



Legendary Masters of the Martial Arts

Unraveling fact from fiction

AUGUSTUS JOHN ROE

Advance Praise for *Legendary Masters of the Martial Arts*

The stories are presented vividly before the “facts and function” section arrives to bring us back to reality. The tales range from profound stories of fighting wild animals to plausible ones of battling adversity. It should be noted that the author is not in the business of attacking or debunking, rather he is trying to determine the probability of these events. Contradictions, based on records and chronological events, arise for each story, and the interests of the people promoting these stories are taken into consideration (from the need of an ancient lineage, the boost of patriotic sentiment, the shaping of public opinion, and commercial reasons, among others).

Safe to say that there is much to decipher, and scepticism will arise despite the tempting stories that surround these masters. The author does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. He gives each aspect that is probably true its due, along with reasoning about what we should keep from the overall tale. It is recognised that not only one master creates a style but rather that many contribute to its development. The book is well referenced and each chapter succinct. You certainly get the feeling that you know the essence of each master’s story. Furthermore, regardless of whether a story actually took place, insights into the arts themselves are well presented.

For example, the dualism and exploitation of the contrasted powers in Taijiquan is explained through the story of the snake and the crane. The flow is very good and can be appreciated by both the martial arts scholars and those seeking stories from the continent of Asia. The author has studied several of the martial arts described without trying to claim the role of authority. It is worth mentioning that he resides in Vietnam, which immerses him in Oriental culture.

—Andreas Louca, Sandan J.K.A.
Shotokan Karate Portal Book Review

Mr. Augustus John Roe, himself a dedicated, learned, and accomplished martial artist in his own right, offers this tribute to martial arts heroes and partakers of their legacies. For the martial artist, his straightforward retellings of the lives of obscure figures such as the Vietnamese swordswoman Bùi Thị Xuân and Thai pugilist Nai Khanom Tom, alongside more popular martial celebrities like Musashi and Bruce Lee, place these personalities' exploits in comparative context, which allows the reader to explore the nuances and diversity of martial arts storytelling—all the while intimating divergent prospective paths for the aspiring martial artist.

Furthermore, Mr. Roe's Legend-Facts-Functions structure makes the book especially suitable for the classroom as a sourcebook for storytelling that compels the learner to question the nature and meaning of history and mythmaking as well as investigate their own presumptions about the value of a good story.

— Quảng Huyền PhD, Dharma
Master, senior lecturer of
Vietnamese history and culture

This book approaches a very interesting area of martial arts. Within the lives of these legends, we seem to find the same ascetic practices in one form or another, all constituted by training that helps each to reach a very high level of skills in their art or attainment of enlightenment.

With good style, the author depicts the stories of different masters, through different times and places in history. A must-read for any martial arts practitioner wanting to learn more about legendary masters from the past.

— Clement Martin, Head Instructor
Kishinkai Vietnam

This book examines various martial arts legends through the lens of four thematic topics as to their factuality and the lessons and value that could be derived from them for martial arts practitioners.

I especially enjoyed the segment about Bùi Thị Xuân in the Challenges section. The question arose in my mind as to whether her legend otherwise motivated the women fighters in the Viet Cong and Viet Minh. It is not common today to see women as frontline fighters beyond support roles, excepting possibly the Kurd YPJ. Bùi Thị Xuân was an early role model for women's liberation and reflected that women do not need men to protect them.

I would certainly recommend this book to those interested in the lessons derived from these legendary masters of martial arts.

In my own case, the book's framework is now helping me with an ongoing examination of the legends and myths of a particular Asian martial art. I expect other readers may find this framework useful in their own examination of a martial art system.

— Moe Gyo, fifty-year practitioner
of Japanese and Southeast Asian
Martial Arts, Krav Maga

Augustus John Roe dissects important figures from the world of martial arts, where legends and history often merge. Once again, he offers us a rich contribution to the field of Martial Arts Studies.

— Mickael Langlois, Ph.D., author,
martial arts researcher

LEGENDARY MASTERS OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

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Unraveling Fact from Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Martial arts transport us to the realms of legends. Every single day, countless stories are told of history's martial heroes: warriors that overcame seemingly impossible odds to defeat their enemies, find spiritual transcendence, or simply survive.

