

# **American Shaolin: Flying Kicks, Buddhist Monks, and the Legend of Iron Crotch: An Odyssey in the New China Study Guide**

**American Shaolin: Flying Kicks, Buddhist Monks, and  
the Legend of Iron Crotch: An Odyssey in the New  
China by Matthew Polly**

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# Plot Summary

"American Shaolin" tells the true story of a young American man called Matt who decides to travel to China to learn kung fu at the Shaolin Temple. He wants to change a list of things that he thinks is wrong with him. When he arrives at Shaolin it is not everything he expected, but he is determined to see it through. He comes to respect Shaolin for what it is, not what he wants it to be, and learns more about Chinese culture and society while he is there. He changes, becoming braver and more confident, and gradually crosses everything off his list. By the time he returns to America he is more skilled in kung fu, and feels that he has finally become a man.

Matt makes a list of things that are wrong with him, consisting of: 1) ignorant, 2) cowardly, 3) still a boy (not a man), 4) unattractive to the opposite sex, 5) spiritually confused. He goes to college to cross off number 1, but then decides the best way to address the others is to study kung fu at Shaolin in China. Matt's parents do not approve, but Matt uses his college fund to do it anyway.

When Matt arrives in China, he has no idea where the Shaolin Temple is and has to ask until someone can direct him. He catches a train to Zheng Zhou, then a bus to Shaolin. He is surprised at how tacky and touristy the place is, but he is determined to learn kung fu and so he is not put off. He agrees to pay \$1300 a month for his training, room and board while there. He settles in, and begins his first lessons. At first, training is very hard and painful for Matt, but after a while his legs become more flexible and the pain goes away. He manages to find a vendor that sells coca cola, but in other ways he misses home and begins to feel quite lonely.

As Matt displays his willingness to train and 'eat bitter' the other monks begin to accept him. He angers Deqing by questioning why a monk would be interested in money, and is then ashamed when he finds out Deqing's sad back-story. Deqing forgives him, and the two become good friends.

One day Matt has a religious experience while training, a feeling of perfect peace. He crosses 'spiritually confused' off his list. However, he is still concerned that he is a coward and could not win in a proper fight. He decides to take up Chinese kickboxing. The leaders of the Wushu Center set up a new team so Matt can learn. At first the other team members do not approve of Matt, but when he shows them how serious he is about training, they accept him. Coach Cheng, the kickboxing instructor, becomes a good friend and mentor to Matt.

Matt begins to settle in even more, and learns more about the Chinese people. He becomes better at dealing with them, and manages to renegotiate how much he is paying for training. He is also improving at kung fu, and Coach Cheng decides he will compete at the kung fu tournament in Zheng Zhou in the fall. Matt's confidence has gone up considerably, and he now begins to visit other areas and other people in China. However, he does not have much luck with women, and still experiences prejudice

because he is a foreigner. When a new American student, John Lee, arrives at Shaolin, Matt is pleased to have a friend who is similar to him.

When a visiting master from a rival school challenges Shaolin, Matt steps up to defend Shaolin's honor. He wins the fight and gains even more confidence. At the tournament Matt makes it to the final but loses to the Chinese National Champion. However, he realizes that in fighting this match, he has finally conquered his fear. He can cross 'cowardly' off his list. After this, he has the confidence to face trouble on his own, protects John Lee, and finds a proper girlfriend. He crosses 'unattractive to the opposite sex' off his list.

When Matt is finally ready to leave Shaolin he realizes that he has achieved what he wanted to and become a much more confident person. Back in America, his father remarks that Matt has become a man, and he crosses this final item off his list. However, he also realizes that he will be constantly adding new things to the list, such as 'family' and 'career' and that this is actually a positive thing rather than a negative thing.

When Matt revisits China and Shaolin ten years later, a lot has changed. However, what remains the same is the dedication and passion of the monks and the kung fu students, which is what Matt admires so much.

# **Prologue and Book 1: Wanderer, Chapters 1-3, 'The First Step', 'Lost in Translation', and 'Sleeping Beauty'**

## **Prologue and Book 1: Wanderer, Chapters 1-3, 'The First Step', 'Lost in Translation', and 'Sleeping Beauty' Summary**

Matt is a young American man who has a list of things he wants to improve about himself. He decides to drop out of college for a couple of years to study kung fu in China, at the Shaolin Temple. He arrives, but it is not quite what he expected. At first he is clueless, but he begins to learn more about Chinese culture and to make friends with the monks. His kung fu steadily improves until he is able to defeat some of his opponents. His coach enters him into a martial arts tournament in the nearby city. After much hard training, Matt comes second in the competition. By the time he leaves Shaolin, he feels spiritually fulfilled, no longer a coward, and believes that he has finally become a man.

At the Shaolin Temple, Pierre, a photojournalist from France, is throwing a party for the monks. A master from a rival kung fu school, called Master Wu, challenges a champion from the Shaolin Temple. This is an insult and the monks are angry. Matt offers to fight, but he is just being polite and does not actually expect the monks to agree. Coach Yan, however, decides that Matt should fight. He is only a foreigner, so if he is defeated there will be no shame, but if he wins they will earn great honor for being able to train a foreigner so well. Matt and Master Wu prepare for the fight.

The story now shifts to America, and back in time. Matt has compiled a list of things about himself that he wants to change, called 'Things That are Wrong with Matt.' Number one on this list is 'ignorant,' so Matt goes to college to change this. He takes classes in the intellectual history of China, and in the Chinese language, and he finds that he admires Chinese philosophy. He decides to take a year or two out of college to go to China and study kung fu there. He hopes that this will help him to be less of a coward, as well as less spiritually confused.

Matt's friends think he is crazy, his mother is worried about his safety in China, and his father is furious that he will be spending his college fund on this trip instead of concentrating on his career prospects. Matt decides to go ahead with the plan anyway, despite his family's misgivings.

Matt flies to China and arrives in Beijing. He is shocked when he cannot understand the taxi driver, but when he reaches the hotel the doorman understands him perfectly and compliments him on his Chinese. The doorman explains that the taxi driver must be



from the South, where they speak a different kind of Chinese. Matt is relieved, but not for long. He asks the doorman where the Shaolin Temple is, and the doorman replies that he thinks it was destroyed. Matt is devastated.

Matt visits Tiananmen Square in Beijing, where a Chinese student was killed by the government while staging a non-violent protest. He hears a gunshot and cowers in fear, then realizes it was a taxi backfiring. He gets back up to find a rural Chinese family staring at him, amused.

Matt sees a police officer and asks him where the Shaolin Temple is. The police officer does not reply, so Matt tries to demonstrate what he means by imitating kung fu moves. This draws a crowd of people, who are all amazed that Matt can speak Chinese. He asks them about the Shaolin Temple and a woman tells him that the northern Shaolin Temple is in the province of Henan, which he can reach by train.

Matt buys a train ticket for Zheng Zhou, the closest city to the Shaolin Temple. When he arrives in Zheng Zhou he gets a room at a local hotel, where he talks to the key girl, Moon. She tells him a little of the history of Shaolin:

The Shaolin Temple was founded in 492 AD as a place for the emperor's favorite Buddhist monk Batuo to meditate. In 525 AD an Indian Buddhist called Damo arrived and meditated in a cave for nine years, after which he became the abbot of Shaolin. He taught the other monks the importance of meditation, but saw that their bodies were becoming flabby and weak from lack of exercise. He introduced kung fu as self-defense, exercise and moving meditation. In the 6th century the monks rescued a kidnapped Tang prince who later became the next emperor. He rewarded the monks by giving them a special dispensation to eat meat and drink alcohol. The monks became the protectors of the emperor and of China, defending their country against the Mongols, the Japanese, and occupying foreign rulers. Shaolin became a center for martial arts, and a second Shaolin Temple was built in the south in the Fujian province.

The next day Matt is woken by Moon, who tries to seduce him. Matt quickly excuses himself and leaves.

## **Prologue and Book 1: Wanderer, Chapters 1-3, 'The First Step', 'Lost in Translation', and 'Sleeping Beauty' Analysis**

The reader's first introduction to Matt shows a young man who is very self-conscious and unsure of himself. Matt wishes to change or improve certain things about himself, but rather than express it in this way, he composes a list of 'things that are wrong with Matt.' This is a very negative approach to the matter, and to the process of growing up. Matt is impatient; he is sick of being a boy and wants to become a man, to gain confidence, and to become strong, admired and spiritually fulfilled all at once. He sees a trip to the Shaolin Temple in China as the answer to these problems as if it is some kind

of magical solution that will fix everything. He has placed a lot of hope and faith in a place he has never been to, and in a way of life he has only ever seen depicted in movies. This is very naive of Matt, who will soon find out that real life is never quite like it is in the films. Matt will also learn that changing these things about himself is harder work than he thought it would be, and that some things cannot change without actually changing his attitude. In order to become a more confident and stronger person, he needs to stop seeing his life as a list of problems.

Matt behaves quite recklessly in these first chapters, spending his college fund to travel to China on little more than a whim. Matt can speak Chinese, but he has not really studied the country or spoken to many people from there. His tutor encouraged him to take this year out, but it is Matt who decided that he should find the Shaolin Temple by himself without gathering any real information about it while he was still in America. This makes things very difficult for him, as the first thing he has to do when he gets to Beijing is ask random people where the Shaolin Temple is and how he can get there. He thinks that this will turn his trip into some kind of quest or adventure, like the sort that the heroes in the kung fu movies he is watching always go on. Again, he is making the mistake of trying to live life as if it is a story found in a film. Real life does not work this way, as Matt soon finds out.

First, Matt faces the problem of a taxi driver who seems to be speaking a different kind of Chinese from what Matt learned. Matt panics, thinking that he has miscalculated his own skill in speaking the language and wondering what he is going to do now. The doorman at the hotel clears this up, explaining that there are different kinds of Chinese but that the people in the north speak the same kind of Chinese Matt has learned. However, a new problem arises when the doorman tells Matt that the Shaolin Temple has been destroyed. Matt suddenly has to start thinking about the possibility that he has wasted all this money traveling to China, and has taken a year out of college, for nothing. Thankfully, he finds out that the Temple in the north is still there, but this demonstrates just how stupid Matt's lack of planning really was. He failed to anticipate two potential problems that could have had disastrous results. Matt is still a very young and naive, and sometimes reckless, young man. He has romantic notions about life that currently overshadow reality. He thinks of China and Shaolin as deep, meaningful, exciting and glamorous places, and thinks of himself as an action hero for coming here.

In the hotel in Zheng Zhou, Matt meets a Chinese woman who has similar romantic ideas of the world. She sees herself as the star of a romance, in which a mysterious foreigner arrives and sweeps the innocent country girl off her feet. She wants Matt to play along with this, and is disappointed when he does not. Matt can see that she is naively attaching things to him that in reality he is not, making him something more exciting and glamorous in her imagination. Through this, he is able to see that he is doing something similar, but that they are simply trying to live different movies. Matt is not living a romance movie plot, but trying to live the plot of a kung fu action movie instead. He sees how much importance he has attached to the Shaolin Temple and begins to worry that it will not live up to his expectations. That night he dreams of knocking on the gates to the Temple and not being admitted, then eventually being allowed in only to fall into a black void. This shows how much anxiety he really does

have about what he is doing. He suddenly realizes how reckless he has been, and worries that he has no idea what Shaolin is really like or what will happen to him there. His future is a void; it might turn out to be something wonderful, or it might be disappointing or even dangerous. Matt has come too far to back out now, and this is only just beginning to dawn on him.





# **Book 1: Wanderer, Chapters 4-7, 'Kungfu World,' 'Light, Camera, Action,' 'A Coke and a Smile,' 'Defection'**

## **Book 1: Wanderer, Chapters 4-7, 'Kungfu World,' 'Light, Camera, Action,' 'A Coke and a Smile,' 'Defection' Summary**

Matt takes a bus from Zheng Zhou to Shaolin. When he arrives, there are buses full of Chinese tourists in the parking lot, lean-to-restaurants, souvenirs, and attractions for tourists such as a ski-lift that will take them to the top of the mountains where they can fire machine guns. Everything is a bit tacky and Matt is slightly disappointed.

Matt buys a ticket and goes inside. He searches around the buildings for two hours but finds no sign of the monks. He wanders back down the road towards the village, where there are different schools teaching martial arts to hundreds of Chinese children. There are still no Shaolin monks anywhere to be seen, however, and Matt is quite rudely turned away from the schools. Finally, Matt catches sight of a small boy in orange monk's robes and follows him into the Wushu Center building. Matt had avoided this building because it looked too well-kept and touristy.

Matt speaks to a man inside, who takes him to a room where Comrade Fish talks to him. Matt explains that he wants to study kungfu. Comrade Fish brings in Deputy Leader Jiao, who asks Matt how long he intends to stay. Matt says one or two years, and Jiao tells him that this will be \$1300 a month for his food, training and board. Matt suspects he is being ripped off, but when he sees the monks performing he is amazed and cannot pass up the opportunity to learn their skills. He agrees to pay the \$1300.

Matt stays at the local hotel, and arranges with the woman in charge what he would like to eat at each meal. She is dismayed when he says that he wants meat at each meal, as it will cut into her profits. After breakfast Matt wanders to the merchant's stalls looking for coca cola. One merchant has some, and Matt asks for ten. The merchant only has five, so Matt buys them all. This causes a bit of a stir among the merchants.

In the evening Matt finds the monks hanging out in the performance hall. They tell him that when Shaolin was reopened by the government in 1989, the Wushu Center was created as the place where the government would pay them to train, teach and perform for tourists. Some monks chose to remain at the temple, but most, like Deqing, moved into the Wushu Center, as the monks at the temple do not get any government money. The monks tell Matt about two monks who defected while touring America earlier that year. They ask if Matt knows how the defected monks are doing in America, but Matt has not heard of them. The monks then ask Matt how much they could earn in America



for doing different jobs. They are amazed at the answers, as it is so much more than they could hope to earn in China.

## **Book 1: Wanderer, Chapters 4-7, 'Kungfu World,' 'Light, Camera, Action,' 'A Coke and a Smile,' 'Defection' Analysis**

Matt visits China at an interesting time, in which the country is moving from a more extreme Marxist communist ideology, to an ideology prepared to embrace elements of capitalism and nationalism. The country is a single-party state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. At first the government was dedicated to extreme left-wing communism, which is a movement that aims to create a classless and moneyless society, with all means of production and distribution owned by everyone and run by the state (with the ultimate goal of creating a stateless society too). The idea is that each person receives food, housing, clothes, etc, according to their need. China never reached these pure ideals, but in the earlier days of the Communist government it had more left-wing policies than in 1992, when Matt visits China. By 1992, China has begun to embrace some capitalist ideas too, letting go of the more extreme methods used to enforce China's version of communism.

