



BAWU
HOK
THE
SOUL
OF
**KUNG
FU**

IN THE SHADOW OF
CHINA'S LEGENDARY SHAO LIN
TEMPLE, A KUNG FU MASTER'S
DISCIPLES CONFRONT
THE CHANGING WORLD OF
MARTIAL ARTS.

Buddhist monk Shi Dejian practices kung fu
at the mountain-top retreat he has spent 15 years building.

BY PETER GWIN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRITZ HOFFMANN

THE MASTER

spent his last day of life wrapped in a quilt stitched by his wife, his rasping, irregular breaths filling the small bedroom. Throughout the cool spring day a stream of visitors arrived in the town of Yanshi, in the foothills of the Song Mountains, to pay their respects at the deathbed of Yang Guiwu, the man who had taught them kung fu. Some wore monks' robes and offered

blessings as they entered the tiny brick house. Others wore jeans and loafers and stubbed out cigarettes before passing through the door. The master's wife, her white hair neatly combed, clasped the shoulders of each new arrival as if he were a blood son and ushered him through her kitchen, past the coal-burning stove, to join family members and other disciples assembled at her husband's bedside.

The wife leaned close to the bundled figure to announce a visitor, the last disciple the master had accepted into his kung fu family 15 years before. "It's Hu Zhengsheng," she said. Wearing a Nike tracksuit and traditional cloth slippers, Hu, now a broad-shouldered man of 33, bent over the shriveled figure. "Shifu," he called softly, respectfully, using the Mandarin word for teacher. "Can you hear me?" The old man's eyelids, pale and thin like rice paper, flickered. For an instant, his pupils seemed to center on the young man's face, then drifted away.

Many times the master had told Hu about

awakening from dreams in which his martial arts ancestors, long-dead monks from the Shaolin Temple, visited him. They came bearing wisdom collected over centuries from generations of men whose feet had grooved the flagstones in the temple's training hall, whose bones were interred in the Pagoda Forest just outside the temple walls. These were the monks who had committed their lives to perfecting kung fu styles with names like Plum Flower Fist and Mandarin Duck Palm, each a symphony of physical movements, adding variation upon variation that pushed human muscles and bones to their limits. Some would say beyond their limits. Perhaps, Hu thought, these ancestors now were gathering by his master's side.

The master's most advanced disciples recognized special irony in the fact that the old man's lungs would ultimately betray him. He would have approved of this turn of life's wheel, a final lesson in humility for the man who had instructed that breathing was elemental to harnessing

one's chi, or life force. taught them: breathe through the nose. Steady with your heartbeat; other organs. Learning told them, was the in path to tapping the we and, in doing so, unlock hidden doors.

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one's chi, or life force. It was the first thing he'd taught them: breathe in through the navel, out through the nose. Steady, controlled, in harmony with your heartbeat and the rhythms of your other organs. Learning to breathe properly, he told them, was the initial step on the arduous path to tapping the wellspring of the chi's power and, in doing so, unlocking one of the universe's hidden doors.

Now, with or without unseen spirits at his side, Yang Guiwu stood at another of the universe's hidden doors. The disciples listened for signs in his breathing that he was trying to marshal his life force for the journey ahead.

SOME 12 MILES from where the old master lay, in a valley just over the Song Mountains, tour buses prepare to disgorge their daily load of visitors at the Shaolin Temple. They come from all over the People's Republic—uniformed soldiers on leave, businessmen on junkets, retirees on package holidays, young couples leading wide-eyed children kicking and chopping the air with exuberant expectation—all to see the birthplace of China's greatest kung fu legend.