Whether these tales appear orally from student-to-student, on the big or small screen, or in the form of the written word, they remain a key element of martial culture.

Although the legends of historical martial arts warriors are undoubtedly gripping, playing on our darkest fears and tugging at our heartstrings with acts of hope, adversity, and triumphs of the human spirit, they often cause one to wonder where fact ends and fiction begins.

No stories are more gripping than those surrounding the founders and great masters of modern-day practices. It is with these legendary figures and their tales that this book concerns itself.

The "hero" and "underdog" story structures, a staple of humanity since antiquity, are commonplace throughout the canon of martial arts legends, with their familiar plot points and character types. For example, the student being frail or sickly, their study being prohibited by parents or other authority characters, an (often old) mentor figure teaching them ancient secrets, and a final test of skills that must be undertaken alone.

The protagonists of each martial arts legend are varied, and may be of different genders, ages, or backgrounds. They may face a spiritual crisis, a physical enemy, a natural enemy, or even be their own greatest enemy.

However, it cannot be ignored that we *do* often see specific formats and themes reoccurring in supposedly real-life events. This then raises the question: “Do we tell the legends of martial arts figures because of their magnificent characters and gripping stories, or do we insert these elements into what may be far more mundane realities?”

This is a conundrum that this book intends to investigate further by examining three key questions.

- ◆ Why are the legendary martial arts founders and figureheads held in such high regard?
- ◆ How factual are their legends?
- ◆ What is the function of these legends, both historically and in the modern day?

Twelve “true” tales of some of the most legendary martial arts figures will be presented in this book. These legends have been specifically selected as they represent a spread of well-known martial arts communities (rather than just a single style or nation), and because they are highly dramatic and widespread in numerous formats.

The following legends have been divided into four thematic categories, based upon what is widely considered to be their key content (however, these categories are subject to personal interpretation, as many of the tales could be placed into two or more).

These categories include:

1. Spiritual Journeys
2. Rebellion Tales
3. Duels
4. Challenges

The legends will first be retold as they commonly appear within informal martial arts histories, usually repeated orally, seen in film or television, or other media formats. We will then examine the known facts about each figure and legend, present possible reasons for their longevity, and discuss key functions that they have served for followers and practitioners of martial arts both historically and in the modern world.

In the final part of the book, we will examine common themes and motifs throughout these legends and return once again to ruminate upon their functions.

NOTES ON WRITING

Although the terms “myths” and “legends” are often used interchangeably, they can be distinguished by two key differences.

Myths are traditional stories that often incorporate aspects of the supernatural and may be entirely fictional. In contrast, legends are typically based upon verifiable historical characters. Second, while often incredible, legends rarely cross into the realm of what is clearly impossible. It is with these legends that this book concerns itself.

Regarding the content, the martial arts being examined here are “traditional” Eastern martial arts. These are usually Asian-developed systems that incorporate the use of forms/kata and focus on the spiritual and mental aspects of training alongside the physical, rather than pure combat sports.

It is also important to highlight that focusing upon the facts of these legends is not an attempted “debunking” or “defamation” of martial arts masters and figureheads. Instead, each legend will be presented alongside the known facts (or lack thereof). Therefore, it is up to the reader to draw their own conclusions about the content discussed.

For the most part, all names and foreign language words have been romanized following standard conventions.

For words written in English with diacritical markings and romanizations of Chinese/Japanese/other languages, I have used italics for the first appearance to highlight that it is a foreign language. From that point onwards, I have used standard American English without accents, tones, or italics.

The legends told at the beginning of each section have intentionally been left uncited except for dialogue. This is a deliberate exclusion, as these tales are typically not dependent on reliable sources and are often shared orally within martial arts communities, or dramatized in film, media, and written interpretations. Therefore, they seldom have a fixed original source or form.

Dialogue used within the legends is based on records of conversations or writings from the figures and has been cited in the references. However, in some cases this speech has not been written verbatim and may have been adapted slightly to better fit the narrative.

At the start of each legend, you will find an overview of each main figure of the story. This includes basic aspects such as their life and death dates, but also examples of what they are known for and why, as well as notes surrounding the figure(s) that are pertinent to the legend.

