

# Shaolin Si

## A World Apart

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**I had already been traveling for over a month. The slower pace of wondering around in China was a welcome break from the long trekking days of Nepal. I missed the mountains but was eager to try something new. The Shaolin monasteries of Hénan province had been constantly lingering in my mind for as long as I knew of their existence. Now only days away, I felt that excitement only brought about by getting so close to something that had seemed, for the longest time, just a fabric of my vivid imagination.**

I passed a few lazy days in Louyang with my Chinese friend Zhang Shu-Fang, or Amy, her English name of choice. Amy and I had met almost two years ago during my first visit to this enchanted land. Back then I'd met, and was travelling with Glenn Hughson and Assaf Duvdevan, a Canadian and an Israeli who were on journeys of their own. I was still working in London and the visit, my most ambitious at the time, was only 3 weeks long. Glenn, braver than I could have ever been, worked in East Timor on a development project that involved constructing community centers for the villagers when at the time, East Timor, a rogue state, was probably the one place on the planet where you wouldn't want to go. He did though, and when we met he had been on a pure diet of rice and spinach for nine months straight. It wasn't surprising then that Glenn, a thin small-framed guy, always ate as if for two or three people. Glenn's visit to China was short, albeit still a couple of weeks longer than mine.

Assaf, or 'Israel' as we often called him, was in a league of his own. He was a few months into a trip that would ultimately last a whole year and had arrived to China through Russia then Mongolia on the infamous Trans-Siberian railway in the dead of its Siberian winter. Before that, he had been in Eastern Europe where he lost a few valuable weeks to drinking vodka in Prague. We listened as he recounted how every day he would make plans to leave at first light only to realise that he had slightly too much to drink the night before. That was ancient history now. When we met, unlike most travelers, Assaf, an ex-military commando, was always up for doing things differently, venturing 'off the beaten path' and on his own. I was not to know then, that only a year later I would embark on a one-year journey of my own. It's fair to say that a large part of my inspiration came from this man and the engaging stories that he recounted during the little time we spent together yet we got to know each other so well.

When Glenn, Assaf and I reached the ancient city of Xi'an, home to the incredible life-like Terracotta Army warriors, and having just spent the best of 12 hours on a train, we were eager to stretch our legs, walk around town and sample the nightlife. Enter Amy, a young beautiful English teacher from Xi'an. Amy was out that night with her friends in the one club in the whole of Xi'an (there were only two!) that we happened to walk into. I immediately noticed something different about her and after much deliberation and encouragement from my fellow travellers, (they basically called me an idiot if I didn't go talk to her); managed to muster enough courage to approach her. Looking back, from our experiences thus far in China, we knew the chances of a common language would be low but surely enough and much to our surprise, Amy spoke English brilliantly, and in a way only English teachers do. It was interesting to see China through the eyes of a local. Wherever we went together, people would ask her who I was and what was I doing traveling alone in Mainland China. Chinese people are naturally curious but they just seemed overly curious when it came to tall dark Egyptians with funny curly hair and tattered clothes. Amy accompanied us everywhere for the couple of days we were in town. She was our own smart beautiful tour guide. Isn't it funny how some memories seem so recent yet they are in fact a few years old? Three years have passed already since this very encounter.





A pagoda in Kun Ming, southwest China.



Amy and I met one other time during the six months I spent working in Hong Kong. Eight months later I shared with her my plans for the trip and she traveled from Xi'an to meet me in Louyang. She too, had never been to Shaolin Si. Assaf now is a physicist, working and living in Tel Aviv. Glenn's whereabouts at the time of writing are unknown to me, but the last time our paths crossed was in Mongolia over a year ago while I was on a Trans-Siberian journey of my own. He was on his way there to photograph a camel race in the Gobi desert.

The bus journey from Louyang was short and uneventful. Trying my best to fit into the seat, I struggled with knees against my chest while Amy found no trouble in stretching her legs. We sat gazing through the window as the scenery unfolded before our eyes. A noisy bustling city gave way to quieter suburbs then nothing. I knew we were close when the flat terrain opened up to a hilly landscape and then two formidable mountains where a little town sat perched in between.

As soon as we got off the bus, an unassuming Chinese guy jumped off behind us and with one swift acrobatic maneuver was on the roof. He threw my backpack to me and with the same finesse jumped back in. Taken by surprise I stood watching as the bus drove off and disappeared into the distance.

Our town was not directly adjacent to the road, but a couple of miles away. Amy talked me into getting on a dubious looking motorcycle. Minutes later we were scooting into town with a surrealistic trail of grey exhaust fume behind us. The only place to stay in this little town was the school dormitory and where else would one want to stay anyway? Separated from the world's greatest martial artists by one narrow corridor, your room only meters away from theirs, this was most exciting! What wasn't so exciting was that with no heating, the room was so cold that it probably made more sense to sleep outside. The sun was still out and we could still feel its warmth but in a matter of hours it would drop below the horizon and with it, the temperature to near zero levels. This was central China in winter.