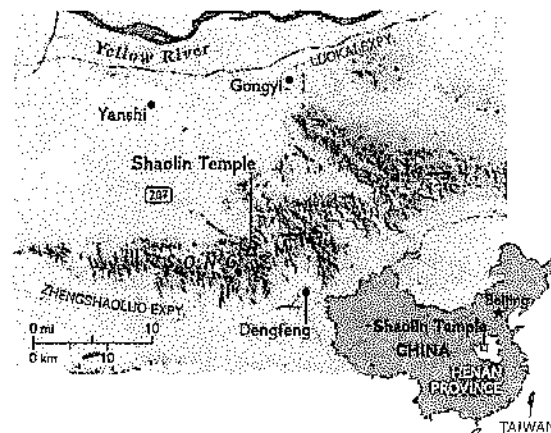
Here, the popular myth holds, is where a fifth-century Indian mystic taught a series of exercises, or forms, that mimicked animal movements to the monks at the newly established Shaolin Temple. The monks adapted the forms for self-defense and later modified them for warfare. Their descendants honed these "martial arts" and over the next 14 centuries used them in countless battles—opposing despots, putting down rebellions, and fending off invaders. Many of these feats are noted on stone tablets in the temple and embellished in novels dating back to the Ming dynasty.

Scholars dismiss much of this as legend embroidered with bits of truth. Bare-handed martial arts existed in China long before the fifth century and likely arrived at Shaolin with ex-soldiers seeking refuge. For much of its history, the temple was essentially a wealthy estate with a well-trained private army. The more the monks fought, the more proficient they became as fighters, and the more their fame grew. Yet they were not

unbeatable. The temple was sacked repeatedly during its history. The most devastating blow came in 1928, when a vengeful warlord burned down most of the temple, including its library. Centuries of scrolls detailing kung fu theory and training as well as treatises on Chinese medicine and Buddhist scriptures—essentially the temple's soul—were destroyed, leaving the legacy of Shaolin kung fu to be passed down master to disciple, through men such as Yang Guiwu.

Today, however, temple officials seem more interested in building the Shaolin brand than in restoring its soul. Over the past decade Shi Yongxin, the 45-year-old abbot, has built an international business empire—including touring kung fu troupes, film and TV projects, an online store selling Shaolin-brand tea and soap—and franchised Shaolin temples abroad, including one planned in Australia that will be attached to a golf resort. Furthermore, many of the men manning the temple's numerous cash registers—men with shaved heads and wearing monks' robes—admit they're not monks but employees paid to look the part.

Over tea in his office at the temple, Yongxin calmly makes the case that all of these efforts further Buddhism. "We make more people know about Zen Buddhism," he says. A slightly jowly, sad-eyed man, he has a politician's gift for imbuing his remarks with the sense that he believes deeply in what he's saying. "By registering the Shaolin brand name in other countries, promoting Shaolin traditional cultures, including kung fu, we're having people around the world



SHAOLIN HAS HELPED FOSTER A KUNG FU RENAISSANCE, COINCIDING W.



Shaolin Through the Ages

- **11th century B.C.** Oldest Chinese reference to martial arts.
- **A.D. 495** Shaolin Temple founded by Indian Buddhist.
- **621** Thirteen Shaolin monks battle opponents of Tang rule, are honored by prince.
- 1350s** Temple sacked by marauders, one of many such events in its history.
- 1553** Shaolin monks help fight off Japanese pirate attacks on Chinese coast.
- 1898-1901** Martial artists foment the Boxer Rebellion to challenge Western influence.
- 1928** Warlord Shi You-san burns Shaolin Temple, obliterating its vast library, including ancient martial arts texts.
- **1940s** Shaolin monks ambush Japanese soldiers patrolling near the temple.
- **1966** Cultural Revolution's Red Guards ravage Shaolin Temple, beat the few remaining monks.
- **1972** *Kung Fu* TV series begins, introducing the Shaolin Temple to Americans.
- 1982** Martial arts champ Jet Li portrays a heroic monk in *Shaolin Temple*, a film that sets off a Shaolin frenzy in China.
- **1999** Shi Yongxin installed as the 30th abbot of the Shaolin Temple.
- 2010** Shaolin Temple named a UNESCO World Heritage site.

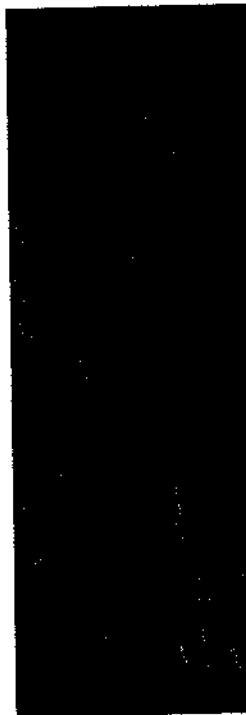
know better and believe in Zen Buddhism.”