Part I

SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

This section will look at three legendary figures of martial arts who are widely known for their spiritual legacies in Buddhism, Taoism, and Shintoism, respectively. These are Bodhidharma, Zhang Sanfeng, and Morihei Ueshiba.

While the legends of these figures take place many centuries apart, they all detail journeys undertaken that focus on spiritual and religious awakenings, either for the figures themselves or their followers.

Similarly, they have been categorized this way due to the key aspects of their legends historically, and the relevance they hold in the modern world. In this respect, we know each of the three figures for their contributions to the religious and spiritual sides of martial arts as much as for their physical contributions.



Key sites from Chapter One: Chennai (India), Mount Wudang, the Shaolin Temple, and Manchuria (China), and Tanabe (Japan).

BODHIDHARMA

A Zen Monk's Journey to the East



Bodhidharma was born as *Bodhitara*. He is known as Daruma in Japanese and Da Mo in Chinese. Bodhidharma is reported to have been born as the third son of a southern Indian king (possibly in the Chennai region) during the fifth or early sixth century.

If so, he would have been raised as an elite member of the warrior caste. This means he would likely have been trained in unarmed combat, wrestling, stick-fighting, swordsmanship, and military strategy. He also may have studied yogic and Buddhist breathing and flexibility exercises.

The dates of Bodhidharma's death are disputed, and some versions of his story claim that he lived until one-hundred-fifty or even older. Meanwhile, folktales from the era often recount him appearing in the region long after his alleged death.



Bodhidharma is often portrayed in paintings and stories with dark skin and thick black hair. Some texts, however, portray him as having blue eyes and a lighter complexion and claim he was of Persian descent. Bodhidharma is usually pictured with a large beard, earrings, and dark brown or orange robes of the Buddhist clergy. In most modern depictions, he wears a twisted expression, displaying either sternness or anger.

He is known today as the founder of Zen (Chan) in China, an introspective school of Buddhism that believes the truth lies within oneself rather than in external sources. He is also known as the Patriarch Master of the Shaolin Temple, Chinese Kung Fu, and by extension, many schools of Asian martial arts.

Legends of Bodhidharma appear in many countries throughout Asia. He is seen as a forefather of martial arts by many groups that have been influenced by Chinese culture over the centuries, including Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the nations of the Malay Archipelago.



Possible routes of Bodhidharma's journey to East Asia.

THE LEGEND

For more than two years, Bodhidharma traveled on nothing more than his own two feet, dedicated to fulfilling his dying master's ultimate wish. His goal was to spread the word of Zen in the great kingdom beyond the mountains.

Many monks had ventured east before Bodhidharma, though very few had ever returned, and those that did told of a bizarre land, cold and hard, divided by war and rife with suffering. It seemed the task he had been presented with would prove impossible.

At first, he trekked across the wetlands and grassy plains of western India before facing the vast mountain ranges that lay to the east. Over the next year, Bodhidharma weaved a path through the wild Himalayan lowlands before eventually emerging into Southeast Asia. The last leg of the Zen monk's epic journey was by boat. He set foot in southern China for the first time in the year 527 CE. Keen to make headway on his challenge at last, Bodhidharma ventured to the city of Jian Kang, the seat of Imperial power. Supposedly, Emperor Wu, the leader of the Liang Dynasty, was an avid follower of Buddhism. If he could bring the message of Zen to the nation's ruler, then maybe Bodhidharma's mission would have a chance of success.

As he approached the city walls, an escort of guards met the monk. It seemed word of his quest had already reached the city, and the opportunity to meet a wandering holy man from the lands of the Buddha himself was a tempting offer for the pious emperor.



The soldiers escorted Bodhidharma through the streets of a bizarre and foreign city, filled with thousands of people, sights, sounds, and smells that were alien to the monk. Eventually, they reached the gates of the Imperial Palace and led the monk through into a lavish great hall where the emperor was seated drinking tea.

Bodhidharma bowed low, to which Wu responded with a friendly nod. The meeting had started well. Bodhidharma had studied the local language while traveling, and this impressed Emperor Wu. The emperor was intrigued by the monk's mysterious nature and soon questioned him on the nature of Zen Buddhism.