We quickly dropped our bags, picked up our valuables and headed out. As I walked towards the door, I heard a very Bruce Lee-like sound coming from downstairs and immediately rushed to the window. I couldn't believe my eyes. Right in front of me and stretched over about two hundred square meters were more than one hundred men and women of all ages engaged in the most elaborate martial arts techniques my eyes had ever seen. Everyone had a shaved head and wore red monk-like robes. Six-year-old boys were performing double summersaults and a group of teenage girls were doing back flips in unison. One man held a double-edged sword and another rotated a pair of nunchaku as if it were attached to his body. It was surreal and took my breath away. I stood there mesmerized long enough for Amy to walk across the room and pull me away.

We quickly made a decision to leave visiting the temple to the following day. It would be dark in a couple of hours and we preferred having the whole day to explore. As we walked down the one narrow street that comprised this little town, I came to realise that all the businesses consisted of three restaurants, one mini-market type shop and a few places that sold practice weapons to the students. Amy had to pull me away again as I found myself, much like a needle, being pulled into one of these shops and towards a beautiful samurai type sword, the magnet. Naturally, I did go back on my last day to buy the sword only to have it confiscated from me in a showdown with the Russian authorities in Saint Petersburg a few weeks later. I am still in mourning over the dazzling rapier.

It wasn't difficult for both of us to agree that the most important thing after a skillfully crafted hand-made sword was food! The first two restaurants, dark and empty, didn't inspire much confidence. The third was also empty but the owner responded, and stepped out from the back, after we shouted for attention only ten times. We comforted ourselves with the fact that we were eating at an awkward time. Amy, despite being petite and not having lived on a rice and spinach diet for extended periods of time, had a huge appetite. Between us we devoured a large Chinese chicken (I say Chinese because Chinese chickens are big!), various bowls of noodles, rice, potatoes and vegetables. As we dug into one plate after the other with chopsticks in hand, and despite not being in the owner's direct line of sight, I couldn't help notice him staring at me the whole time. In China, this unusual habit was neither new to me nor considered rude. Unlike most places, if you caught someone staring at you and looked back at them, they wouldn't turn the other way in mild embarrassment but just continue to impart on you that same blank fixed look.

The owner had spent the last ten minutes asking a variety of inquisitive questions about me. Amy directly answered those that she was able to and through her own translation, I managed the remainder. We were just about done eating and ordered the bill when instead of bringing the cheque, I saw her eyes widen in apparent disbelief as he sent another question her way. She explained that the amiable China man wanted to arm-wrestle me for the tab. I laughed, shrugging it off as some old Chinese joke but no one else was. From the expression on the man's face it seemed like this was a perfectly normal request in this mythical part of the world and there was no use trying to decline. I resigned to my happy fate.





My camera was capable of a minute of muted footage and Amy stood with it in hand to take advantage of this classic moment. There we were, in a little town in middle China, two grown men (admittedly, one a fair bit more grown than the other) sitting across from each other on a wooden stool about to arm-wrestle for a chicken. It seemed like the fate of the planet depended on it. My arm seemed frail as I laid it down on the table next to that of the large man. We raised our right hands in position while keeping elbows fixed on the cold surface. His palm was thick and coarse and my eyes were met with an ice-cold gaze. Amy gave the signal to start.

What, for a few seconds, began as a fairly balanced affair quickly turned to his favour as I felt the load of his large frame weigh on my now struggling wrists. My eyes were fixed down on the table for the most part as I laboured to summon as much energy as possible. I could even see the little splinters on the table surface and for a moment it felt like saw the reflection of a struggling face; the creases over my forehead, eyes bulging and jaw clenched. I looked up for a moment and saw a face devout of expression, his concentration solid. I struggled to mimic his masterful technique but my concentration faltered. The balance was still slightly in his favour. Slowly and perhaps with stamina working to my advantage, we were back level again, arms upright. Still there was no sign of vulnerability on his part. Forty-one seconds, which is how long this duel lasted, seemed like an eternity. Towards the end I felt the strength in my arms fade away. Nothing but stubborn pride kept me going. Only in the very final seconds did an expression brake over his solemn face, and with it his strength wavered. He lost immediately after.

I walked out of the restaurant feeling more nourished and stronger than when I had walked in. I was more pleased about my victory than I had initially thought. The sanctuary that is Shaolin Si was only metres away. Feeling lighter and despite the onset of darkness, I found my mind venturing on its own accord, shedding light deep into the temple grounds. Suddenly everything seemed so familiar and I momentarily closed my eyes savouring the thought for a moment longer.

Many years ago, a man, weary after a long pilgrimage he had undertaken from India in search of Buddha, came to this mountain seeking refuge. So peaceful were the surroundings he stumbled upon, that legend has it he sat still on the hilltop in reflection for eight consecutive years. So long was his meditation and perfect his stillness, that his shadow got imprinted on the rocky walls forever. ☐



Statue of a legendary man who meditated at this wall for 8 years



Dali in Yunnan province



Louyang