Matt can see this in effect as he travels through the country, in the odd mix of capitalism and communism that he experiences. China appears to be in a state of change, with confusing and often conflicting ideas. At the Sheraton hotel in Beijing Matt is given a key card, but at the hotel in Zheng Zhou he is let into his room by a key girl. The latter is an obvious attempt by the government to create jobs even where there is no need for them. This is to keep everyone busy because of the belief that idleness promotes greed, desire and corruption. In a communist society everyone should be equal, so there should not be people working when others are not. The Communist Party also likes to promote a system in which everyone watches everyone else for anti-party sentiment, so as to stop potential rebellion, so the key girls also fulfill this role. Matt observes that the Sheraton Hotel does not have a key girl because they are in Beijing, an important city on the coast where change is happening more quickly. In Zheng Zhou, a northern and inland province, some things are still done the old way, reflecting values that represent China's past. This has obviously confused the citizens, as they do not seem to be quite sure how they should feel about capitalist enterprises and about money. Practically every Chinese person Matt meets wants to exchange money with him so that they can obtain foreign currency. This would allow them to buy foreign products or even leave the country. The monks ask Matt about America and about jobs and earning potential in particular. Attractions and stalls have been set up around the Shaolin Temple to cash in on all the tourists, and Matt finds that he is often charged more for things because he is a foreigner. Matt also often comes across the belief that America is better than China, that it represents opportunity, freedom, and the ability to earn more money.

Matt is a little surprised by all this, as he had not expected Chinese people, and in particular the monks, to idealize America and money in this way. Matt is especially

surprised and angry when he realizes that the leaders at the Wushu Center are trying to scam him out of as much money as possible. He knows he will have to pay it if he wants to train here, so he agrees to the exorbitant sum, but he is not happy to learn that communists can be greedy too.

The strange mix of communist and capitalist values is not the only thing surprising to Matt. Shaolin is not at all what he expected. It is touristy and tacky, and lacks the peaceful, spiritual atmosphere that he imagined would be there. The monks are not in the temple but in the Wushu Center. They have moved here so that the government will pay for their living, and in return they teach and perform. This means that most of the monks are not necessarily dedicated to the monk's way of life, but are using Shaolin as a step on a ladder to building their own careers and getting their own schools. They have personal ambitions, which is incongruous with the idea of being a Buddhist monk. In many ways, they seem like normal boys with normal concerns, rather than wise old monks like in the movies Matt has seen. In fact, Shaolin is not at all like the movies. The focus of Shaolin has become about attracting tourists and promoting the Wushu Center, rather than on meditation and pure martial arts. This highlights Matt's naive attitude; he had expected Shaolin to be like it is in the stories, not considering that Western preconceptions might not represent the reality of another country. It is not what he expected, but he has arrived, and he has managed to get himself a place here with the monks. He did not panic when he saw how different the reality was from his expectations, sticking to his original plan and deciding to give it a chance. He might be naive, but he is also determined. The first hurdle of his challenge has been successfully crossed.



## **Book 2: Novice, Chapters 1-3, 'Eating Bitter,' 'The Show Must Go On,' and 'Chinese Medicine'**

### **Book 2: Novice, Chapters 1-3, 'Eating Bitter,' 'The Show Must Go On,' and 'Chinese Medicine' Summary**

Matt gets up early and goes to practice with the monks before official training starts. He sees some monks frog jumping up the steps from the Wushu Center to the hotel and restaurant, and others running up the steps to the temple. Then he sees some monks playing basketball and decides to join in. He tries to show them the proper rules and techniques, but they are not really interested. Deqing asks Matt if he can slam dunk, and they hold a challenge. Matt is not very good, but all the other monks can leap very high and do perfect slam dunks. Matt asks how, and Deqing points to the frog jumping monks. After this, Matt spends every morning practicing frog jumps up the steps.

Matt's personal trainer is a monk called Cheng Hao, who lets Matt learn faster than the other monks. After the first day of training Matt's legs are extremely sore and painful. Cheng Hao forces him to push through the pain, and six days later Matt's legs have become more flexible and no longer hurt.

Matt is beginning to get lonely, as the other monks do not interact with him and he feels very much left out. He writes home regularly. He also finds that there is not much for him to do when not training, so he becomes bored. The only entertainment is the Wushu performances the monks put on for tourists, and Matt attends every one. Monks Deqing and Lipeng are particularly good.

Matt tries to prove himself to the other monks by 'eating bitter.' He forces himself to train for seven hours a day instead of the normal five. In his 2-3pm session his only companion is a ten year old girl he nicknames Cinderella, a student of Monk Lipeng's father. Lipeng's father is quite harsh with Cinderella in her training, so Matt always tries to cheer her up when Lipeng's father is not around.

One day Matt gets an injury in both knees, which stops him from practicing. Lipeng's father is impressed with Matt's willingness to eat bitter, and his kindness towards Cinderella, so he helps to heal Matt's legs. He uses Chinese medicine, and ten days later the legs have healed perfectly. Matt calls Lipeng's father 'Doc' after this. Doc tells Matt that he cannot teach him Chinese medicine, but that he will teach him Iron Forearm Kung fu. After six weeks of practicing Matt's forearms are very hard, and he shows off to the other monks. Doc calls Matt to him and makes him hit his forearms against Lipeng's. Lipeng's are much harder, because he has been training for longer, but Lipeng never boasts. Matt realizes that he is being taught a lesson in humility.

## **Book 2: Novice, Chapters 1-3, 'Eating Bitter,' 'The Show Must Go On,' and 'Chinese Medicine' Analysis**

Matt is finding it hard to adjust to life at the Shaolin monastery. It is not everything he expected. He is surprised at how often the monks are expected to perform to tourists. He had thought the monks would live more like his preconception of monks, as wise, holy and ascetic men. Instead, they take their performances seriously, conversing like actors before the curtain has been raised. They seem to enjoy impressing people with their skills. In many ways they act like normal boys, playing basketball and hanging around with each other in practice time before and after formal training. The Wushu performances seem to be a mockery of the respect and mystical atmosphere Matt thought he would encounter at Shaolin. Matt wants to experience something that will change his life and his view of the world, not to become a performer.

However, the performances are the only entertainment for a very bored Matt, so he attends every single one. Matt feels isolated and ignored by the other monks, and constantly left out because he is a foreigner. This makes him lonely. When he is practicing he does not have time to think about this, but in his free time he is aware of how he has nothing to do and no friends to talk to. He writes home often, and even attempts to get his ex-girlfriend to correspond with him, but she sends a letter back politely explaining that they are not together any longer and she does not wish to be. Matt is desperate to feel some kind of acceptance, so he decides to prove that he can 'eat bitter.' This will show the monks that he is serious about his training and not just a spoiled rich kid from America who wants to play at being a monk. Matt does not admit it, but perhaps he also needs to prove this to himself.

After a few weeks of training very hard, Matt's 'eating bitter' pays off when Lipeng's father notices him and helps to heal his knee injuries. Matt bonds with Lipeng's father, who he nicknames 'Doc,' over their mutual hatred of the Shaolin leaders. Although Doc is not exactly a friend, at last Matt has found someone who seems to have accepted him. Doc begins to teach him Iron Forearm Kung fu, and demonstrates an important lesson in learning humility. Matt might be improving, but there will always be people who are better, which means that he must never let his successes go to his head. Matt is beginning to learn what it means to be a martial artist, and although he is feeling a little lost and homesick, he is gradually starting to fit in.



## **Book 2: Novice, Chapters 4-6, 'Roommates,' 'Shaolin's Champion,' and 'The Sacred and the Profane'**

### **Book 2: Novice, Chapters 4-6, 'Roommates,' 'Shaolin's Champion,' and 'The Sacred and the Profane' Summary**

It is two months before the monks visit Matt in his room. Deqing and Cheng Hao come to see him and ask him how much they might get for various Shaolin weapons and items if they sell them in Japan. They will be touring soon, going to Japan first, and they want money so that they can bribe government officials to give them passports, since the government has seized theirs' out of fear that they might try to defect to another country. In fact, it is the fear that the government may think they are trying to defect that has stopped the monks from coming to see Matt all this time.

Matt makes the mistake of showing his disapproval of Buddhist monks seeking money. This offends Deqing. Later, Matt realizes that he was wrong and being patronizing based on his own romantic ideals, so he tries to apologize. However, it takes Deqing a long time to forgive him for hurting him and his honor.

Matt starts inviting the monks to eat with him at the restaurant, which serves better food than the monks' usual fare. Most of the monks are afraid to be seen eating with Matt, but Deqing is secure enough in his position at Shaolin that he accepts every time. One day he tells Matt his story. His father was sent to prison for running over a person when the breaks on his truck failed. Deqing's mother paid down the sentence by seven years, giving up almost everything she had to do so. The family used to be quite affluent but now are very poor. Deqing's mother could not afford to look after Deqing as well as his younger brother, so she eventually decided to send Deqing away. She dropped him off at the Shaolin Temple and left him there. Deqing had no money and had to eat scraps of food leftover on the tourists' plates, before he was accepted into the Wushu Center. Matt now feels doubly terrible for questioning Deqing's interest in earning money.

Deqing is having some kind of romantic relationship with Lotus, a girl training at the Wushu Center. When they break up and Lotus leaves, Deqing explains that he could not be with her as he does not intend to stay in China forever. He wants to be a movie star like Jet Li and spread the fame of Shaolin kung fu around the world.

One day a movie director comes to Shaolin, as he wants to cast a real Shaolin monk in his film. He holds auditions, but picks Cheng Hao instead of Deqing. Cheng Hao is a very good looking monk, and the others feel that the director picked looks over skill. Six weeks later Cheng Hao comes back, pleased, saying the director wants to use him





again. Deqing is jealous and cannot help pointing out that the director was probably lying. After too much time passes without the director contacting him, Cheng Hao sees that Deqing was correct.

An important man at the Wushu Center, Big Wang, gets in trouble with the law when a tourist slaps his wife, who works as a waitress in one of the restaurants. When Little Tiger tells Big Wang what happened, Big Wang charges straight to the restaurant and beats up the tourist and his wife. Big Wang is friends with the local cops and can normally get away with anything, but this time the tourist happens to be family of one of China's leaders, Canton Province's minister of tourism. Big Wang has to run, sending Coach Cheng to negotiate for him. The longer Big Wang can stay un-captured, the lower the fine will drop. It takes five weeks to lower from 60,000 RMB to 6,000 RMB (\$750), which Big Wang agrees to pay. This is more than the average Henan farmer earns in two years, but less than half what Matt spends in a month to stay at Shaolin.

Matt wonders what has happened to all the Buddhism at the temple. He mentions this to Deqing, who takes him to a Buddhist ceremony. Matt tries to meditate every morning but has trouble emptying his mind. One day, he has a religious experience while training. He has a feeling of perfect peace and happiness, which is so intense that it proves God's existence for him. He can now cross 'spiritually confused' off his list. A Spanish man called Carlos comes to stay at Shaolin for a short time, hoping to improve his martial arts so he can make more money teaching it. He also has a religious experience while at Shaolin, believing that Jesus spoke to him about how everything is energy.

## **Book 2: Novice, Chapters 4-6, 'Roommates,' 'Shaolin's Champion,' and 'The Sacred and the Profane' Analysis**

In these chapters, Matt begins to realize that his attitude towards Shaolin and the monks has been unhelpful and wrong. He expected them to live up to some romantic notion that he had in his head, based mainly on stories, and did not consider that monks might actually be real people with real problems. He wanted them to be something special, something that could help him to gain a sense of who he is and teach him to be a better and more confident person. He wanted to gain their wisdom. He wanted to see poor, ascetic and religious monks so that he could feel better about himself, even though he was not willing to give up everything to become a Buddhist monk. When he sees that Deqing and Cheng Hao are interested in money, he is disappointed and lets his disapproval show. This hurts the monks, particularly Deqing, who feels as though his honor has been questioned. When Matt finds out that the monks need money for a variety of very legitimate reasons, not just greed, he feels very bad.

It is this incident, as well as more experience of the monks and their lifestyle, that shows Matt that his attitude needs to change. He cannot keep expecting Shaolin to be something it is not, and blaming it when it does not live up to his own imagining. Instead he must accept the reality for what it is and let it teach him things in its own way. He has to accept that this is a different culture that does not necessarily understand the world



the same way he does. He also has to look at himself and realize how privileged he is. The money Big Wang had to pay to avoid prison is more than an average Henan farmer would earn in two years, yet less than half of what Matt pays a month simply to train at Shaolin. This suggests Matt is being taken advantage of, but it also shows how unrelatable these people's lives are to his own. He has never had to worry about being the sole provider for his family, like Cheng Hao, or about a mother abandoning him simply because she could not cope, like Deqing. Matt has never been completely on his own. He is therefore in no position to judge them. Learning a little more about their lives and worries also helps him to understand why the Chinese people he meets idealize America. They long for the hedonistic and rich lifestyle they imagine every foreigner has. They judge Matt on their own preconceptions of America, just as he has judged them on his preconceptions. He sees how wrong-headed this is, and is determined to change.

Matt reaches out to Deqing and it seems that he has finally made a friend. At first he insulted him, but as he got to know Deqing better he realized he was wrong and tried to make it up to him. Eventually Deqing forgives him, and Deqing is the only one who will eat with him. Deqing and Cheng Hao visit Matt in his room for the first time. More of the monks are beginning to talk to and interact with Matt now, such as Little Tiger wanting to learn English curse words. This shows that Matt is finally beginning to be accepted, and that he is becoming a real part of Shaolin life. Now Matt seems to be happier and less lonely.

Matt's views on religion are fairly all-encompassing. He believes that all versions of God or gods are just a different form of the same thing, the same power behind the universe. While training he has a religious experience, feeling a perfect sense of peace that he attributes to God. Carlos, a Spanish martial arts teacher training for a short time at Shaolin, also has a religious experience. He sees a vision of Jesus, who tells him that everything is energy. This seems to back up Matt's idea, that everything is connected and that all beliefs are really just different forms of the same truth. This is also similar to certain Chinese beliefs, such as the energy, or qi, that makes up everything in the universe and connects all life. Buddhism also teaches pacifism and acceptance of other people, as well as the idea that all life is connected in a circle of birth, death and reincarnation. Through enlightenment, such as what Matt briefly experiences, a soul can free itself from this cycle and move on. It is easy to see how Matt's beliefs have been influenced by Buddhism and the culture he admires so much, as well as by his own Christian upbringing. It is interesting that Matt has come up with a personal theory that allows all these disparate elements to be connected, despite the fact that Buddhism and the Christian God are really incompatible beliefs. Despite Matt's initial disappointment concerning the lack of Buddhism at Shaolin, and his feelings of not fitting in, he does receive spiritual answers here.