"What do you think is the highest meaning of the noble truth?"

"There is no noble truth," Bodhidharma replied.

The emperor stroked his beard in thought. "Well then, how much karmic merit do you think I have accumulated from my work? I have built vast temples, ordained hundreds of monks, and copied tens of thousands of sutras."

The monk took a breath. He was never one to skirt around the truth. "I believe you have accumulated none."¹

As respectfully as possible, Bodhidharma explained how, in the pursuit of true enlightenment, one must journey inward rather than outward.

Emperor Wu took offense to the claim that all of his devotion had achieved nothing and expelled Bodhidharma from his city.

The monk was stunned that the meeting that had seemed so promising just a short time before had ended in abject failure. Bodhidharma swallowed his pride, deciding this was Karma and that his faith must not wane in the face of hardship.

* * *

Making his way deeper into the vast country, Bodhidharma soon found himself staring upward at the peak of Mount Song. It was one of China's five sacred Taoist sites and home to one of the emperor's most important Buddhist monasteries. Maybe speaking with the monks themselves would prove more fruitful than it had been with their ruler.

Unfortunately, word had already reached the abbot that a bizarre-looking, huge, hairy man with dark skin and blue eyes was traveling through their lands, spreading a false message of Buddhism.

The abbot called out through the gates on seeing the stranger approach the temple, declaring that he was unwelcome. Respectfully, as always, Bodhidharma bowed his head and thanked the abbot for his time.

Never one to be easily disheartened, the Zen monk decided to meditate on his dilemma. Finding a cave on the northern side of the mountain, Bodhidharma took the weight off his aching feet and sat cross-legged with his eyes fixed upon the wall in a distant stare.

As he gazed ahead, trying to perfect his mastery of Zen, the days rolled into weeks and the weeks rolled into months. Upon orders from the abbot, many monks came and went, checking on the mysterious figure from time to time.

Nine years of Bodhidharma's life passed before a young monk named Shen-Kuang happened across the cave quite by chance. He had heard of the mysterious hermit that lived somewhere on the mountain, and when he noticed the outline of a figure



sat in the shadows one cold winter morning, curiosity got the better of him.

Shen-Kuang approached, offering a greeting. Bodhidharma stayed silent and deathly still but his eyes were open and focused on one single spot. According to the stories the monk's brothers had once told him, the bizarre foreigner had not so much as stood up in nearly a decade.

With no acknowledgement of his presence, Shen-Kuang stepped forward to investigate. Only then, beneath the shadowy light of the cave, did he notice the two eye holes that had been burned into the far wall by Bodhidharma's gaze. Immediately, he knew this was no ordinary man.

Kneeling before Bodhidharma, the young monk begged to join him as a disciple. Once again there was no response, so he was left wondering what he could possibly do to get the mysterious figure's attention.

After kneeling in the snow outside the cave for weeks, hoping to earn the Master's respect, Shen-Kuang came to realize that he must do something spectacular to prove he was worthy.

In a display of absolute dedication, one morning he slipped away from the temple before dawn. Shen-Kuang carried a ceremonial sword on his back and, before the entrance to the cave, hacked off his own left arm at the elbow.

As his blood burned holes through the white snow, Shen-Kuang tore a strip of fabric from his robes and tied it tightly to the stump of his arm as a tourniquet. He then entered the cave and laid his bloody limb before Bodhidharma.

"The mind of your disciple is not yet quietened," he said, gritting his teeth through the tremendous pain. "I beg you Master to quiet my mind."

Coming around from his nine-year meditation, Bodhidharma answered, "Bring your mind forth and I will quieten it for you."²

With his formal acceptance as a Zen disciple, Bodhidharma dubbed Shen-Kuang "Hui-Ko," meaning "His wisdom is sufficient."

Over time, Bodhidharma's following grew as more monks joined Hui-Ko, curious about the teachings of Zen. Eventually, the monks invited the Great Master to take up residence in the Shaolin Temple and teach them the art of Zen Buddhism.