It is an argument he has made many times in both the Chinese and foreign press, and he isn't the first abbot to face criticism that Shaolin has pursued riches over enlightenment. A 17th-century magistrate railed against the temple's "lofty mansions and splendid furnishings." And yet, whether a force for evangelizing or profit-making, the Shaolin Temple has helped foster an undeniable kung fu renaissance, which has coincided with China's own resurgence as an international power. Nowhere is this more evident than in Dengfeng, a sprawling city of 650,000 just six miles from the temple gates. Here some 60 martial arts academies have sprouted over the past two decades and now boast more than 50,000 students. A drive down a main road passes some of the biggest schools. They rise like Vegas casinos, with towering dormitories adorned with murals of kung fu fighters, dragons, and tigers.

These schools fill their ranks with boys, and increasingly girls, from every province and social class, ranging in age from five to their late 20s. Some arrive hoping to become movie stars or to win glory as kickboxers. Others come to learn skills that will ensure good jobs in the military, police, or private security. A few are sent by their parents to learn discipline and hard work.

Six days a week, 11 months of the year, the campuses come alive at dawn with legions of students dressed in identical tracksuits—hundreds of children born in the new China, aligned in sharp rows, practicing kung fu. Faces forward, backs rigid, they punch and kick in unison, their voices puncturing the morning air as they repeat their instructors' cadences.

A FEW DAYS before Hu Zhengsheng visited his master's bedside, he received a call many martial artists spend their lives hoping for: a Hong Kong producer offering him a lead role in a kung fu movie. It's easy to see why. Hu has a boyishly handsome face and projects a confidence won through years of physical and mental testing. Yet he isn't sure whether to accept the offer. He doesn't agree with how kung fu usually is portrayed in the movies—a mindless celebration of



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Like other martial artists of his generation, Fan Fuzhong, 75, has seen kung fu banned by Japanese occupiers, discouraged by Mao's Red Guards, and resurrected as a cultural treasure in the new China.

violence that ignores the discipline's key tenets of morality and respect for one's opponent. He is also concerned that Yang Guiwu's other disciples will lose respect for him if he becomes an entertainer. And he worries about the trappings of fame. His master had admonished him to remain humble, even as he surpassed the students around him. Humility defeats pride, Master Yang had preached. Pride defeats man.

On the other hand, the role would bring much needed publicity and money to Hu's small kung fu school. With the blessing of his master, he had founded the school eight years earlier in a few cinder-block buildings just outside Dengfeng. Unlike the big kung fu academies, which stress acrobatics and kickboxing, Hu teaches his 200 boys and a few girls the traditional Shaolin kung fu forms that Yang Guiwu passed on to him.

But fighting is not the most important lesson

of kung fu, Hu explains. His focus is on honor. The skills he is passing on to his charges come with great responsibility. In each boy he looks for respectfulness and a willingness to "eat bitterness," learning to welcome hardship, using it to discipline the will and forge character.

At night his students sleep in unheated rooms. No matter the temperature, they train outside, often before sunrise. They jab tree trunks to toughen their hands and practice squatting with other students sitting on their shoulders to build leg strength. Within a month of arriving, new students are expected to be able to do full splits. During drills, coaches use bamboo staffs to swat the hamstrings of any boy whose form is not

Staff writer Peter Gwin wrote about Timbuktu's manuscripts in the January issue. Photographer Fritz Hoffmann lived in China for 13 years.

perfect or whose effort is deemed insufficient.