## **Book 3: Initiate, Chapters 1-3, 'Kickboxing,' 'Media Matters,' and 'Iron Forearm Boy'**

### **Book 3: Initiate, Chapters 1-3, 'Kickboxing,' 'Media Matters,' and 'Iron Forearm Boy' Summary**

Matt goes home to America for Christmas while the monks tour Thailand. Matt's friends take him to several rough bars, hoping to see a fight, and Matt realizes that he is still not confident he could win an actual fight. When he returns to Shaolin after Christmas, he tells the leaders that he wants to train in sanda, Chinese kickboxing, with Coach Cheng. They arrange for a kickboxing team to be set up, using Matt's money to pay a stipend to the athletes on it. In other words, everyone on the team is an expert except Matt, who has bought his way on instead. He knows the others will hate him for this and that he will have to prove himself by eating bitter.

Sure enough, Matt's sparring partner, Baotong, refuses to go slowly to help Matt learn. Instead, he deliberately tries to hurt Matt. Matt fights back and shouts for Baotong to continue after each time he is knocked down. Matt passes some kind of test by doing this. Although Baotong does not exactly go easy on Matt after this, he does warm to him and respects him.

After practice Matt goes to Deqing and Cheng Hao's room, shaking from exhaustion. Deqing makes Little Tiger fetch coca cola. Deqing then forces Matt to have a nap. Despite the pain Matt returns to afternoon class, proving his dedication. This time Baotong takes pity and is slower. At the end of the session Coach Cheng sets up a sparring match. Baotong easily beats Matt, but while Matt tries to fight back, Baotong kicks him in the cup, which cracks. Matt is still writhing on the floor when the other students have all left. Coach Cheng asks what Matt fears and whether he was bullied as a child. Matt admits that he was, and that he is afraid of pain. Coach Cheng hits him to show Matt that pain is not actually something to be feared.

Matt and the other monks watch a Chinese TV miniseries called "Beijingers in New York" about a Chinese couple living in America and the horrible experiences they have there. This is supposed to be propaganda to make America seem unappealing, but the monks admit that they would still like to live there. Matt is disturbed that foreigners are always the bad guys in Chinese films, so he brings American martial arts movies for the monks to watch. They like some of them, but feel that the heroes are not proper heroes if they do not die. This is because real bravery and heroism comes from fighting even when the person knows they will lose.

One day Matt sees a Chinese tourist smash a clay cat that an old lady is selling. The old lady curses him and he slaps her. Matt steps in to prevent the tourist hurting the old

woman again, and his presence persuades the tourist to leave. Deqing later criticizes Matt for stepping in, saying that he should not interfere in these things because he is a foreigner. Matt is hurt by this.

Another time Deqing, Matt and a foreign student called Ahmed see some boys dragging around another boy, with a rope around his neck. The prisoner calls out to Deqing, who is from the same province as him and so obligated to help him. Deqing yells at the other boys and frees the prisoner. He arranges to meet the boys later than night to sort out their issue. That night Matt wants to come with Deqing and the other monks but Deqing does not let him. He is a foreigner and so there could be political implications if he is harmed in a fight. Matt follows them secretly anyway, and sees Deqing resolve the situation peacefully. He reveals himself, and Deqing laughs and says that Matt is 'the best.'

### **Book 3: Initiate, Chapters 1-3, 'Kickboxing,' 'Media Matters,' and 'Iron Forearm Boy' Analysis**

Coach Cheng talks to Matt about courage, which is one of the things that Matt wishes to improve about himself. Coach Cheng explains that he needs to let go of trauma and fear in the past, and not to fear pain. When he is no longer afraid of the pain of being beaten up, then he will be able to face people more bravely and fight more calmly. Later, the monks discuss heroes in movies. Deqing says that a true hero continues to fight even when he is sure that he will lose. Matt still thinks that he is a coward and is still afraid of losing. He still has not understood the point of learning martial arts. He thinks that he needs to be strong so that he can win in fights, but in reality he needs to learn the right attitude so that he can gain confidence and no longer be afraid. Being a hero is not about winning, as the monks point out, but about facing troubles bravely. To a certain extent Matt has already done this. This is what 'eating bitter' is about, which Matt has shown he can do, and Matt has also proved that he can fight back bravely against Baotong while training. He also bravely faces the tourist who slaps the old lady, and follows Deqing and the other monks to help them in their fight. However, when it comes to actual martial arts fights and sparring matches, suddenly Matt seizes up because he is worried about pain, and about losing. All Matt needs is a little more confidence and self-belief, and he is actually much closer to this than he thinks.

The Chinese attitude to foreigners is making Matt feel excluded and uncomfortable. He is used to being one of the majority in his country, and is now finding it hard to cope with being one of the minority. He is at the same time one of the revered, envied, privileged and rich, but also excluded and considered inferior. This is confusing and disconcerting for Matt. For example, the monks assume that Matt will never be as good at kung fu as a Chinese person, and this is taken for granted. On Chinese TV and in Chinese movies, foreigners, particularly Americans, are presented as the bad guys, and America as a bad place of low morals. Matt tries to show the monks martial arts heroes from American movies, like Steven Segal, David Carradine and Jean-Claude Van Damme, but the monks are not that impressed. They compare their marital arts to those of Chinese heroes, and conclude that the foreigners are good but will never be good

enough. Matt does not want the monks and other Chinese people to think of him in this way, but he knows he will have to do a lot to prove himself to them.

## **Book 3: Initiate, Chapters 4-7, 'Taiwan Tunes,' 'Playing Hands,' 'Crazy Negotiations,' and 'Taking a Beating'**

### **Book 3: Initiate, Chapters 4-7, 'Taiwan Tunes,' 'Playing Hands,' 'Crazy Negotiations,' and 'Taking a Beating' Summary**

Matt is introduced to Monk Xingming, a Buddhist teacher at Shaolin. Xingming likes Broadway musicals and Barbra Streisand, and Matt thinks that he is obviously homosexual. One day Xingming is talking to the monks about politics and is angry that America has sold F-16 fighter planes to Taiwan. Xingming says that Taiwan is part of China and that America should not interfere. He says that he would fight America over this, and the other monks agree. Matt is surprised by the usually mild monk's vehemence. Xingming asks Matt what he thinks about the matter and Matt says that it is complicated. Deqing rescues him, diffusing the situation by joking that Xingming could fight the Americans with his terrible singing. They all laugh.

The Chinese play a drinking game called The Hand Game, in which the two players simultaneously hold up a number of fingers, while shouting out another number that they think will be the total of all fingers, including their opponent's. If someone gets it right, the other one drinks. There are subtleties to this as people tend to hold fingers up in patterns. An observant player can take advantage of this. As players get more drunk, of course, they become even worse at hiding these patterns. Matt is not very good at this game, which is a problem because everyone always wants to try to beat the foreigner. Coach Yan is an expert at The Hand Game, so Matt asks him to teach him the techniques. He shows Coach Yan the American quarters drinking game, in which coins have to be bounced into a glass. Matt beats him at it, so Coach Yan spends two days practicing and then beats Matt. After this, he agrees to teach Matt about The Hand Game.

After a month of training, Matt is invited to a dinner with Deputy Leader Jiao and dignitaries. Coach Yan suggests Matt and Jiao play The Hand Game. The first round is an even 5-5, so Jiao challenges him again. This time Matt trounces him 8-2, then drinks Jiao's last two shots to patronize him. Jiao is furious but Yan is pleased, and Matt realizes that this was probably Yan's plan all along when he agreed to teach Matt.

One day Matt decides to lower the price he pays for his coca cola. He asks which of the merchants will sell it to him cheaper, starting a price war between them. The outcome is that Matt gets his drink for much cheaper.



Matt talks to a German student before he leaves, and finds out that the German has only been paying the equivalent of \$550 a month to train and live at Shaolin. Matt now knows he is being taken advantage of. When Comrade Fish comes to collect the monthly fee, Matt refuses to pay more than \$550. He does not back down for a week, encouraged by the fact that the monks are on his side. However, Coach Yan comes to him after a week and tells him that Leader Liu will not back down or he will lose face. Matt will have to make up a story about family troubles, as family is so important to the Chinese. Matt pretends that his father will no longer pay rent, so Matt has to ask his grandfather, who is only a farmer. His grandfather can only afford \$550. Coach Yan takes this back to Leader Liu, who allows Matt to pay \$550 from now on.

Doc wants Matt to come to Zheng Zhou with him to buy a mechanical grinder for his medicine. Matt knows he owes Doc for training him in Iron Forearm Kung fu and for healing his legs, so he goes with him. The grinder breaks after a few days, so they return to the shop to ask for a refund. The shopkeeper refuses, so Matt pretends to go crazy and threatens to smash the shop's window. The shopkeeper has the typical Chinese belief that foreigners are unpredictable, so he quickly backs down and gives Doc half his money back.

Matt is now improving so much in sanda that Coach Cheng wants him to fight in a tournament in Zheng Zhou in less than eight months. Matt thinks he is crazy, but agrees.

### **Book 3: Initiate, Chapters 4-7, 'Taiwan Tunes,' 'Playing Hands,' 'Crazy Negotiations,' and 'Taking a Beating' Analysis**

Matt begins to learn more about the Chinese and how they think in these chapters, and is able to use it to his own advantage. First, he asks Coach Yan to teach him to play The Hand Game well. Matt understands that Coach Yan will not agree unless Matt impresses him with something else first, so he shows him the American quarters drinking game. Matt beats Coach Yan easily, so Coach Yan practices for two whole days and then beats Matt. He seems to be pleased that Matt introduced this new skill to him, and is now willing to teach Matt. Through learning the techniques of The Hand Game, Matt learns to read Chinese people and their expressions. He begins to understand how to get his own way better.

When challenged at The Hand Game by Jiao, Matt beats him quite easily. Later, he is able to negotiate a smaller monthly fee for being at Shaolin, by understanding that his *guanxi*, his level of familiarity and respect with the leaders and the monks, is high enough that he should not be paying so much. He now knows that fees and prices can be rearranged based on the status of both people involved, and that prices are never fixed. This confused him at first, because it is so different from America, but now he can use this to his advantage. He also manages to negotiate a cheaper price for his coca cola. He understands that he must help out Doc because he owes him, and that China

is built on a favor-based economy in this way. He is really beginning to fit in now, and is becoming much more familiar with the culture he is living in. He has even begun to use Chinese insults, such as 'turtle egg.' Matt has come a long way from the naive, ignorant, lonely and bemused American that he was at the beginning of the book.

Matt also sees The Hand Game as a metaphor for the Chinese people. It represents them because they are like players in the game, never letting the opponent see their true motivations and feelings. The Chinese always like to keep their true self hidden, while putting on a different face for the world. This is not seen as two faced or a bad thing, but instead is encouraged. Power is based on being introverted and on watching others, waiting for the right opportunity. In this way, The Hand Game is both a metaphor for the Chinese and a training regimen for them, teaching them how to get by in life in China. Here, it is a disadvantage to be too open and to let too much show. This is so different from the American values of the time, such as the importance of 'being true to yourself.' This confused Matt at first, but now he understands and is able to use these differences to interact with the people around him better.

When Matt negotiates a cheaper price for his coca cola, he uses both Chinese and American ideas. He now realizes that the Chinese do not consider prices to be fixed, and that he can try to renegotiate a price any time he wants to. However, he also knows that capitalism can get him a cheaper price, so he uses this idea against the sellers, encouraging them to compete with each other for Matt's custom. This makes them lower their prices, starting a price war between all the traders. Eventually the price lowers considerably and Matt can buy his drink cheaper. He has singlehandedly introduced quite an aggressive form of capitalism into the Shaolin village marketplace, in which the traders had never normally competed with each other. Matt breaks down these inhibitions and forces the sellers to lower their prices out of desperation. He does not seem to be even slightly ashamed of himself for doing this, despite the fact that his own country's ideals are not necessarily any better than any other country's. Matt also observes that he managed to create a coca cola market in the village, replacing the Chinese soft drink Jianlibao. When he leaves, all the monks are now drinking coca cola instead. This is an example of how globalization can destroy local products, values and cultures.

## **Book 4: Apprentice, Chapters 1-4, 'Happy Endings,' 'Iron Crotch Kungfu,' 'Getting Schooled' and 'The Sixth Race'**

### **Book 4: Apprentice, Chapters 1-4, 'Happy Endings,' 'Iron Crotch Kungfu,' 'Getting Schooled' and 'The Sixth Race' Summary**

Matt has been celibate for five months when he has an erotic dream about a man. He decides it is definitely time to stop being celibate and try to get some sex. The jocks on his kickboxing team talk about a barber shop that is also a massage parlor in Zheng Zhou where they think the girls will also provide sexual favors for money. Matt visits, gets his hair washed, and then is given a massage. As the girl massages him, she tells Matt her sad back-story about how her bad relationship with her father. Matt cannot ask her to do anything after this, so he leaves with just a hair cut.

One night a performance is held for prominent visiting party officials from Beijing. At the end of the performance an old student comes on and performs Iron Crotch Kung fu. Matt is called down by Deqing to help demonstrate, and he kicks the performer in the crotch to no effect. Matt nicknames him 'Monk Dong.' One of the girls from the band is particularly interested in Monk Dong, wanting to know if his penis is real but too embarrassed to actually ask him. Matt and the other monks tease her and she runs away.

After the show, Monk Dong asks Matt if he would like to learn Iron Crotch Kung fu. Matt is not sure, but he agrees to come to visit Anhui province with Monk Dong and learn some of his sanda techniques. The next day, Matt sees the trumpeter girl from the band leaving Monk Dong's room.

Matt and Monk Dong are accompanied on their trip by Tiger Man, a grifter who only knows Tiger Form and likes to con young students into paying him to teach them. On their journey he boasts about himself to all the peasants and tries to scam money out of them. When they arrive in Anhui province, they visit four different women, each with a child that is obviously Monk Dong's. Finally they reach his house, where he lives with his mother. Monk Dong takes Matt to see the students in his kung fu school and then teaches him some sanda techniques. The next day Monk Dong shows him how he practices Iron Crotch Kung fu by pulling a heavy roller with his penis. Matt decides not to learn Iron Crotch Kung fu.