Finally making progress after more than a decade, Bodhidharma was pleased. One morning he was walking cheerily through the halls with the abbot when he saw several of the monks were sleeping at their stations rather than working on translating Sutras, the sacred Buddhist texts.

Bodhidharma questioned the abbot about his monks' lack of vitality, to which he responded with excuses, stating how their minds were under such demand from translating sutras and meditating that it took its toll on them physically.

Bodhidharma found this statement ridiculous, knowing full well that for one's mind to be strong, the body must be strong too. He ordered the abbot to bring his followers to the courtyard the following morning at sunrise.

The next morning, the order of monks stood in the icy, snow-covered courtyard. Bodhidharma watched for a few minutes as the group shivered, yawned, and grumbled in the cold.

Bodhidharma ordered the monks to watch him and copy his movements exactly as they saw. He first worked through a routine of yogic exercises, then the beginning of a form of unarmed fighting techniques called the "Eighteen Hands,"

and finally a series of breathing exercises to develop Qi. These were techniques he had learned during his time both as a child growing up in the elite warrior caste, and later as a disciple of Zen.

The monks were soon sweating and red faced but energized and awake. As they ate that morning, voices and an atmosphere of vibrancy filled the normally quiet and stoic hall.

Over time, the monks' physical and mental spirits were lifted, and they learned more techniques from Bodhidharma, including different weapon practices such as the sword, staff, and spear, and physical meditation forms that would later develop into the Shaolin style.

Similarly, the monks' focus and discipline as students of Zen Buddhism grew rapidly. Bodhidharma soon found he had a temple of skilled and dedicated followers.

Although this was not the route he had pictured, Bodhidharma found joy in the spread of his Master's teachings. For many years he remained at the temple, building his following into something greater than he could ever have imagined.

With his task finally accomplished, a yearning for his homeland swelled within Bodhidharma's aged body. In due course, he assembled his closest disciples in the cave where he had once sat for nine years. This was to be their final lesson.

Bodhidharma called forth his most devout followers one by one. Using his body as a metaphor, Bodhidharma proclaimed the depth of each of their understandings. To one he offered his skin (outer knowledge), another his flesh (deeper knowledge), and a third his bones (deeper still). Finally, calling forward Hui Ko, Bodhidharma announced, "You have got my marrow, the full depths of my teachings."³

Unsure how to make sense of the news that he had become the twenty-ninth patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Hui Ko prostrated himself before the Great Master and thanked him for bringing the true path of Zen to the monks of Shaolin.

THE FACTS

For years Bodhidharma's legend has been a subject of great debate. Some believe that he is a historically unfounded figure entirely, while others argue that there is clear evidence for his existence and his dissemination of Zen Buddhism and the associated Shaolin martial arts.

First, if Bodhidharma was a legitimate historical figure, the specific locations of his travels vary wildly between versions of the legend. In Southeast Asian folktales, he is stated to have traveled south by sea to Sumatra and then journeyed up the Malay Archipelago into China, teaching Buddhism and martial arts practices as he went. Some local communities consider this to have even helped pioneer the Indonesian martial art of Silat.⁴

In another version of the tale, Bodhidharma later left the Shaolin Monastery and traveled through the Korean peninsula before crossing the sea into Japan, where he is also identified as a forefather of martial arts.⁵

While his route of travel is speculative, there are various documents (albeit mostly written posthumously) that describe Bodhidharma's time in China. One notable work is "The History of the Monasteries of Luoyang," which was written in 547 CE and describes "Sramana Bodhidharma" as a Persian monk living in Yong Ning Temple and who claimed to be one-hundred-fifty years old.⁶

While there are various texts that place Bodhidharma (or another similar figure) at "Shaolin," the temple's name itself

is a point of contention. In Chinese, “Shaolin” means “Young Forest” and has been used to refer to many sites throughout history, leading to conflicting theories about the actual location of the temple.

Therefore, Bodhidharma may well have been in residence at *a*, but not necessarily *the* Shaolin temple in Henan Province that is associated with him today.