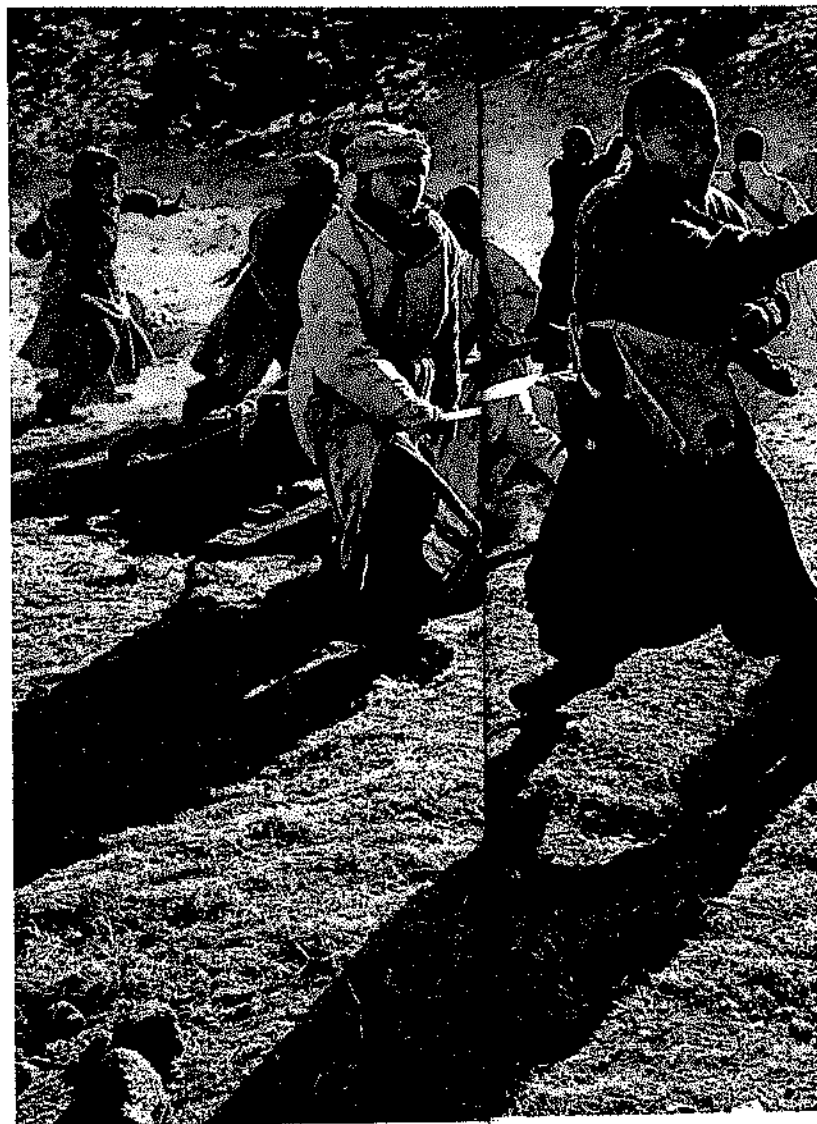
Asked if such harsh treatment could yield angry students, Hu smiles. "It is eating bitterness. They understand it makes them better."

Hu's problem has not been students leaving so much as getting enough new enrollees to keep up with the school's costs. Many of the boys come from poor families, and Hu charges them only for food. Unlike the big schools, he refuses to give kickbacks to taxi drivers who troll the Dengfeng bus station for newly arrived prospective students. Gradually, however, he has accepted the teaching trends and has begun offering a few courses in kickboxing and the acrobatic kung fu forms, hoping to attract new students and then sway them to the traditional forms.

From his own experience Hu knows that a boy's idea of kung fu can change as he matures. When he was young, he was obsessed with kung fu films, absorbing the performances of Bruce Lee and Jet Li and fantasizing about taking revenge on bullies in his village. At age 11 he managed to talk his way into the Shaolin Temple, where he became a servant to the coach of one of the performance troupes. Later the man introduced him to Yang Guiwu.

"When I met Shifu, I already had memorized many traditional forms," Hu says, "but he taught me the theory behind the moves. Why you must flex your arm a certain way. Why your weight must be on a certain part of your foot." He stands up to demonstrate. A fist strike, he explains, is delivered like a chess move, anticipating a range of possible countermoves. "No matter how my opponent responds, I am prepared to block and deliver a second, third, and fourth blow, with each aimed at a pressure point." He pantomimes the moves in slow motion. "A student can learn this in a year," he says. "But to do it like this"—his hands and elbows become a blur as he repeats the moves at full speed—"takes many years." The difference, he says, is making the moves instinctive and delivering each with precision and maximum power to the weakest points of an opponent's defenses.