Back at Shaolin, many people want to spar with Matt for the chance to beat up a foreigner. Coach Cheng keeps them away, but he cannot refuse Coach Ming, a Wushu coach who is equal in status to Coach Cheng. At first Coach Ming is defeating Matt





easily, but Matt is annoyed that Ming is patronizing him by demonstrating training moves on him. Matt uses this to his advantage to anticipate his next move and avoid it, punching Ming several times. Eventually, Ming gives up. No Wushu Coach challenges Matt to spar again.

One day another foreigner arrives at Shaolin, a Finnish man called Mikael. He has brought his piano with him from Beijing, and Matt soon sees that he is a little crazy. He talks to Matt about the 'sixth race,' explaining that there have been five evolutions of human consciousness so far, and that the sixth is about to happen. He calls this Spiritual Darwinism. He claims that Odin and Thor spoke to him, and later Jesus, all supporting the sixth race. Mikael tries to recruit Matt several times but Matt is not interested. Mikael tells Matt that he made up the perfect kungfu move that cannot be countered. He demonstrates, using the same jab technique that Bruce Lee made famous. Matt points out that this is Bruce Lee's move, then demonstrates how it can be countered anyway. Mikael leaves Shaolin soon after. Matt sees him again one day in Beijing. Mikael tells him that he has found French backers for a kung fu/meditation academy in France. Matt realizes that Mikael only came to Shaolin to boost his "New Age résumé" (p246).

## **Book 4: Apprentice, Chapters 1-4, 'Happy Endings,' 'Iron Crotch Kungfu,' 'Getting Schooled' and 'The Sixth Race' Analysis**

Matt observes that Shaolin, with its mix of Buddhism, spirituality, and kung fu, often attracts loonies. A perfect example of this is Mikael, who claims that he is championing the sixth race, a new evolution of humanity supported by Thor, Odin and Jesus. Matt clearly thinks this is ridiculous, and makes fun of Mikael subtly without angering him. However, Matt has had his own religious experience here, and Carlos thought he was visited by Jesus. Matt believed Carlos, as he knows from his own experience how Shaolin and kung fu can spiritually affect a person. Mikael is a little too crazy to believe, but Matt does acknowledge the irony of laughing at him. Matt knows that he approached Shaolin with a similar naivety about its spiritual meaning and purity, and that he has had his own perhaps unbelievable experience here. Later, Matt learns that Mikael has gained financial backing for his own school in France, and realizes that Mikael may have had ulterior motives after all. He was only at Shaolin to add to his 'New Age résumé', calling into question how much he really believes in his weird theories. This is similar to Carlos, who came to Shaolin to add weight to his martial arts credentials in the hopes it would attract him more students. This is part of the strange way people approach Shaolin, as a place in which a person can be improved or filled out, but not necessarily as a place to stay, or to dedicate oneself to the monk's life. Matt, too, is only at Shaolin to learn something, and certainly does not intend to become a monk. The monks themselves have ambitions to leave Shaolin to open their own schools one day, or to become martial arts actors. Shaolin has become like a university, a place where people achieve what they need to and then leave, rather than a way of life.





Matt is now getting desperate for sex, as he has been celibate for five months and finds that he cannot cope with it. However, foreigners are treated oddly and a relationship with a Chinese girl would be disapproved of. If a girl is found in a foreigner's room after midnight it is assumed that she is a prostitute and so both she and the foreigner are fined. Matt decides that if they are going to treat him this way, he may as well visit an actual prostitute. He goes to a barber shop and massage parlor in Zheng Zhou, which he has been informed also sells sex. This turns out to be true, but Matt cannot go through with it in the end. The girl tells him all about her bad relationship with her father, turning her into a real person that Matt then does not want to use. While Matt is not having luck with the opposite sex, Monk Dong is having plenty of luck. He attracts girls wherever he goes, and has at least three children with different women. Although Chinese women are expected to be demure and innocent, they are more interested in sex than they pretend to be, as the trumpeter who is fascinated by Monk Dong proves. Many of the monks at the temple have girlfriends and marry in later life, destroying the idea of the celibate Buddhist monk. This is another aspect of life at Shaolin that Matt had not prepared for. He decided to be celibate like the monks, but finds he cannot stick to this and that the other monks are not celibate anyway. Unfortunately, celibacy is forced on him simply because he is a foreigner, and he is forced to watch other monks attracting attention from the opposite sex instead.

Now Matt's kung fu has improved enough that he can beat Coach Ming, a Wushu teacher equivalent in status to Monk Cheng. This is satisfying for two reasons. First, it allows Matt to beat a man who only challenged him so that he could beat up a foreigner. Matt has been feeling inferior because of his difficulty in getting sex, and because of the general way foreigners are treated, and now he can get a little of his own back while proving himself at the same time. Secondly, Matt's victory shows that he is improving and learning quickly, and that maybe he will have a chance in the tournament after all. He is becoming braver and sticking up for himself more than when he arrived. Kung fu is obviously good for Matt's confidence, and things are looking up for him.

## **Book 4: Apprentice, Chapters 5-7, 'Dirty Jokes and Beer,' 'Pride and Penance' and 'Another American'**

### **Book 4: Apprentice, Chapters 5-7, 'Dirty Jokes and Beer,' 'Pride and Penance' and 'Another American' Summary**

An old student called Long Spear visits Shaolin. He is now at Wuhan Sports University and Matt asks him about Wuhan, as he knows he will face the Champion from there at the Zheng Zhou tournament. Long Spear offers for Matt to come back to Wuhan with him to meet the Champ. Matt accepts.

At Wuhan Sports University Matt is introduced to Long Spear's teammates, then Long Spear takes him to meet Wrestler #1, the big man on campus. It is obvious that Long Spear wants to impress him by introducing a foreigner to him. Wrestler #1 sees what he is doing and refuses to acknowledge Matt, so Matt tells Wrestler #1 that he wants to throw him a banquet. Wrestler #1 agrees and tells him to arrange the feast for Wednesday. In the afternoon Long Spear takes Matt to meet the sanda Champ, who is very friendly.

At the banquet on Wednesday Wrestler #1 looks unimpressed. To help out Long Spear, Matt tries to impress Wrestler #1 by telling a dirty Chinese joke. Thankfully, everyone finds it funny and Wrestler #1 declares that 'the laowai is good!'

Back at Shaolin, a coach from a rival school, Taguo, wants to fight Matt. The coach is past his prime and slightly fat, and obviously wants to regain some glory by defeating Matt, who he thinks he can easily beat. Matt trounces him. Afterwards Matt talks to him and the coach says that Matt must be the best fighter in America. Matt tells him that there are many better fighters and enjoys how this humiliates the coach. Matt feels bad about this later, realizing that he acted like a bully.

Matt gets dysentery and is very ill. Coach Cheng insists that Comrade Fish take Matt to the hospital. No-one at the hospital seems to want to help. The pharmacist tries to give Matt the same pills he has already tried, which did not work. Matt insists that someone do some tests on him. He is taken to some doctors who do not seem interested, and who ultimately give him the same pills the pharmacist tried to give him. They return to Shaolin. Thankfully on the fifth day the dysentery clears up, and Matt can return to training.

One day another American student arrives, an ethnically Chinese but culturally American young man called John Lee. The Nationalist-Communist war cost John's



family everything, so they moved to America, where John's father founded the powerful Lee Manufacturing clan. John is more interested in partying and sport than learning and academics, so his father has sent him to Shaolin to learn discipline.

John tries but his heart is not really in learning forms. Matt takes him to his kickboxing class, but John breaks a finger while practicing. They rush to the same hospital Matt was taken to, and come up against the same indifference. Matt gets angry and demands that they do something for John. An angry nurse takes an x-ray and then leaves. Eventually a doctor looks at John and stitches up the wound with a dirty needle. Matt faints when he sees this. Afterwards the monks all laugh at Matt for fainting.

## **Book 4: Apprentice, Chapters 5-7, 'Dirty Jokes and Beer,' 'Pride and Penance' and 'Another American' Analysis**

In these chapters Matt gets his first taste of real victory in a sanda match, when he fights the aging coach and wins easily. This is not an exploitation of the technique of a man trying to patronize him, as the last match he won was, but an easy victory based on Matt's superior skill. He lets this go to his head and enjoys humiliating the coach. Afterwards he rubs this in even more when he tells the coach that he is not even close to being the best fighter in America. By saying this, he prevents the coach from using this last excuse to save face. The coach is devastated, and Matt suddenly feels terrible. He realizes that he enjoyed finding a weakness and exploiting it. Inside the sanda ring he needs to do this to win, but he does not have to do this out of it. If he does, then he will become what he hates the most: a bully. Matt sees that if he is to become a good fighter, this requires a certain responsibility to only fight in proper competitions and spar matches, and not to pick on others who are weaker than him. By this, he proves that he is not only a good person, but also really beginning to embrace what it means to be a monk.

After this match, Deqing points out how much Matt has changed. When he arrived at Shaolin he used to slump his shoulders. He was shy and nervous, and afraid to stick up for himself. Now Matt is much more confident and braver too. He has more pride in himself and his abilities and is no longer afraid of everything. He has a certain fierceness in his eyes that reflects his determination and self-belief. Now he can win fights and is improving in his kungfu because of this attitude. When fear disappears, calm focus emerges instead, allowing a person to fight better. Matt understands the good ways in which he has changed, and the areas he still needs to improve on. He is growing up and becoming a man.

When another American arrives at Shaolin Matt is overjoyed. Finally he has someone who can really understand him and relate to him. Matt has found friends in many of the monks, but nobody who can share what it means to be an American in this strange country. John Lee can share these things with Matt. John is a cultural mix of Chinese and American influence, though he is more American than Chinese. Because of this odd

mix, John seems to reflect Matt's confused and sometimes contradictory experiences of China so far. Matt soon finds himself liking John a lot and becoming quite protective of him. When John has to go to hospital, Matt acts like an older brother, getting angry when no-one will help John. Matt is stepping into the older sibling role of the monk who protects a younger monk from the same province as himself. Monks are expected to stick together because of geographical ties, and Matt finds himself treating John in a similar manner. As Matt's younger American student brother, Matt is expected to befriend him and stick up for him no matter what. The fact that Matt slips into this role automatically shows how much he has been influenced by the Chinese culture at Shaolin, as well as how grateful he is to finally have a friend who can really understand him.

## **Book 5: Disciple, Chapters 1-3, 'Challenge Match,' 'Mistress Management' and 'Tournament'**

### **Book 5: Disciple, Chapters 1-3, 'Challenge Match,' 'Mistress Management' and 'Tournament' Summary**

This chapter revisits the fight that began in the prologue chapter: Matt versus Master Wu. Matt takes advantage of Master Wu's weaknesses to punch him repeatedly in the face, before following up with other moves to finish him off. Wu surrenders, but then accuses Matt of cheating. Matt is angry and starts yelling at Wu, but Deqing holds him back. They all go for drinks and the monks congratulate Matt for defending Shaolin's honor.

After the fight Pierre, the French photojournalist, begins to hang around Matt and his friends too much. When Deqing puts an arm around his shoulders, Pierre comes to Matt and John Lee panicking that Deqing is homosexual and might force himself on him. Matt and John Lee tease Pierre before explaining that this is just how Chinese men show friendship.

Less than a month into his stay at Shaolin, John gets a girlfriend called Yeli, who is a dancer in Zheng Zhou. He sets Matt up with her friend Miling, but Matt becomes angry when Miling asks if he has AIDS. He is hurt at being treated like the diseased foreigner, so he tells her that he only has 'a little AIDS.' She is horrified, then furious when she realizes he was making fun of her. She leaves and takes Yeli with her. John is annoyed that Matt ruined his chances and it takes a while before he forgives him.

Matt has a friend of the sanda team called Yunfei, who is very popular with women but does not want to settle down. One day he is escorting female tourists around the temple when a girl called Jewel looks at Matt with interest. He asks her to dinner, and afterwards sneaks her back into his hotel room. They have sex, but it is over very quickly and Matt begins to worry that he is bad in bed. He asks to see her again and they arrange to meet the next Sunday in Zheng Zhou. On Sunday they visit a department store where Matt buys a suitcase. Jewel looks at some designer purses longingly, but Matt does not get the hint. It is only after she makes it clear she is no longer interested in him that he realizes she expected him to buy her a purse.

Yunfei suggests that Matt become the formal disciple of one of the monks. This is not for training purposes but is more symbolic. It will help Matt by giving him important connections. Yunfei suggests his own master, Yongxin, who has good guanxi with members of the government and will one day be the abbot of Shaolin. Matt performs the ceremony and becomes Yongxin's disciple.

It is time for the Wushu tournament in Zheng Zhou. The monks sleep in a hotel in the city and the next day march in the parade. Matt is not allowed to compete for Shaolin, so he has to make up a fake team: Princeton University Wushu Team. Deqing finds two local girls who want to make dumplings for Matt after his weigh in. After dinner with them, Matt tries to sneak one of the girls back to his room, but Coach Cheng stops him and explains that it will make his legs weak before the fight.

The next day the first matches are held. Matt's date from the night before helps him put his padding on. Matt faces a Korean fighter and wins easily. The Japanese fighter is knocked out, and the Chinese Champ beats his opponent easily too. The next day Matt will face the Chinese Champion in the final. That night in the hotel room a non-Shaolin master and his student want to challenge Matt, but Coach Cheng refuses to allow it. He offers to fight instead, but during the match the student uses illegal moves and does not treat Coach Cheng with proper respect. Coach Cheng's girlfriend, 'Shou Ting,' starts shouting at them, they apologize and try to leave, and Cheng tries to persuade them to stay and fight him again. In all this commotion Matt's date decides they are all crazy and quickly leaves.

At the final Matt is beaten easily by the Chinese Champion, but during the fight Matt is determined to knock him off the mat once. He manages this, and even though he loses the fight he feels that he managed to keep his pride. He realizes that this fight is the bravest thing he has ever done and that he has managed to conquer his fear. He can now cross 'cowardly' off his list.

## **Book 5: Disciple, Chapters 1-3, 'Challenge Match,' 'Mistress Management' and 'Tournament' Analysis**

Matt finally feels that he can now cross 'cowardly' off his list. He has fought in the tournament at Zheng Zhou, and although he did not win, he realizes that he has managed to conquer his fear and to face the challenge bravely. This was made all the more impressive because Matt knew there was no way he could win. Matt has finally understood what the monks and his training have been trying to teach him, that being brave and a hero is not about winning but about a certain attitude. A hero is someone who fights anyway and keeps trying, even if they are sure they will lose. In choosing to step back into the ring and fight on, even though defeat was inevitable, Matt proved himself to be like the heroes from Chinese martial arts movies rather than the heroes of American martial arts movies. It is his bravery and determination that count in the end, not his skills. Matt may have lost the fight, but he has won his own personal war against his fear and his self-doubt. Matt is thrilled to realize that he can no longer consider himself a coward, and that he has achieved what he set out to achieve at Shaolin.