Second, while Bodhidharma is often said to have established Zen Buddhism in China, some scholars believe the depiction of this lineage may have been a later undertaking to create a direct, retroactive connection between Zen and the Buddha.⁷

With this in mind, the resemblance between Bodhidharma’s legend and the story of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, should be noted. Both figures are said to have given up their lives of luxury as princes of the Indian Subcontinent to become wandering monks. If Bodhidharma is indeed a fictional creation, it is possible that these parallels are not coincidence.

While there are also several written Zen practices and sermons that have been posthumously accredited to Bodhidharma, the authenticity of such documents is often debated. Many modern scholars agree that these are primarily works of later Zen disciples rather than Bodhidharma himself, as the religion was not widespread until at least the seventh century.⁸

Third, the legend of Bodhidharma teaching martial arts as part of religious training may have also served a purpose for the Chinese Buddhist clergy. Historically, Buddhist monks often engaged in military crusades. The Shaolin Monks specifically served during various campaigns throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁹

In recent times, there may have been a drive for Chinese Buddhists to distance themselves from martial arts practices

due to increased periods of peace and changes in modern religious ideologies.

One method for doing so could have been to emphasize the historical use of martial arts as purely spiritual exercises. However, Shaolin's military background appears to be a more convincing argument for hundreds of years of ongoing martial arts practice rather than being solely part of Bodhidharma's religious teachings.

It should also be noted that many drawings and sculptures of Bodhidharma from the Middle Ages portrayed him in a similar manner to any other saint or prophet—calm, good natured, and reverent. Meanwhile, the stern, bizarre-looking version of the character that we regularly see today has emerged more recently. Rubbings taken from sculptures and steles in the Shaolin temple show pronounced changes over time in both Bodhidharma's demeanor and the foreignness of his appearance when compared to Chinese saints. This is particularly noticeable from the era in which his association with martial arts became widespread.¹⁰

In terms of Bodhidharma's discussions with his followers, the speech in which he metaphorically offers parts of himself to his disciples—with Hui Ko "attaining the marrow," or the fundamentals of his teachings—is of particular relevance.

Many scholars throughout history have taken the term "marrow" to refer to specific texts on ancient Qigong-like practices collectively referred to as "The Marrow Cleansing Classics." However, by conservative estimates, these books did not appear until nearly one thousand years after the legend took place.¹¹

Another consideration is that until around the sixteenth century, the Shaolin monks were not known for their unarmed fighting skills. Although some monks at the Shaolin temple

did practice styles of boxing, most records indicate they used common systems of martial arts from the period rather than any specific Shaolin style.¹²

The writings of author Cheng Zhongdou (1522–1587 CE) support this, describing how at his time the monks' unarmed fighting techniques had not reached the level of their staff fighting, which was already well known.¹³

While Bodhidharma has been discussed in many texts that also reference martial arts over the centuries, there was no clear and direct link between the two, except for the occasional forged or unreliable document, until the seventeenth century.¹⁴ In fact, the first modern incarnations of Bodhidharma's tale that resemble the one told earlier can be traced back to fiction from the early nineteenth century, one notable work being *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*, which was first published as a newspaper serial in China in 1907.¹⁵

Such stories were hugely popular at the time, and Bodhidharma's legend, like any good "true life" story, was nothing short of explosive. A lone traveler, a warrior mystic of great physical and spiritual power who overcame tremendous odds to complete an epic journey was compelling, just as it has been in countless other instances and cultures. In modern times, however, Bodhidharma's legend is simply more interesting and convenient than the myriad of societal, cultural, economic, and military factors that have contributed to the development of Asian martial arts traditions.

While he may be a figure of respect for Buddhists and martial artists everywhere, the known facts about Bodhidharma present a convincing argument that it is inaccurate to consider him as the father of all modern-day Asian martial arts.

FUNCTIONS OF THE LEGEND

Connecting Martial Arts and Zen Philosophies

While there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Bodhidharma probably was an actual figure, or at least an amalgamation of figures who resided at one of the Shaolin Temples, it is likely that his specific exploits and teachings have been confused over the centuries, with facts, tales, and statements being misattributed.

Regardless of its authenticity, however, the legend of Bodhidharma serves an important function by connecting Zen Buddhism and the martial arts. One way it does this is by acting as a religious parable and highlighting key aspects of the Zen Buddhist teachings, such as introspection, perseverance, and physical cultivation.