"There are no high kicks or acrobatics," he says. Such moves create vulnerable openings.



In a scene for a Chinese Qing dynasty. Not you!

"Shaolin kung fu is designed for combat, not to entertain audiences. It is hard to convince boys to spend many years learning something that won't make them wealthy or famous." He seems drained by the thought. "I worry that is how the traditional styles will be lost."

A boy dressed in the school's dove gray robes and sneakers appears at the office door to report that a student has twisted an ankle. By the time Hu arrives to check on him, the injured pupil has resumed practice, gritting his teeth as he kicks a heavy bag. Hu nods with a teacher's satisfaction. "He is learning to eat bitterness."

NEWS OF MASTER Y reached his most enigmatic mountaintop above Shi Dejian, a 47-year-old who already endured a trying journey. He had trekked up the walled paths hacked into the mountainside to reach the monastery. He was a professional mixed-media artist. They planned to film the monks. (He went to the team from Hong Kong to study the effect of



In a scene for a Chinese TV series, stuntmen portray Shaolin monks battling bandit gangs during the Qing dynasty. Not your average nonviolent Buddhists, the monks loom as heroes in the national psyche.

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NEWS OF MASTER YANG'S impending death reached his most enigmatic student on an isolated mountaintop above the Shaolin Temple. There Shi Dejian, a 47-year-old Buddhist monk, had already endured a trying week. A television crew had trekked up the vertiginous series of switchbacks hacked into the granite mountainside to reach the monastery. They brought with them a professional mixed-martial-arts fighter, whom they planned to film testing his skills against the monks. (He went home bruised.) A neurology team from Hong Kong University had arrived to study the effect Dejian's rigorous meditation

regimen has on his brain activity, and he had spent an exhausting night applying his chi techniques to ease the pain of an ill friend. Then there had been the Communist Party official from Suzhou who had barged through the gate and demanded a cure for his brother's diabetes. For a man who seeks solitude, Dejian finds himself inundated with people.

He owes this parade of strangers largely to Internet video clips that show him demonstrating traditional Shaolin kung fu forms, often while balancing atop needlelike precipices or on the sloping roof of his cliffside pagoda, one



Monks file to prayer in the Shaolin Temple. Some 150 monks live at the temple, and visiting monks from across China and abroad come to study and meditate at the purported fountainhead of Zen Buddhism.

misstep from a fatal fall of several hundred feet. The clips, most taken by visitors over the years, have spread among sites devoted to kung fu and Chinese medicine and called attention to the philosophy that a healthy life turns on the principles of *chan* (Zen meditation), *wu* (martial arts), and *yi* (herbal medicine). These are the same three principles at the root of the Shaolin Temple's guiding philosophy, he tells me. And though he doesn't say it, these are the principles that the temple's many critics, both inside and outside China, say have been neglected in the pursuit of commercial deals and tourist dollars. The message of his death-defying performances seems to be one of authenticity: When you practice true Chan Wu Yi, this is what is possible.

Face-to-face, Dejian looks like a sort of mountain elf, standing a few inches over five feet tall with a thick, muscular build. He wears a long

wool cape and a round, Mongolian-style hat to protect his shaved head from the cold mountain air and prefers to talk while in motion, replanting a young cedar tree or plucking dandelion leaves for a salad. His frequent laughter hints at an impish rather than a pious spirit.

His path to this Song peak began in 1982, when, as a 19-year-old kung fu prodigy, he left his family's home not far from the Mongolian border and made a pilgrimage to the Shaolin Temple. His search for kung fu teachers led him to Yang Guiwu, and he soon distinguished himself as the master's best student. The more he learned about kung fu, the more he became interested in its intersection with meditation and Chinese medicine, and he finally decided to take the monastic vows at the Shaolin Temple.

As the tourist crowds steadily grew in the early 1990s, Dejian increasingly sought seclusion,



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A monk seeks shelter from a snow shower in the Shaolin complex, lavishly rebuilt in recent years. Stone tablets throughout the grounds testify to the generosity of patrons from all over the world.