The tournament is not the only fight in this section of the book. The fight introduced in the prologue is also finished here, in which Matt manages to defeat Master Wu and defend Shaolin's honor. The author has included these fights close together in order to make a point about victory and defeat, as well as to show how much Matt has improved. The victory balances the loss, so that it does not give the impression that Matt is bad at



kung fu, but the loss also balances the victory, showing that no matter how good Matt is he still cannot beat the best. This emphasizes the lesson in humility that Matt was taught earlier in the book. Skills should not be boasted about, as there will always be somebody better than him. The two fights show how far Matt has come in two different ways. His skills have now improved to the point where he can beat a visiting kung fu master, but his understanding of what kung fu and bravery are really all about has also improved, as he can see that his defeat is actually not necessarily a loss. Whereas Matt wins the fight with Master Wu, it is the fight that he loses that is really his bigger victory. This is the fight in which he conquers his fear and achieves one of his main goals. These fights also subvert the expectations of readers who are familiar with the way events tend to happen in movies. Readers might expect Matt to lose the first fight, then to learn from it and come back stronger to win in the tournament. However, real life does not work this way, which is one of the important lessons Matt had to learn from the very beginning of his stay at Shaolin.

Matt does not have very good luck with women in these chapters. He is still desperate to end his celibacy and to feel less like a foreign 'freak.' This is why he gets so annoyed when Miling asks him if he has AIDS, as she is buying into the government propaganda that foreigners are diseased and dirty and that America is suffering an epidemic of AIDS. This only reminds Matt how isolated he is and how he is considered inferior by the Chinese. He jokes with Miling that he only has 'a little' AIDS, which first horrifies her, then angers her when she realizes he was making fun of her. Matt's own feelings of inadequacy and paranoia ruined his chances here. Later, Matt finally manages to actually have sex with a woman called Jewel, but the experience is a little unsatisfactory and leaves Matt feeling even more self-conscious and unsure of himself. These feelings are worsened when Jewel makes it clear that she expected Matt to buy her an expensive purse, as if it is obvious that he would have to pay her to be with him. Again, this makes Matt feel like the 'foreign freak.' At the tournament it looks like Matt might have a chance with a local girl, but Coach Cheng will not let this get in the way of the match. The girl is driven away by the odd behavior of all the monks, once again foiling Matt's chance to get a girlfriend. These stories are all told to humorous effect, but it is clear that none of this is helping Matt's confidence problems. Matt may have been able to cross 'cowardly' off his list, but he still feels a long way from being able to cross off 'unattractive to the opposite sex.'





# **Book 5: Disciple, Chapters 4-6, 'No Problems,' 'The Western Spear' and 'Endings', and Epilogue: Shaolin Reunion**

## **Book 5: Disciple, Chapters 4-6, 'No Problems,' 'The Western Spear' and 'Endings', and Epilogue: Shaolin Reunion Summary**

John Lee drops out of college in America for a year and joins Tsinghua University in Beijing. He tells his father that he wants to improve his Chinese, but in reality he wants to stay where he can visit his girlfriend, the Chinese dancer Yeli. One day Comrade Fish brings the phone into Matt's room, early in the morning, saying that John needs to talk to him. John tells Matt that Yeli is staying with him in the dorms and that her ex-boyfriend and his gang are waiting outside, threatening them. John says that Yeli's ex-boyfriend has ties to the Chinese mafia. Matt promises to come straight away.

Matt tells Deqing and Cheng Hao what is going on and asks for their advice. They give him weapons but do not offer to come with him. Matt gets the train from Zheng Zhou and arrives at Beijing the next day. Yeli is unfriendly to him because she knows Matt disapproves of her. John is apologetic but grateful. John says the ex-boyfriend, a man called Li Hetai, is staying at a local hotel. Matt agrees to go talk to him alone, as bringing John along could make the situation worse.

Matt arrives at the hotel room and knocks on the door. It is answered by one of Li's friends, who tells him that Li has gone back to Zheng Zhou for now. Matt tells the man to make sure Li does not bother John again or Matt will be back with friends. Matt manages to intimidate him enough to make this threat work. Li never bothers John again, but he does call Yeli to berate her for sending a foreigner against him.

John thanks Matt by taking him out to dinner. Matt is smitten with a waitress at the restaurant, called Wenqing, so John insists they eat there every night. On the fifth night Matt manages to overcome his shyness and flirts with Wenqing. He asks her for her number and she gives it to him. The next day he calls her and asks her out. They walk around Beijing and then go back to the dorms. Finally Matt manages to have a successful sexual encounter in China. Matt begins to spend more time in Beijing after this. His relationship with Wenqing lasts for six months, but she wants to marry and he is not ready yet.

It is now time for Matt to leave. He exchanges contact details with the monks and they all promise to stay in touch. Back in America, Matt returns to college. That Christmas his





mother throws a party where the guests are very interested in Matt because of his experiences in China. China has now become big news and there are lots of new business opportunities there. One businessman asks Matt to send him his résumé after graduating. At the party, Matt bear hugs his father, which is an old tradition. Usually his father can push him away, but this time Matt is strong enough to resist and to lift his father up. His father remarks that Matt has become a man, and Matt realizes that he has one more thing he can cross off his list.

Ten years later Matt revisits Shaolin. A lot of things in China have changed, as the country is embracing modernity and more capitalist ideas. Shaolin itself no longer looks like 'Kung fu World' and all the tacky tourist stuff has been moved out. The Wushu Center now focuses even more on performance than it did before. Not many of the monks are left there. Matt's old master, Yongxin, is the new abbot. Cheng Hao and other monks have moved to Houston in America, and Lipeng is in New York. They all have their own kung fu schools. Deqing moved to Hungary to teach the military's special forces. Other monks have moved to Beijing or Hong Kong to open schools or pursue a dream of becoming movie stars.

Coach Cheng is still living nearby and has his own school. Matt visits him and he shows him around the school. Matt is impressed by a peasant in his 70s practicing kung fu, which he must have done all his life. Matt realizes that what he really admires in the monks is not their skill, but their devotion and passion.

## **Book 5: Disciple, Chapters 4-6, 'No Problems,' 'The Western Spear' and 'Endings', and Epilogue: Shaolin Reunion Analysis**

Matt manages to cross all the remaining items off his list in these chapters. He finally has a successful sexual encounter with a woman, Wenqing, which turns into a six month relationship. This is partly due to Matt's increased confidence in himself, gained from his fight in the tournament in Zheng Zhou. Conquering his fears and being able to cross off 'cowardly' has made him feel like he can actually succeed and achieve his goals after all. Wenqing makes Matt feel as though he is special and attractive, and he now feels able to cross 'unattractive to the opposite sex' off his list too. When Matt returns to America he is able to lift up his father, which causes his father to comment that Matt has become a man. Matt can now cross off the final problem from his list: 'not a man, still a boy.' Matt's trip to China has achieved everything he hoped it would, allowing Matt to change, grow up, and become a better and more understanding person. Having to face a completely different culture and learn to accept it has opened his mind and made him more tolerant, as well as teaching him not to jump to conclusions or judge people on preconceptions. Training in kung fu has taught Matt discipline and bravery, and given him a great amount of self-confidence. He has also learned humility, and has been able to let go of past grudges.



Matt may have been able to cross all the initial problems off his list, but now he is adding more things to it, such as a career and a family. He realizes that his list will never be complete, and that he will forever be adding to it just as he removes from it. This is because the list represents life. Matt will never be complete, and will always want to change, to better himself, to seek new things that fulfill him and make him happy, and to experience new adventures. This is not a bad thing, as Matt had thought at the beginning of his journey. Through meditating Matt realizes that he will only have one chance at being Matt, even if he does live repeated lives as the Buddhists believe. Therefore, he may as well enjoy being Matt and make the best of it that he can. By always adding to the list as he removes from it, Matt will be able to do this. By understanding this, Matt shows that he has grown up a lot as a person. Now, instead of looking at his life as a problem or a failing, he can look at it as something to be embraced and enjoyed, as a set of goals to always work towards.

When Matt returns to Shaolin ten years later, much has changed. China has become stronger and the business world has really taken notice of it. America no longer considers China the same potential enemy that it once did, which relieves Matt. He knows that China would fight if it was pushed, and that even the pacifist monks would fight too. Some American politicians assumed that the people of China do not share their government's policies and concerns. Matt knows better. Matt has seen China and understands that it is a complicated mix of different ideologies, and that an American should not assume they know a culture so different from their own. Now, ten years later, America and the rest of the world treats China with a greater respect. China is looking forward to the Olympics that will be held in Beijing, and is preparing to try to impress the world. It is embracing modernity and more capitalist ideas. China's goal still seems to be to become stronger and better than America, but now there is a sense of optimism among the people that this goal is actually possible. Matt sees the good and the bad in these changes. He acknowledges that many of the changes will give people better lives, but in some ways he misses the old China he knew. The tourist tackiness has been removed from the Shaolin Temple, which no longer resembles 'Kungfu World,' and while this is more respectful, Matt misses the quirkiness and the liveliness that all the traders gave to the village. China is a place that is changing quickly, and Matt seems to feel that this is bittersweet.

China is not the only thing that has changed. Matt has also changed noticeably. Now he watches an old seventy year old student practicing his forms, and he realizes that his attitude to kung fu is different. When he was twenty-one, what he admired most was the skill of the monks, and their incredible fighting ability. Now, Matt admires the passion, the determination and the devotion. He recognizes that this great love for something is a beautiful and wonderful thing, and that if he could feel a similar passion for anything in his life, he would be happy. Even ten years later, Shaolin can still teach Matt lessons about what is really important in life.

# Characters

## Matthew Polly (Bao Mosi)

Matt is the main character of the book, as well as its author. The story is told from his point of view. The stories he tells are real events that have happened to him, though he admits to having edited them a little for dramatic effect, as well as playing around with the order in which events happened. 'Bao Mosi' is Matt's Chinese name, which is what he uses to introduce himself to a person when in China.

Matt begins the book as a very naive and unconfident young man who does not have much self-belief. He creates a list of things he wants to change about himself, titling it 'Things That are Wrong with Matt.' This negative approach says a lot about Matt's character at the beginning of the story. He does not have the right attitude towards himself and towards growing up, looking at himself negatively and being too impatient to 'fix' everything. He shows his naivety when he imagines that going to the Shaolin Temple in China to study kung fu will somehow solve all his problems. He expects Shaolin to be a magical, tranquil place of meditation, spirituality and enlightenment. He expects to learn from the wise monks there, whose own ascetic examples will help him to get his life on the right track. He sees himself as a hero from a martial arts film, and so tries to create a quest for himself by not looking up any information about the Shaolin Temple before going to China. He soon sees how silly and reckless this is when finding Shaolin turns out to be more difficult than he thought. He also begins to see that life is not at all like movies, and that expecting it to be is a little foolish.

When Matt arrives at Shaolin it is not what he expected, being more touristy than a place of tranquility and respect, but he does not give up. Even though Matt is still very naive and unconfident, he has a great amount of determination and inner strength. He manages to secure a place for himself at the Wushu Center to learn kung fu, and begins his new life there hopefully. At first, Matt is unable to let go of his expectations, and is disappointed when things do not live up to the preconceptions he has built up in his mind. The monks are not wise and holy, but more like normal young men. Matt shows his disapproval, which hurts the honor of Deqing. Matt is also disappointed about the lack of spirituality at Shaolin, and by the feelings of homesickness and loneliness that he did not expect to have. Later, Matt begins to see how wrong he was to project his own expectations onto another place and a different culture. Who is he to say how things should be here? He feels guilty for questioning Deqing's honor and tries to make it up to him. He begins to be more accepting of Shaolin and the monks for what they really are, and stops trying to make them something that they are not. As he loosens up like this, he quickly makes more friends and is accepted by the other monks. He stops being lonely, and he even has a kind of religious experience, proving that although Shaolin is not what Matt expected, it can still profoundly affect him.

Matt is a friendly and caring person who is interested in learning about other cultures. He tries to adapt to the Chinese way of life and takes every opportunity he can to



understand them better. He asks Coach Yan to teach him The Hand Game, a Chinese drinking game that is very important in the Chinese culture. As Matt learns more of the game, he also learns more about how the Chinese interact with each other. This is a kind of introversion, in which people hide their true selves and watch others for their opportunity. This is very different from American ideals of openness and being true to oneself. Matt is perceptive enough to see this and to emulate their behavior. This allows him to win The Hand Game more often, as well as to have more successful interactions with the Chinese people he meets. Matt also understands Chinese concepts such as saving face, guanxi (favor based economy), and that prices are not fixed. He knows that Chinese men show affection more easily than Americans without being considered homosexual, and he forces himself to accept this despite some initial discomfort. He does not try to fight or argue against everything that is different and shows himself willing to adapt and listen. However, this only goes so far. Matt stills wants some American conveniences and luxuries, such as coca cola, and he tries to show the restaurant how to make fries. He gets annoyed when the Chinese treat foreigners as if they are dangerous or dirty. He accepts some of the Chinese values, but he still believes in capitalism and in some American policies. When John Lee arrives, he is glad to have a friend who can relate to his American side.

Matt changes throughout his stay at Shaolin. He learns many things, such as the importance of humility, when to use his skills and when not to, and how to win without being a bully. He also manages to let go of past grudges to concentrate on his own life and future instead. He accepts these lessons, and shows concern about how to act in a way that will still allow him to be a good person. This shows that Matt is not simply a man who likes violence and who wants to learn how to beat people up. Matt also learns something about the nature of bravery. At first he is too concerned with winning fights, but the monks explain to him that Chinese action heroes are the ones who fight even when they know they will lose. This is different from American action heroes, who always tend to win. Chinese heroes often die at the end of movies. Matt comes to understand that they are right. He wins a few fights, but when he finally manages to conquer his fear it is actually in a fight that he loses. He steps up to fight, and continues trying, even though he knows he cannot possibly beat the Chinese Champ. This proves to him that he can be brave, and he realizes that this particular fight is more meaningful than the ones he won easily. Now he feels he can cross 'cowardly' off his list.

Matt is very shy and unconfident with women. He has many bad experiences with them while in China, most of which only bruise his ego even more. Women are either not interested, or wary of him because he is a foreigner, or they only seem interested because they think he can buy them things. Eventually, however, Matt does find a girlfriend, Wenqing, who helps him to see that he can be attractive and loved. He can then cross 'unattractive to the opposite sex' off his list. He also manages to cross 'spiritually confused' off when he has a religious experience of perfect peace while training.

