Conditions and training will vary from school to school. Most schools are focused on Wu Su because of the Beijing Olympics. There are schools which focus on Tai Chi, San Da (kick boxing) and other Chinese arts. Larger schools even have Tai Kwan Do and kick boxing. Some schools go to competitions outside of the temple. I didn't see judo but wouldn't be surprised to learn that they had judo programs, since many of the students at Shaolin were dreaming of the Olympics.



As a rule, you can expect to sleep in a military style dorm. In some schools they have as many as thirty students in bunk-beds, sharing a room. And since there is no running water and most students only have two uniforms, you can imagine what it smells like. In winter it is bloody cold in Henan, and buildings are not heated at all. And of course, you will be training outdoors. There is

nothing worse than training in the bitter cold, sweating up your clothes, freezing your face and hands, and then coming inside and discovering you are too wet and cold to sleep.

You will be woken up by a whistle at around 5:00 AM. You will fall out into a military style formation and count off. Next, you will go running. After running you will have a training session which will focus primarily on stretching but also include some exercises.

You will eat breakfast around 7:00 and train until lunch. Breakfast will probably be shi fan (rice water) and maybe parched shredded potatoes, maybe you will also have manto (bread rolls) and rice. Don't expect tea in



China. In rural, poorer areas like Shaolin, you will drink boiled water. Morning training is normally forms or kung fu techniques, and will most likely include another session of exercises and stretching.

Lunch will be rice and parched shredded potatoes. After lunch you will sleep for about two hours.

When you wake, you will do kung fu until dinner. After dinner there is another training session of one or two hours. Lights out is at 9:00 PM.

What you can get out of the experience – many people have criticized the modern Shaolin Temple, saying that they are no longer teaching the classical arts, they are artificial, and that they are teaching a watered down, Disneyland version of Kung Fu. That may or may not be true. I don't care.

What you will get out of your time at Shaolin is a phenomenal cultural experience that you could never get anywhere else. Aside from the fact that you will be fulfilling a childhood dream, you will be completely immersed in a foreign culture and language. Even living in Taiwan, teaching English, it is hard to be immersed in the culture because you are fulfilling a role which is not naturally a part of Chinese society. You are a foreign English teacher. That is not a very Chinese experience. But in Shaolin you are a Shaolin student. That is very Chinese. In fact you are having a Chinese experience which most Chinese have never had.

As for your training, many people have read my other articles and books and saw that I was disappointed with the level of fighting in Shaolin Temple. And it is true, they aren't fighters. I am a fighter. So, I had to look elsewhere, Thailand and

Cambodia, for real fighting training. But the Shaolin Temple is nearly the only place where you can get 8-10 hours of training per day, seven days a week. I have seen articles on the internet by schools in the USA who claim they will teach you the real Shaolin, and thus you don't need to go to China. Ask those schools if you will live there and train full time. One day at Shaolin is equivalent to one or two weeks of the training most people do at home. Shaolin will definitely increase your flexibility. We sometimes held a split for a half hour three times a day. It will improve your stances. When I left, I could hold horse stance for a full hour with students hanging on my arms. Of course you will learn the Shaolin forms and kicks.

For me, the Shaolin Temple was a life-changing experience, which predicated who I am and who I would become. But most importantly, I walked where David Caradine did not.

Antonio Graceffo is a martial arts and adventure writer, living in Asia. See his website speakingadventure.com "The monk from Brooklyn" and all of his books are available at amazon.com



Checkout Antonio's website <http://speakingadventure.com/>