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often camping near the ruins of a small temple on a nearby mountain peak. The oldest monks, disheartened by Shaolin's expanding commercial ventures, encouraged Dejian to establish the old temple as a retreat focused on Chan Wu Yi. He recruited local masons to quarry granite blocks out of the rock faces, and he and his disciples hauled bags of cement and roof tiles up to the site. Slowly they have transformed the crumbling temple into a complex of pagodas that appears to cling to the steep mountainside.

It is a setting that evokes a meditative calm. Pockets of thick fog get trapped along the ridgelines, magpies nest among the outcrops, and springs intermittently spray over the rocks. The only human sounds are the constant *tink, tink, tink* of the masons' chisels ringing in the chill air.

Dejian and his disciples tend small groves of bamboo and terraced plots of vegetables and

herbs. They adhere to a vegetarian diet and harvest wildflowers, mosses, and roots to make medicines for everything from insect bites to liver problems. People come from all over China seeking advice for various ailments. Usually they want treatment only for symptoms, says Dejian, but "Chan Wu Yi treats the whole person. When the person is healthy, the symptoms disappear."

His habit is to rise at 3:30 a.m., first meditating, then practicing breathing techniques designed to strengthen the chi. There was a time when he would spend six hours or more practicing traditional kung fu forms every day, but now he is pulled by some of the same modern forces that are reshaping the Shaolin Temple. Responding to requests to lecture, raising money to finish the construction, training his disciples, and of course attending to the stream of visitors—all compete for his attention and energy.

"But I am always practicing kung fu," he says. He grabs my hand and puts it on one of his immense quadriceps. I can feel him pulsing the muscle. Then he moves my hand to a shot-put-like calf. More pulsing. "I do this all day," he says, explaining that he incorporates kung fu moves into all sorts of daily activities, from pulling weeds to climbing the mountain.

Isn't kung fu essentially about violence, I ask him, and doesn't that conflict with the nonviolent principles of Buddhism? No, in essence kung fu is about converting energy to force, he explains. Absent an adversary, the practice is a series of movements. The practitioner's own physical and mental weaknesses become his adversary. In effect, he goes to war with himself and emerges better than he was before. "In this way," says Dejian, "kung fu is nurturing."

Sometimes the adversary isn't absent. Not everyone who comes up the mountain is a friend, and Dejian has survived attempts on his life. A few years ago, as he was returning up the mountain path, four men jumped him, attempting to push him off a ledge. They possessed advanced kung fu skills, but he quickly fought them off. It is a subject he chooses not to discuss, but others confirmed the incident. "The Song Mountains are full of kung fu rivalries," a Dengfeng official told me, "just as they have been for centuries."