Soon Matt has crossed everything off his list, but he comes to realize that this is not actually the point. He now has new items to add to the list, and he sees that he will be adding things to it forever. This is what living means; it means constantly changing,



trying to better oneself, and experiencing new things. The point is not to create a negative list of things that are wrong, but to create a list of ambitions, things to do, and things to improve. When Matt changes his attitude to see life more positively, he shows how mature he has become, and how much he has grown up.

The biggest change to Matt is in his confidence. At the beginning of the book he was very unsure and negative. Deqing observes that he walked around with hunched shoulders and was afraid of everything. By the end, however, Matt has learned that he can achieve things if he tries, and this has given him a tremendous boost in self-confidence. When he returns to America he manages to lift his father, who has always been able to fend him off in the past, and his father comments that Matt has become a man. Matt is pleased, but the reader can see that Matt has actually been a man for a long time now. He just needed the self-belief and confidence to see this for himself.

## Deqing

Deqing is a monk at the Shaolin Wushu Center. He is particularly skilled in Wushu and always impresses the tourists in his performances. Although he is more skilled than most, he is not the best when it comes to technical ability. However, no-one has the same energy and pure power as Deqing, whose leaping ability amazes Matt on several occasions. Deqing is the monk who most impresses Matt and is the one who inspires him to want to become better at martial arts too.

At first, Matt offends Deqing by suggesting that he is not being a very good Buddhist monk when he worries about money. Deqing is angry and it takes him a long time to forgive Matt. When he tells Matt his story, that his father is in prison and his mother is too poor to look after two sons, so she had to abandon Deqing at Shaolin, Matt feels very bad for questioning Deqing's motives. Matt realizes that he has been putting his own expectations and preconceptions onto the monks, and that this is unfair and wrong of him. He makes it up to Deqing by inviting him to eat with him and by being extra friendly. Deqing warms to this and forgives him.

Deqing becomes one of Matt's good friends at Shaolin. He is more confident and outgoing than the other monks, and he is less worried about what others will think of him for hanging around with a foreigner. He finds Matt funny and interesting, and he appreciates all Matt's gestures of friendship. Deqing is a very passionate man who will always stick up for his friends, as well as any students who are from the same province as him. He takes his martial arts very seriously, but is slightly embarrassed when Matt points out that the monks do not practice much Buddhism. He seems very proud to be a Shaolin monk.

However, Deqing also has personal ambitions beyond being a monk. He tells Matt that he wants to be a movie star like Jet Li and spread the fame of Shaolin kungfu round the world. When a movie crew turns up at the Wushu Center with the intention of hiring a genuine monk as an actor, Deqing is excited. When they choose the better looking Cheng Hao instead, Deqing is devastated and jealous. He tries to be supportive and not



show his disappointment, but he cannot help snapping at Cheng Hao when he keeps talking about his success. Deqing feels bad for doing this, as he tries to always be a good friend and a good person.

When Matt revisits Shaolin ten years after his first stay there, Deqing has left and moved to Hungary where he teaches martial arts to the Hungarian Special Forces.

## John Lee

John Lee is a new student who arrives at Shaolin after Matt has been training there for some time. John Lee is ethnically Chinese but culturally American. His family was forced to leave China when the Communist Party won the war against the Nationalist Party, and his father managed to create a strong business empire in America. Now that China is more accepting of capitalist ideas and interacting with foreign powers, John's dad wants to bring his business to China. John's dad may have moved to America but he still has many Chinese values, and he expects John to work very hard. John is culturally more American, however, putting value in different things in life. He is more interested in partying and sports than in studying. His father sends him to Shaolin to learn discipline.

Because John is more American than Chinese, and he speaks English, he instantly becomes good friends with Matt. The two can share jokes and cultural references that the other monks do not get, and they understand each other better. For Matt, it is nice to finally have someone he can be himself more easily with. For John, Matt acts like an older brother who can show him the ropes and help him get out of trouble.

John gets a girlfriend, Yeli, very quickly after arriving in Shaolin. She is a dancer from Zheng Zhou and Matt disapproves of her, thinking she is a gold digger. John decides to drop out of college in America and attend university in Beijing so that he can stay closer to Yeli. She comes to live with him in his dorms in Beijing. One day Yeli's ex-boyfriend, who has some ties to the Chinese mafia, finds out that she is living with John, and comes to Beijing to beat him up. John calls Matt, who immediately comes to the rescue. They are more than just friends, and Matt thinks of John like a little brother who he has to look after. Matt manages to intimidate the ex-boyfriend's gang into leaving, and John is grateful.

John seems to care about Matt too, respecting his opinion a great deal and constantly trying to get him a girlfriend. Ten years later, John Lee still seems to be a good friend, as they keep in touch over the phone. He appears to still be living in China and is now in a position of importance in his father's business.

## Coach Cheng

Coach Cheng (not the same person as Cheng Hao or Monk Cheng), is a sanda expert, once a national champion. He is a little shy and withdrawn, except when practicing his martial arts when he suddenly seems to come alive with joy, confidence and vigor.





When Matt decides that he wants to learn sanda, Coach Cheng becomes his coach. Coach Cheng is strict but fair, and proves to be a good friend to Matt. He encourages him and tries to make him reach for his best. He accompanies him to hospital when Matt is ill, and tries to look after him. At the Wushu tournament in Zheng Zhou, Coach Cheng gives Matt support when the crowd is against him. He is a very likeable character.

Coach Cheng has a girlfriend who is quite loud and yells at him a lot, who Matt nicknames 'Shou Ting.' She wants him to marry her, but he has no intentions of doing so. She once helped to get him out of jail when he was imprisoned for trying to defend her honor. She had to sell almost all of her possessions to get him out, and now resents the fact that he still will not commit to her. She appeals to Matt a lot to talk to Coach Cheng on her behalf. Coach Cheng seems embarrassed by her constant nagging behavior, but prefers to avoid conflict rather than argue with her. When Matt returns to Shaolin ten years after leaving, Coach Cheng is now married with children, but to a different woman.

## Lipeng

Lipeng is one of the monks at the Shaolin Wushu Center. He is very skilled, and is an expert in Ditang Quan (Floor Boxing). He is a crowd pleaser as his kung fu looks extremely impressive. When he was younger he could perform a handstand with only two fingers, but now he is too old and his bones are too heavy to be able to support himself in this way. A picture of him doing the two-fingered handstand has been circulated in the media, however, which attracts some people to the temple wanting to learn how to do this.

## Lipeng's Father/Doc

Lipeng's father is a descendent of a long line of martial arts masters. He trained his son, then brought his family to Shaolin where their skills might be more useful. Lipeng performed for tourists, and when the Wushu Center was opened he was given a place based on his skills. Lipeng's father was given the position of a janitor, and he and his whole family now live in a cupboard under the stairs. Lipeng's father is training his own student, a ten year old girl who is related to Lipeng, but whose parents cannot afford to keep her. Lipeng trains her and feeds her in exchange for her help with various chores, which is why Matt has nicknamed her Cinderella. When Matt injures his knees, Lipeng's father treats and heals them with Chinese medicine. After this, Matt refers to Lipeng's father as 'Doc.' Doc teaches Matt Iron Forearm Kung fu, which is one of the many kung fu styles that Lipeng is particularly skilled at.

## Cinderella

Cinderella is the nickname Matt gives to the ten year old girl who practices at the same time as him. She is Lipeng's father's student, and has been sent to him by her parents



who are too poor to look after her. Lipeng's father trains and feeds her in return for her help with various chores. Matt thinks that Lipeng's father is pushing her too hard, and sees that she is often as miserable as he is. He tries to cheer her up whenever he can, and finds that she is just like any normal ten year old child when allowed to play and laugh.

## **Big Wang**

Big Wang is one of the important men in the hierarchy of the Wushu Center. Matt is never sure of what his actual job is. Big Wang can be very arrogant and hard to get on with. When Big Wang hits a tourist who slapped his wife, he is forced to run from the law and hide out until his fine is lowered.

## **Little Tiger**

Little Tiger is the youngest monk at Shaolin, and so gets ordered around a lot by the older monks. He begs Matt to teach him how to swear in English, and in return teaches Matt about Chinese curses.

## **Carlos**

Carlos is a Spanish man who comes to train at Shaolin in order to improve his kung fu, hoping that this will help his kung fu classes to attract more students and earn more money. He is married, but this does not stop him flirting and sleeping with other women. During his short stay at Shaolin he has a similar religious experience to Matt.

## **Baotong**

Baotong is Matt's sparring partner in sanda. At first Baotong obviously disapproves of Matt and refuses to go easy on him. However, when Matt proves that he is serious about learning and training, Baotong warms to him. Baotong is very good at sanda and his kicks are particularly powerful.

## **Monk Xingming**

Monk Xingming is a Buddhism instructor at Shaolin. Matt thinks that he is obviously homosexual, and thinks it is funny that the other monks do not realize this. Monk Xingming is extremely friendly and a pacifist, but even he becomes annoyed when he thinks America is interfering too much in Chinese politics. He tells Matt that he would fight over Taiwan if necessary. Monk Xingming loves Broadway musicals and Barbra Streisand.



## **Leader Liu**

Leader Liu is the man in charge of the Wushu Center, and Matt does not think he is a very nice person. However, he is not as powerful or as sly as Deputy Leader Jiao. Leader Liu is not mentioned much in the book.

## **Deputy Leader Jiao**

Deputy Leader Jiao is the second in command at the Wushu Center in Shaolin. He is more cunning and ruthless than the actual leader, and Matt thinks that it is really Jiao who runs things and has the real power. Jiao is not portrayed as a nice person, and Matt does not like him. He is generally more concerned about money than about anything else, and does not seem to care about the kungfu or the Buddhist practices at the Temple, despite this being what Shaolin is supposed to be all about. Jiao is a member of the Communist Party and so answers to the Chinese government.

## **Vice Deputy Leader Me**

Vice Deputy Leader Me is the third in command of the three leaders of the Wushu Center. Matt describes him as the best and most honest of the leaders, but unfortunately he does not have many dealings with him.

## **Comrade Fish**

Comrade Fish works for the leaders of the Wushu Center, helping with the admin and general running of the Center. He comes across as a sly, cowardly and greedy man who wants to get as much money out of Matt as possible. He is intimidated more easily than Deputy Leader Jiao, and in particular he seems to worry about angering Jiao. He does not appear to like Matt very much, and the feeling is mutual.

## **Coach Yan**

Coach Yan is a coach of the other coaches, like the dean of a faculty at college. He is a master at the Chinese drinking game called The Hand Game. Matt persuades Coach Yan to teach him the techniques for winning at The Hand Game.

## **Master Wu**

Master Wu is a kung fu master from Tianjin, a rival martial arts school to Shaolin. He attends the feast that Pierre throws for the Shaolin monks, and challenges them to a kung fu match. Matt offers to take up the challenge, not really expecting the senior monks to agree. Master Yan thinks this is a good idea, as Matt is a foreigner and so will



not shame Shaolin if he loses, but will bring them great honor if he wins. Matt fights Master Wu and wins, but Master Wu accuses Matt of cheating. This makes Matt angry.

## **Monk Cheng**

Monk Cheng is one of the eldest instructors at Shaolin (in his mid-30s) and is the kindest monk there. He should not be confused with Coach Cheng, who is a different person.

## **Cheng Hao**

Change Hao is one of the monks at Shaolin and is Matt's first teacher at the Wushu Center. He is nineteen years old. He shares a room with Deqing. One day he is chosen by a film crew to act in a movie, and is told by the director that they will use him again. For weeks afterwards he is proud of this, but when the director never calls him he realizes that he will not become a famous actor after all.

## **Monk Dong**

Monk Dong is an ex-Shaolin monk who now runs his own private martial arts school. He practices Iron Neck Kungfu and Iron Crotch Kungfu, though it is the latter than really attracts him a lot of attention, particularly from women.

## **Tiger Man**

Tiger Man is a grifter who only knows Tiger Form and how to crack bricks over his head, and cons young monks into paying him to teach them. When the young monks find out that he cannot do much kung fu at all they run him out of the temple. He boasts about himself constantly and Matt assumes that no-one likes him. However, Tiger Man and Monk Dong struck up a friendship on the American tour. Tiger Man goes on the trip to Anhui province with Monk Dong and Matt.

## **Coach Ming**

Coach Ming is one of the Wushu Center's instructors who challenges Matt to a spar match but is beaten by him.

## **The Coach from Taguo**

An aging coach from Taguo challenges Matt to a sanda match, thinking that he will be easy to beat and so will help to restore some of the coach's glory. Matt easily beats the



coach and enjoys humiliating him afterwards. He is remorseful about this, feeling that he acted like a bit of a bully.

## Mikael

Mikael is a Finnish man who comes to Shaolin for a short time. He tells Matt that there will soon evolve a sixth race of superior humans, and wants to recruit Matt to his cause. He claims that Jesus, Odin and Thor visited him and support his sixth race idea. Matt thinks that he is completely crazy.

## Pierre

Pierre is a French photojournalist who visits Shaolin for a while to take photographs of the monks. It is at a party that he is throwing for the monks that Master Wu challenges the Shaolin monks, and Matt steps up to defend Shaolin's honor. Later, Matt and John Lee tease Pierre when he thinks that Deqing is homosexual. Matt finds Pierre a rather boring and arrogant person, and does not enjoy spending time with him.

## Matt's Father

Matt's father is a very straightforward man who does not approve of Matt's intention to take a year or two out of college to live in China. He believes Matt is going off on a whim and will waste time and money on something useless. He wants Matt to focus on his education and then his career prospects instead. He does not seem to be the kind of person who values life experiences unless there is a focused career goal behind them. When Matt returns from China, his father is no longer unhappy with him about this choice, as China has become big news and big business. Now that Matt's father can see the worth in terms of career and earning potential, he has changed his tune. Despite their disagreement at the beginning of the book, Matt and his father do not seem to have a bad relationship.

Since childhood, Matt and his father have wrestled. Matt has never been able to pick up his father, as his father has always had greater strength to hold Matt back with. After returning from China, however, Matt can now lift his father into the air and his father cannot push him back. Matt's father remarks that Matt has now become a man.

## Matt's Mother

Matt's mother is a loving woman who is worried when Matt tells her that he intends to go to China. She has seen the news about the student killed in Tiananmen Square and has a bad impression of China. She is afraid that Matt will not be safe there and begs him not to go. When Matt eventually returns, however, she is very proud of him, and enjoys bragging to her party guests about her son.



## Moon

Moon is the key girl at the hotel Matt visits while in Zheng Zhou, on his way to the Shaolin Temple. She flirts with him and attempts to seduce him, obviously excited by the idea of a romance with a foreigner. Matt, however, has decided to become celibate like the monks, and does not encourage her advances. Moon tells him the history of the Shaolin Temple.