For example, in Bodhidharma's conversations with Emperor Wu, it is made clear that achievements such as building temples are of lesser importance than the internal development that the Emperor has obviously neglected.

Similarly, Bodhidharma's steadfast dedication to completing his task over thousands of miles and years of his life emphasizes the strength of his spirit and perseverance required to succeed in both Buddhist practices and martial arts alike. Meanwhile his interactions with Hui-Ko reinforce this message and further teach that one must remain humble and respect one's teacher.

Furthermore, by discerning that the monks in the temple were weakened by their poor physical state and agreeing to teach them martial arts, the legend demonstrates the importance of physical cultivation for Zen Buddhists.

In Western dialogues the body and mind have historically been divided into separate entities, as described by Descartes

and later revisited by Ryle, who coined the phrase “Ghost in the machine.”¹⁶ Zen Buddhism, however, teaches that these two elements are unified and work in accordance with one another.

This principle is displayed through Bodhidharma’s teachings to the monks on Shaolin, and demonstrates a greater purpose for the practice of martial arts than simply to fight, tying Buddhism and martial arts practices together neatly.

Providing a Figurehead for Chinese Martial Arts

Bodhidharma’s legend provides a traceable lineage for the development of Shaolin (and subsequently, all Chinese/East Asian) systems. In particular, this includes those stemming from Shaolin or that are considered to be external “hard” styles of Chinese martial arts (i.e., those that place more emphasis on strength and physical conditioning than Qi and internal alignment, such as Shaolin Kung Fu, Hung Gar, Choy-li-Fut, etc.).

Even though the Shaolin monks were historically more likely to pray to the Buddhist icon Vajrapāṇi as the divine progenitor of martial arts rather than the Buddha,¹⁷ there have undoubtedly been many generations of Buddhist warrior monks who view Bodhidharma as their patriarch, not only in China but across Japan and Southeast Asia too.

By promoting Bodhidharma into the martial arts narrative from his original role as a Zen patriarch, a single, ancient figurehead and lineage for the practice of Shaolin Kung Fu was born.

Being ancient is often perceived as proving legitimacy for martial arts practices, even though it has been widely identified that the vast majority of “traditional” martial arts that “present themselves as ancient are hardly even old.”¹⁸ Therefore Bodhidharma’s legend, at allegedly over fifteen-hundred-years-old, does a sublime job in this respect.



Promoting Chinese Martial Arts

Bodhidharma's story as a mysterious and legendary founder has certainly helped to attract students, both foreign and Chinese, to Shaolin Kung Fu and the related styles. This in turn has ensured various economic and cultural benefits for modern-day China.

By creating a traceable lineage and focal point from which all Asian martial arts (allegedly) developed, China has transformed sites such as the Shaolin Temple and the alleged cave where Bodhidharma took refuge into a Mecca for modern-day martial artists.

This has led to the creation of an entire tourism industry around the Shaolin Temple and the alleged sites Bodhidharma visited. Dozens of Buddhist and martial arts training academies are located in the surrounding region, providing "authentic Shaolin experiences" for local and international guests alike.

Similarly, Bodhidharma has now been tied so steadfastly to China, Shaolin, and the birth of Asian martial arts that it is now near impossible to separate one from the other, with Bodhidharma's role cemented within the collective consciousness of martial artists around the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Augustus John Roe is an author and martial artist. Originally from the UK, he has spent the last decade of his life living, training, and writing in Asia.

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Augustus is the author of the award-winning book *The Martial Arts of Vietnam—An Overview of History and Styles* as well as fiction works including *Where Tigers Roam—An Epic tale of Adventure in the Far East* and several other novels under the pen name A. J. Roe.

Augustus is always happy to discuss his work or hear comments from readers and welcomes you to contact him via his website or on social media. He also humbly requests that if you enjoyed the book, please leave a review on Amazon, Google, Goodreads, Apple books, or other places—for authors, this small act makes a HUGE difference!

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Augustus John Roe is an author, linguist, and instructor of traditional Vietnamese martial arts. For more than a decade, he has lived and trained martial arts in Asia. Augustus Roe currently lives with his family in Vietnam’s capital city, Hanoi.

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