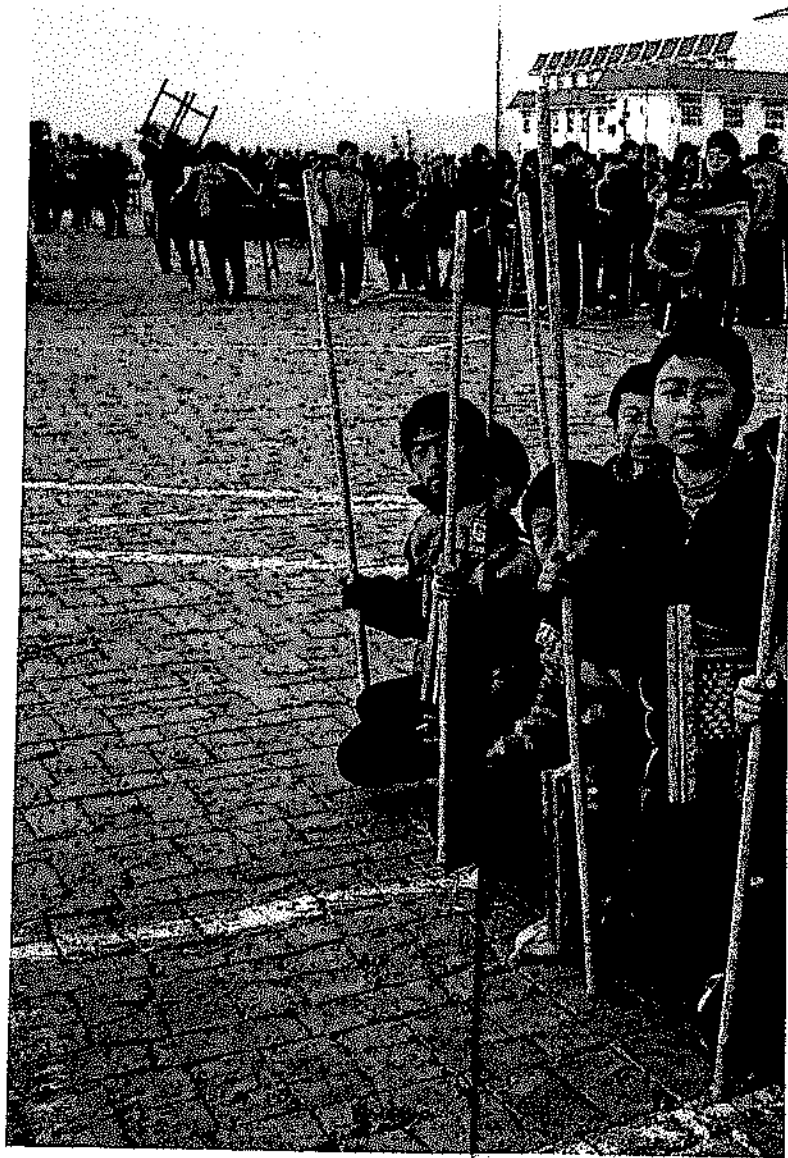
On the last morning I spend at his retreat, Dejian shows me his private quarters, a tiny stone cupola perched on the tip of a sheer cliff. He leads the way out to a terrace with a view of the deep, bowl-shaped valley carpeted with thick pine forests. A weather front is blowing in, and his thick wool cape flutters behind him.

Without warning he jumps up onto the low wall bordering the lip of the cliff, the wind filling his cape so that it flows out over the void. I suddenly feel guilty, that I somehow prodded him onto the ledge, like a morbid voyeur. I hadn't consciously considered it before, but of course that's why many people come up to see Shi Dejian, to watch him challenge death. Maybe this time death wins. But standing on the ledge, he smiles at me. "You are afraid?" he asks, seeing the look on my face. "Kung fu is not only training

the body; it is also about controlling fear." He hops lightly from one foot to the other, lunging, punching, spinning, each step inches from a horrifying fall. His eyes widen as he concentrates. The cape billows and snaps in the cold wind.

"You cannot defeat death," he says, his voice rising over the wind. He kicks a foot out over the abyss, balancing on one of his tree-trunk legs. "But you can defeat your fear of death."

SOON AFTER Hu Zhengsheng visited his bedside, Yang Guiwu passed into the afterlife. Dozens of former students gathered with his family and



In their future careers they develop while pe

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In their future careers Tagou pupils likely won't hit anyone with a staff. Yet the discipline and character they develop while perfecting its use, say their coaches, are weapons they will wield over their lifetimes.

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neighbors at the small house in Yanshi, which had been adorned with dozens of brightly colored paper wreaths. Shi Dejian arrived with two of his disciples. Some of Hu's students demonstrated kung fu routines.

The hiss and pop of fireworks filled the air, alerting the spirit world to the master's arrival. A trio of flute players led the funeral procession out of town to the family's wheat field, where the master would be buried beside his parents. The mourners filed carefully between the muddy rows of lustrous green wheat, careful not to trample the young crop.

As we walked behind the master's casket, Hu was still pondering whether to accept the role in the kung fu film. It would be disrespectful so close to the master's death. And yet he had discussed it with some of the older disciples, who had encouraged him to do it. It would mean that a piece of Yang Guiwu would live on through Hu's performance and, perhaps, inspire future students. After all, the disciples reminded him, it had been kung fu films that led Hu to the master in the first place.

Life's wheel had come full circle, the master would have said. □