## Yeli

Yeli is a dancer from Zheng Zhou who John Lee starts dating. She has an ex-boyfriend who may have connections to the Chinese mafia. When her ex-boyfriend finds out that she is living with John Lee in his dorm in Beijing, he comes to try to beat up John. Matt comes to John's rescue. Matt disapproves of Yeli, thinking that she is a gold digger who is only using John. However, John is completely in love with her and will not listen to Matt's warnings.

## Miling

Miling is Yeli's friend. John tries to set her up with Matt, but Matt becomes irritated when she asks if he has AIDS. He knows the Chinese government put out propaganda that America is dirty and full of AIDS, but he is annoyed that she believes this. He jokes that he only has 'a little' AIDS. She is horrified, and then angry when she realizes he was making fun of her. She quickly leaves.

## Jewel

Jewel is a Chinese girl who catches Matt's eye while she is being shown around Shaolin. Matt asks her out and she accepts. They go for dinner, then sneak back to Matt's room and have sex. Matt is worried that he might be bad in bed and wants another chance, so he asks her out again. They wander around Zheng Zhou and go to a department store where she looks longingly at designer purses. Later she makes it clear that she is not interested in being with Matt anymore and he realizes that she expected him to buy her one of the purses.

## Wenqing

Wenqing is a waitress in a restaurant in Beijing. Matt thinks she is beautiful and is smitten with her the first time he sees her. John notices this and insists they go back to the same restaurant every night. After five nights Matt finally plucks up the courage to flirt with her. He blows the candle out on their table, so that she will have to come over and re-light it. Every time she lights it he blows it out again, which she finds endearing. He says he will stop blowing the candle out if she gives him her number. She thinks

Matt is charming, so she does. Matt calls her the next day and they go on a date. That night they have sex, and it is the first actually successful sexual encounter Matt has had in China. Wenqing seems to really like Matt, and they do not get the same prejudice for being together that they would in Zheng Zhou, as Beijing is more forward thinking. Matt dates Wenqing for six months until she breaks up with him because she wants to get married and he is not ready yet.

## **Li Hetai**

Li Hetai is Yeli's ex-boyfriend. He may or may not have ties to the Chinese mafia. When he hears that Yeli is living with John Lee in Beijing, he comes down with his gang to beat him up. Matt comes to John's rescue and manages to intimidate Li and his friends into staying away.

## **Dashan**

Dashan means 'big mountain' and is the Chinese name of Mark Roswell, a Canadian who came to China to teach English in 1988. He was so skilled at speaking Chinese that he went on several Chinese television shows and became quite famous in China. Now all foreigners' Chinese is compared to his, usually unfavorably. When the Chinese people in this book hear Matt speaking, they always tell him that his Chinese is very good but not quite as good as Dashan. Matt soon gets sick of this.

## **Jet Li**

Jet Li is a famous Chinese actor and martial artist who has starred in many movies about martial arts. He has acted in Chinese and American films. His first film, 'Shaolin Temple,' helped to spread the fame of Shaolin Kung fu throughout the world. As such, he has become loved and almost revered by the monks in this book, many of whom want to be just like him.

# Objects/Places

## 'Things That are Wrong with Matt'

Matt has a list of things that he would like to improve about himself, which he calls 'Things That are Wrong with Matt.' At the beginning of the story these are 1) ignorant, 2) cowardly, 3) still a boy (not a man), 4) unattractive to the opposite sex, 5) spiritually confused.

Matt attends college to sort out number 1, which he then crosses off his list. He decides to study kung fu at Shaolin in order to take care of the rest of the list. This slowly works, as Matt is able to cross off spiritually confused, cowardly, and unattractive to the opposite sex. When he gets home and is able to lift his father off the floor, his father remarks that Matt has become a man, allowing Matt to cross off number 3 too. However, as Matt experiences more of life he realizes that he will always need to add things to the list as he crosses other things off. This is because life is a constant process of changing and improving. At the end of the book, Matt's new list contains 1) no family, and 2) not enough money.

## Kung fu

Kung fu is Chinese martial arts, first developed at the Shaolin Temple as a form of exercise, self-defense and moving meditation. Matt is not sure whether it originated there or somewhere else in the ancient world, but it was the Shaolin monks who made kung fu famous. American and European attention was brought to martial arts by Chinese actors such as Bruce Lee, and in American movies starring David Carradine, Steven Segal and Jean-Claude Van Damme, all of whom are Matt's heroes. The Shaolin Temple itself became famous through the movie 'Shaolin Temple', starring Jet Li, in 1982.

Kung fu contains many different styles and forms, such as the Tiger Form or the Lotus Form. At the Wushu Center at Shaolin, practicing kung fu is more about performance, grace and speed than it is about actual self-defense and fighting. After a while, Matt decides that he would like to be able to fight properly rather than just perform impressive moves. He decides to take up a form of kung fu called sanda, which is Chinese kickboxing.

## Wushu

Wushu can be used as another word for kung fu. It is also the name of the competitive sport based around kung fu. In this, competitors either display their skill in the various different forms of kung fu, being judged on grace, speed and style, or they fight in sparring matches, which is called sanda. Wushu as a sport was invented by the Chinese leader Mao Zedong in the 1950s as a way to re-introduce kung fu after its ban,

but in a way that was not associated with the feudalism of traditional kung fu. The most well known and popular product of Wushu is Jet Li, a famous Chinese actor and martial artist. He won all kinds of Wushu competitions before starring in the movie 'Shaolin Temple' and beginning his acting career.

## **Sanda**

Sanda is a kind of kung fu similar to kickboxing. Matt decides to learn this when he realizes that he would like to be able to fight and defend himself rather than just perform impressive moves. The leaders at the Shaolin Temple set up a new sanda team so that Matt can learn, funded with his money.

## **Floor Boxing**

Floor boxing ('Ditang Quan' in Chinese) is a form of kung fu in which the martial artist leaps into the air, performs various flying kicks, then lands flat on their back on the mat.

## **Zen Buddhism**

Zen is a kind of Buddhism that originated in China in the 6th century. Buddhism is a religion and philosophy that believes enlightenment can be reached through meditation and the teachings of a man called Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. Achieving enlightenment frees a soul from the cycle of life, death and reincarnation that it is otherwise trapped in. Buddhism emphasizes pacifism, vegetarianism, celibacy, and letting go of a sense of 'self.' It is therefore somewhat ironic that the Buddhist monks Matt meets eat meat, drink alcohol, train in martial arts, have personal ambitions, and sometimes even have girlfriends.

## **The Shaolin Temple**

The Shaolin Temple is a monastery for Buddhist monks in China. It is situated in the northern province of Henan in Dengfeng. The nearest city is Zheng Zhou. The Shaolin Temple is famous for the kung fu and Buddhism that is practiced by its monks, and it is these that attracted Matt here to study martial arts and to seek spiritual fulfillment.

## **The People's Republic of China (in 1992-1993)**

China is a country in the Asian continent. It is the most populous country in the world, and the second-largest by land area. Matt visits China in 1992. It is called 'The People's Republic of China' and is a single-party state governed by the Communist Party. This should not be confused with 'The Republic of China,' which is a separate state and the official name of Taiwan.





The Chinese Communist Party was formed in 1921 in Shanghai. After a civil war against the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Communist Party gained full control of China. It is the ruling party of The People's Republic of China, set out in the state's constitution. Elections are not held to vote for different choices of parties, meaning that the Communist Party is always in power. The Chinese Nationalist Party, after losing the civil war, retreated to Taiwan (The Republic of China), where they are still in power. The Chinese Communist Party claims that Taiwan is part of The People's Republic of China, and this issue is still a matter that causes tension. In this book, even the pacifist Buddhist monks express the belief that Taiwan is part of China and that they would fight to make it so.

The Chinese Communist Party has been criticized for its extreme social reforms, totalitarian attitude, and use of force to keep citizens and protestors under control. For example, Matt mentions an infamous incident in 1989 in which a student engaged in non-violent protest was executed by the government in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. It is for these reasons that Matt's mother is anxious about Matt's safety in China. However, in 1992, the year Matt visits China, things have begun to change. The Communist Party has become less focused on extreme Marxist ideology, showing interest in more capitalist ideas and even taking a more nationalist viewpoint, which has improved relations with the Chinese National Party in Taiwan. Matt sees evidence of capitalist ideas alongside the social housing and communist institutions in China, as well as an anxiety to improve its image and relations with the West. After a few weeks at Shaolin, Matt is no longer woken by the communist propaganda songs that are played over loudspeakers to the monks every morning.

## Laowai

'Laowai' is a Chinese word meaning 'foreigner' or 'outsider'.

## Eating Bitter

'Eating Bitter' is the idea that a person must suffer hardship and pain, and work hard in order to become good at something. The Shaolin monks do not think a person can become truly skilled at martial arts unless they are willing to 'eat bitter.'

## Qi

'Qi' (or Chi) is the energy inside everything, which courses through the body. Through breathing exercises qi can be focused on a specific part of the body, such as on the stomach in 'Iron Stomach' kungfu.

## Iron Kung fu

'Iron kung fu' is a form of kung fu that focuses qi on a specific part of the body so that it is strengthened. This hardens the body part against damage as well as making it much tougher for attacks. For example, Iron Stomach involves strengthening the stomach so that punches to the stomach will have little to no affect. Matt learns Iron Forearm Kung fu, hardening his forearms so that hits on his forearms do not hurt, but so that his blocks do hurt his attacker. Matt sees one monk practicing Iron Crotch Kung fu, who he nicknames Monk Dong. Practicing Iron Kung fu involves breathing techniques, as well as 'training' the intended body part by hitting it regularly to harden it against damage.

## Zheng Zhou

Zheng Zhou is the nearest city to the Shaolin Temple, and is the capital of and largest city in the province of Henan. Matt stays here while on his way to the temple, and catches trains from here when visiting other parts of China. The monks come into Zheng Zhou when they need something they cannot get in the small Shaolin village. Matt also comes here with his date, Jewel, but the day does not end well. Although the people in Zheng Zhou are more tolerant of foreigners than in more rural areas, Matt is still often made to feel uncomfortable here.

## Henan Province

Henan is a northern province in China, and its capital city is Zheng Zhou. Henan is the province in which the Shaolin Temple is located.

## The Zheng Zhou Wushu Tournament

A martial arts festival is held at Zheng Zhou, in which a Wushu tournament takes place. Coach Cheng encourages Matt to enter the sanda contest. Matt is not allowed to fight for Shaolin so he makes up his own team instead, calling it the Princeton University Wushu Team. Matt gets through the first round, but is beaten by the Chinese Champion, coming second overall. Through fighting in this tournament, Matt manages to overcome his fear and so can cross 'cowardly' off his list.

## Kung fu World

'Kung fu World' is Matt's nickname for the Shaolin Temple, as it is a tacky, tourist trap that caters to visitors who are drawn by the kung fu. There are stalls, attractions, and cheap gimmicky amusements. It reminds Matt a little bit of the different pavilions of Epcot at Disneyworld.

## **The Performance Hall**

The performance hall is where the monks train and perform for tourists, and is also where they hang around after hours. There is a section of the floor where the various monks have jumped so much that the floorboards are now loose and springy, creating a good area to practice jumps and bouncing.

## **Matt's Room at Shaolin**

Matt's room at Shaolin is in the hotel near the Wushu Center, as he is not allowed to bunk with the monks in their tiny rooms above the training area. This is supposedly for Matt's own health and safety, though he suspects that it is also about the revenue they are getting from him for staying in the hotel. Matt's room has a carpet, a bathroom with a proper toilet, two beds with mattresses, and a TV. This is very different from the spartan nature of the monk's rooms, which have straw pallets, two to a bed, one washbasin between all, and an outside toilet in the form of a hole in the ground. Matt's meals are provided for him as part of the price of his board, served in the hotel restaurant.

## **FEC and RMB**

FEC is Foreign Exchange Currency, and RMB is the people's money. FEC is the only money that can be exchanged for foreign currency. The Bank of China will not exchange RMB. As most people are paid in RMB, this means that no matter how rich they are, they would have no money at all if they left the country. Matt thinks that this measure has been put in place by the Chinese government to prevent the Chinese people from leaving the country. However, RMB is regularly exchanged for FEC on the black market, and any foreigners are treated like a walking exchange. While in China, Matt is constantly asked if he would like to change his FEC for RMB. They offer him a rate better than the Bank of China would give him, but he realizes later that this is much less than what he would get on the black market. By the time Matt's stay in China has ended, however, these restrictions are no longer in place.

## **Guanxi**

Guanxi is a Chinese word for friendship-based favors, or owing someone something for their help. High guanxi means friendship, middle guanxi means friend of a friend, and low guanxi means not a friend, with varying levels in-between. For example, Matt owes Doc high guanxi because of his debt to Doc for teaching him Iron Forearm Kungfu and healing his legs. This is why Matt is obliged to come to Zheng Zhou with Doc to help him buy a grinder, and then again to help him return it.



## Leitai

The leitai is the mat/boundary of the space where a kickboxing match takes place.

## Amitufo

Amitufo is a Chinese word, as well as one of the names of the Buddha. It can be used to mean several different things, as a greeting, a blessing, thanks, apology, 'please', hope, or to express strong feelings. Matt seems to use it most often to mean 'so be it' or 'that's life' or to express the fact that a person got what they deserved.

## The Hand Game

The Hand Game is a Chinese drinking game in which the players put different numbers of fingers up and shout out a number. If the number is the total amount of fingers, including both players, then that person wins. The loser has to drink.

## Taguo

Taguo is a rival martial arts school to the Wushu Center. Its training facilities are inferior but the school has a reputation for being rough and puts out good fighters. The school has many national kickboxing champions.

## Key Girl

Some Chinese hotels do not give keys to the guests, but instead have key girls who hold keys for every room and let the guests in and out of their rooms. Matt explains that this has two advantages; it helps create jobs where none are really needed, as keeping everyone in work is necessary to a communist society; and it promotes the idea of everybody keeping an eye on everybody else. However, the new Chinese leader has started a slow slide from communism to capitalism, with catchwords of 'change' and 'openness.' This is why some hotels are starting to give keys or key cards to the guests instead of employing an unnecessary key girl.

## Wuhan Sports University

Wuhan Sports University is a sports university in Beijing, which teaches kungfu amongst other sports. Matt thinks it is more cliquey and more like high school than Shaolin.

## **The Great Wall Sheraton**

The Great Wall Sheraton is a hotel in Beijing where Matt stays when he first arrives in China.

