

# War and Peace in Chinese Buddhism: Implications for US-China Relations

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## Introduction

The US Government and the American people should understand the degree of silent influence that Chinese Chan Buddhism, an offshoot of Mahayana Buddhism, has had in Chinese society, even under its current regime, not only in its internal approaches of governance but also in its application to US-China relations.

Though Americans assume that Buddhism is a “peaceful” religion, its scriptures surprisingly include images and word choices that are reminiscent of rhetoric found in general military writings. As the Buddhist scriptures were brought into, translated, and practiced in China for over 1400 years, their influence and that of their key practitioners over the centuries in China, has infiltrated into the very fabric of life and worldview up until the present. Moreover, a very recent popular form of Chan Buddhism as practiced by those of the Shaolin Temple in modern Henan Province showcases the development of this martial “arts” branch of Buddhist practice very distant in practice from the meditative aspects of its initial practice.

This present practice of Chinese Chan Buddhism by the re-popularized Shaolin Temple practitioners underlies the approaches and responses to both domestic and international issues even in modern China under the CCP. In fact, the effect and influence of Chinese Chan Buddhism has devolved into something similar to that of the World War II Japanese Zen masters’ support of that country’s belligerent nationalism.

The implications for a better understanding on Chinese actions (and inactions) and its current aggressive patriotism are set out herein briefly.

## Quick History

Even a cursory understanding of the traditional stories and myths surrounding the introduction of Buddhism to China, the founding of the Shaolin Temple, and their mutual development over the centuries show the subsequent influence on daily Chinese cultural heritage and worldview. What maybe less known is that, despite the vagaries of imperial support and persecution by the various dynastic rulers during the first 150 years since its introduction to China, Chinese Chan Buddhism became the dominant and best supported Buddhist sect, the Shaolin monks and adherents having helped the establishment of the Tang Dynasty through its ability to unify their adherents to action and through its fighting prowess in defending against the many bandits, rebels, and warlord armies at the time. Thereafter, imperial policies were put in place to have Shaolin monks and their adherents assist local governments and imperial troops when imperial interests were being threatened.

Throughout subsequent dynasties and into the early Republican years, the influence of the Shaolin Temple on imperial rulers and among the common people grew immensely. Tens of thousands of monks, disciples, and acolytes were trained and sent throughout the China to help defend the empire from their domestic and foreign enemies. Not only did their fighting skills lead to remarkable victories and great honors, but it was their abilities to organize and train the various local militias and imperial troops that also won the hearts of the people. With nearly 1,000 years of such involvement in the daily lives of the people at all levels, the influence

of the Shaolin Temple with its own special brand and spin on Chan Buddhism reaches deeply into the soul and conscience of the Chinese people.

## **Modern Implications**

The general disdain and persecution of religion by the CCP since 1949 hide the true impact that modern-day Chinese Chan Buddhism and its most well-known offshoot, the Shaolin Temple, still holds in the minds of those in Chinese leadership, both on the communist mainland and on nationalist Taiwan (many Shaolin-trained monks and adherents moved there in 1949). One example is Hu Jintao's Eight Honors and Eight Shames, a set of moral concepts. Though known as "Socialist Concepts on Honors and Disgraces" on the mainland, it is a clear reflection of the general Buddhist 8-Fold Path.

There are other examples, of course. Yet, what one discovers from reflecting on the many "thoughts" and modern policies, what pervades the "inner voice" of modern Chinese leaders, including military leaders and the modern "state security" arms of the CCP, is the result of the effects of Shaolin Temple Chan Buddhist training over the many centuries.

Much of the Shaolin Temple Chan Buddhist training focuses on sacrifice, courage, and determination through hardships. In the Buddhist worldview and now in the Chinese general worldview, these three factors are needed to attain liberation, not just from one's "self" in the original Buddhist understanding but also from those who oppress and humiliate. The CCP and its governmental organs have taken these ideas and have expanded it to include them in formulating national defense (including domestic social and "moral" quotients), defense from external aggression (all kinds), and defense against those who don't respect what they respect. In a recent interview, one of the last old Shaolin masters highly revered throughout the Chan Buddhist world, Shi Daoqian, is quoted saying, "Killing a tyrant is a virtue. We have a saying, 'If one tyrant is alive, then ten thousand innocent people can't rest in peace.'" This is not far from the application of this type of Chan Buddhism during imperial times.

Moreover, with the resurgence and popularity of the Shaolin Temple, especially in movies and TV dramas, the CCP has been "enhancing" the Shaolin Temple training and approach to develop into a type of "self-denying egolessness" to the point of selfless devotion to the cause of the Party and the country (usually one and the same). One then sees the rise not of just ultra-nationalist Chinese (on either side of the Taiwan strait) but a selfless soldier/citizen in service to the state and unattached to the small egocentric self.

By eliminating ego and ridding one of one's "self", a sense of a spirit of unity is engendered, and anything that defies this "unity" is a "tyrant" that must be defended against and defeated. One clearly sees this in the CCP's cultural (if not actual) genocide of the Uyghurs and Tibetans and in recent policies against allowing the use of minority languages in schools even in so-called "autonomous" areas at all levels in the country. One can also see this as a model for a "one-world government" where unity (in all forms possible) is prized above all.

## **Conclusion**

It is important that US policymakers learn about and understand the deep influence that the centuries of Shaolin Temple training and its version of Chan Buddhism has had on the people of China and their individual and corporate worldview. Their role and underlying significance on how Chinese conduct their domestic and international affairs cannot be understated.