## **Jianlibao**

Jianlibao is a Chinese soft drink that Matt describes as tasting a bit like Sunkist without the sugar and carbonation. He thinks that it is disgusting.

## **Beijingers in New York**

"Beijingers in New York" is a Chinese TV miniseries about a Chinese couple living in New York. The couple has a hard time and life is pretty horrible for them. The show is an obvious attempt by the Chinese government to make America seem frightening and less appealing.

# Themes

## Capitalism and Communism in China

Matt experiences an odd mix of capitalism and communism while visiting China. China is a single-party state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. After a long civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Communist Party gained power. New policies were put in place to further the communist agenda, such as danweis, organizational structures of Chinese society that provide employment, housing, schooling, healthcare, etc, and keep an eye on all members for signs of anti-party sentiment. Communism is the idea that all resources should be distributed according to need and contribution to society. There should be no rich and poor divide. True communism would aim for a moneyless and stateless society. Although China never approached this form of true communism, it did discourage anything it saw as belonging to the 'bourgeoisie,' and promoted socialist ideals. The government also maintained strict control of the country, stamping out anti-party feeling and silencing anyone who disagreed. This is demonstrated by an incident in which a student engaged in non-violent demonstration was killed by the Chinese army.

Matt expects the government to be harsh and brutal, as he has seen this story on the news, but what he does not expect is for communists to be greedy and corrupt. Matt is surprised by how much money seems to matter to the Chinese people he meets, especially those connected to the government, and is interested to see capitalist ideologies alongside the communist ones. In 1992, when Matt visits, China is a country in a state of change. It is beginning to embrace capitalist and nationalist ideas again, and becoming more open to private business as well as foreign interest and investment. China is trying to change its image, but it is still not letting go of some of its past ideals. When Matt speaks to various taxi drivers in China, he gets an impression of how the common people feel. One taxi driver explains that the Chinese simply want a way out of poverty, and are willing to put up with an authoritarian and oppressive government in return. When things are looking up for the Chinese, then they can address more luxurious issues such as freedom. This puts Matt in his place; he has been assuming he knows how the Chinese feel based on his own American values and ideas, which are certainly not a reflection of Chinese attitude and culture. Communism has not made people uninterested in money; rather, they are interested in communism because of their lack of money. It is not the strict and oppressive nature of the government that worries them, but making a China a better place and giving its citizens better lives.

The taxi drivers also express the opinion that America is a very powerful and impressive place, and that China has a lot of catching up to do before it can be as good as America. This seems like a very un-communist sentiment. Matt experiences this idea in Shaolin too. The monks are fascinated with America because it represents extreme capitalism, in which any person can become fabulously rich through their own hard work. It represents decadence and greed, but this is appealing to the Chinese monks because they are so very poor. Even government propaganda about American being a



horrible place does not convince the monks. Many of them tell Matt they would like to defect, move to America, or become a movie star like Jet Li. Others have aspirations to open their own martial arts schools. They ask Matt many questions about America, particularly about how much they could earn in various jobs there. They want to earn more money, and they are not at all ashamed to admit it. This is doubly surprising to Matt, as the monks are not only from a communist country, but also Buddhists, and so are supposed to reject personal wealth and ambition. This is just another way in which China and Shaolin are not what Matt expected.

When Matt first arrives at Shaolin he tells the leaders of the Wushu Center that he wants to train here. They tell him he will have to pay an exorbitant fee of \$1300. Matt knows he is being ripped off, which especially annoys him when it is coming from Communist Party members. He agrees to pay because he has no other option, but he renegotiates a smaller price when he can. The leaders fight him up until the last minute on this, and only back down when Matt makes up a fake story about his family not being able to pay. Matt learns that the government pays the monks a small fee for teaching, training and performing to tourists. The government is not so much interested in preserving culture or traditions of the past, but in impressing visitors and maintaining a money-making tourist attraction. The government also encourages the monks to perform in competitions and to tour other countries, trying to impress the world with China's greatness. Past traditions are not only ignored but deliberately pushed aside. The government does not want kung fu to be associated with the feudalism of the past, so it invents a new kind of kung fu, Wushu, which is focused on performances and competitions. In these ways, the government can maintain strict control over kung fu while making as much money from it as possible. Even the hotel and restaurant where Matt stays and eats at Shaolin are partly controlled by the government, and the owner only receives a very small part of Matt's fee for his room and board. At every turn Matt sees the government enforcing its control on the one hand, and trying to get as much money out of its people on the other.

Despite this, Matt does see plenty of private enterprise in China. There are traders, stall owners and attractions at Shaolin that all cater to the tourists and occasionally to the monks and students. Matt finds one stall selling coca cola, and by the end of his stay has begun a price war in the marketplace as the stall-owners try to undercut each other to sell Matt coca cola. Although the stall owners own their own businesses, they had not considered it proper to compete in this way until encouraged to do so by Matt. Matt appears to feel no remorse at introducing this capitalist idea to Shaolin. In the cities Matt also sees private businesses alongside the state run danweis. He notices that some hotels give key cards, whereas others have key girls. The latter is a leftover from old communist policies, when the government tried to create jobs for everyone because idleness is the disease of the rich. Hotels that give key cards tend to be located in areas that are embracing capitalism and changing more quickly, such as the coastal big cities like Beijing.

Matt sees things change even more in the two years he stays in China. Shortly after he arrives, the communist propaganda music that is used to wake the monks stops playing. Later, he sees the danwei system begin to disappear. He sees more private enterprises





springing up, and businesses becoming bigger. John Lee is a good example of this. His father earns a huge manufacturing company in America, and he is now bringing this to China, his home country. Although he was forced to leave when the Communist Party won the war, seeking safety and fortune in America instead, now he can return home. Other Chinese ex-pats and students are doing the same, and foreign business is also becoming more interested in China. By the time Matt returns to America, China is big news. When Matt returns after ten years, it is to a very different country. China is becoming more modern, and is embracing even more capitalist ideas. It is preparing for the Beijing Olympics and is determined to impress the world with its power. Matt sees the changes as partly good, partly bad. The lives of ordinary people might be improving, but China is perhaps losing a sense of the identity that Matt saw so clearly when he was there.

## Growing Up

Matt begins the story as a very naive and self-deprecating young man. He does not believe in himself, and has a very negative attitude towards his own development. He believes that he is inadequate in many ways, and so has produced a list of 'Things That are Wrong with Matt.' These include cowardly, spiritually confused, unattractive to the opposite sex, and not a man/still a boy. Matt decides to study at the Shaolin Monastery in China in order to try to change some of these things. He has studied the Chinese language and Chinese philosophy at college, and now thinks that China is his answer to everything. He loves martial arts movies and so decides that learning kung fu will be some kind of magic solution to his problems. He goes to China with many naive preconceptions and expectations, based mainly on the films he has seen. He thinks of himself as a hero in a movie, and so tries to create a quest out of finding the Shaolin Temple. This soon proves harder than he expected and Matt realizes that he has behaved a little foolishly and recklessly. However, he manages to make it to the Temple, and begins his training.

Through training with the monks, Matt changes considerably. He begins to be able to tick off items on his list. First, he has a religious experience, allowing him to cross off 'spiritually confused.' Later, he manages to conquer his fear through becoming a better fighter, and so can cross off 'cowardly.' After many futile efforts he finally manages to find a girlfriend, who helps to boost his confidence, and he now feels comfortable crossing off 'unattractive to the opposite sex.' Finally, when he returns home he is able to lift up his father, who comments that Matt has now become a man. Matt happily crosses off the last item on the list. However, Matt realizes that no matter how much he crosses things off the list, he will always be adding new items in their place. He has now added 'career' and 'family' to the list. Matt now understands that he has been approaching the list in a very negative way. It does not have to be about crossing everything off, but about constantly changing the list. The list reflects his life, the things that he wants to do, achieve and change. He will always be trying to improve himself, and always looking for the next challenge. The list will not end as long as Matt keeps living, and this is actually a good thing. When Matt comes to this realization it shows



how much he has changed, learned and matured in his two years at Shaolin. He now has a much more confident and positive attitude to life.

Matt's naivety also changes as he becomes more aware of how reality actually works, and how silly his preconceptions were. He imagined the monks would all be like monks in the movies, that Shaolin would be a place of tranquility and respect, and that he would learn something from the superior morality of the people there. He was wrong about this, as Shaolin turned out to be a tourist trap and the monks just ordinary young men. At first Matt is disappointed, but then he comes to see that Shaolin is an interesting and good place to be on its own terms. He sees that he has been unfair in judging the monks and that many of them have had to cope with things he cannot even imagine. He cannot compare himself to them, and he cannot assume he understands them. He begins to listen and observe more, and accepts Shaolin and its monks for what they are. He becomes better at dealing and communicating with the Chinese people, and soon manages to make friends. By the end of the book he is a much more savvy and wise person. He no longer believes what he sees in movies or lets his own imagination and expectations misguide him. He has a much greater understanding of Chinese culture, and better than this, he shows it the proper amount of respect.

Matt also learns discipline and humility through his martial arts training. He gains confidence as his skills improve, but learns not to boast about this. He manages to let go of past grudges, and begins to see what it means to be a bully. He is determined not to use his strength to hurt others, and not to look for weaknesses to exploit. He will fight when in a sparring match, but will otherwise be careful he does not become the kind of bully that he despises. Matt concludes that violence can be a good thing for men when properly supervised, with rules, but that this becomes something nasty when used deliberately to hurt others. This is a much better and more mature attitude than his 'kung fu is cool' beliefs that he began with.

As Matt improves in his kungfu, he also learns something about bravery. At first, Matt was afraid to fight because he did not want to lose or get hurt. Coach Cheng helps him to see that pain is not something to be feared, and that if he does fear it this will only hold him back. Through his own experiences, Matt comes to see that bravery is not about winning either. While comparing American and Chinese martial arts movies, the monks argue that the American heroes are not true heroes because they always win and know they will win. The Chinese heroes fight on even if they are sure they will lose. This is a true sign of heroism and bravery, which is why Chinese heroes often die at the end of the movie. Later, Matt sees that the monks are right. It is not through winning fights that Matt proves himself, but through stepping up and continuing on even when he knows he will lose. At the Zheng Zhou tournament Matt fights hard even though it is obvious the Chinese Champ will win. Matt is very proud of himself for this, realizing that he has finally conquered his fear. In the end, it is through losing a fight, not winning one, that Matt is victorious. The fact that Matt can acknowledge this shows how far he has come.

At the end of the book Matt's father observes that he has become a man, and Matt finally feels able to cross this off his list. However, this really happened long before this



point. Matt has been growing and maturing throughout his stay in China, and proved himself a brave, strong and caring man long before he left. All Matt needed was the confidence and self-belief to see this for himself, and how he finally has this.

## Clash of Cultures

Matt goes to China with a certain amount of preconceptions about the people and the culture there. He can speak Chinese and he has studied Chinese philosophy and so thinks he knows enough about the country. He soon finds that he is out of his depth and confused by much of what he sees. Many of Matt's expectations are based on movies and stories. He thinks Shaolin will be a place of respect and tranquility, where Buddhism and spirituality are very important. He expects the monks to be holy and morally superior, so that he will be able to learn from their wisdom. Matt soon finds that he is completely wrong. The monks are more concerned with training and performing Wushu than with Buddhism, and they do not act like monks in many ways. They have personal ambitions, are interested in money, some have girlfriends, and not many intend to remain in the monk's life forever. Shaolin is not a way of life so much as a university that people pass through, learning what they need to and moving on. Matt himself is doing this, but he seems outraged that others would do the same. He resists the reality of the situation and shows disappointment at the monks' attitudes. He judges them on what he would like them to be, not on what they are, which is patronizing and wrong-headed. Matt realizes his mistake a little too late and has to apologize a lot before Deqing will forgive him for hurting his honor. Matt comes to see how naive and silly he was for basing his ideas on movies, and for not simply accepting the Shaolin Temple and its monks for what they really were.

Matt finds other aspects of the culture unexpected too. At first he is confused by money and prices in China. He had expected a more communist society, but China has begun to embrace capitalist ideas. The mix can be a little bewildering for a foreigner. It takes Matt a while to understand that prices are not fixed in China, and that anything can be renegotiated at any time. Prices are also not the same from one person to the next, as they are based on *guanxi* (friendship and favors). *Guanxi* itself is like a form of currency, as favors can be swapped for others, and friends owe friends their help. As Matt becomes more comfortable with these strange ideas, he becomes much better at dealing and communicating with Chinese people. He negotiates a better price for his coca cola, and forces the leaders of the Wushu Center to lower what he pays for training and board. He also understands that he must do favors for the people he owes, like Doc, and for his friends, like Deqing and John Lee.

The Chinese play a drinking game called The Hand Game, which is at first very strange to Matt. As the Chinese enjoy beating the foreigner, Matt seems to be getting constantly drunk and this concerns him. He manages to persuade Coach Yan to teach him the subtleties and techniques of the game. As he learns more about it, Matt comes to understand more about the Chinese people too. He sees The Hand Game as a metaphor for the Chinese, as well as a training regimen for them. The game requires a person to sit back and quietly watch their opponent, waiting for the right opportunity.

During this time, the player must hide their own feelings and tendencies, putting on a different face to the world. This is exactly how the Chinese behave in life. Matt calls them introverts, observing that they think it is a disadvantage to show their true selves too openly, and that each person should put on a different persona for the world than they do in private. This is completely at odds with American ideas at the time about being true to yourself and being open and honest. This is why Matt has trouble at first, but as he learns more he adapts to the Chinese way. Matt shows that he can learn about another culture and fit in, even when its ideas are so different from what he is used to.

Another way in which Matt adapts to very different cultural ideas is in the Chinese expression of friendship between men. Chinese men think nothing of holding hands, putting their arm around each other, etc, which would normally be signs of romantic interest in America. At first, Matt is anxious about seeming gay, but he soon comes to accept this cultural difference, trying not to react badly when Deqing holds his hand. Later, Matt has become so comfortable with this that he is able to tease the French photojournalist Pierre about it when Pierre overreacts to Deqing's familiarity.

Matt is not the only one who had preconceptions about a culture he had never been part of. The Chinese have their own ideas and expectations concerning foreigners and Americans. The Chinese government has put out propaganda that Americans are diseased and greedy, and that America is full of AIDS. It is also a generally held belief that foreigners are unpredictable and dangerous. Matt sometimes gets annoyed about this, and sometimes uses it to his advantage. He does not like being considered dirty or inferior, and hates the fact that foreigners are always the bad guys in Chinese movies. He gets angry when Miling asks him if he has AIDS and cannot resist making fun of her. At other times, he uses the Chinese's wariness of foreigners to benefit himself and his friends by causing a scene when he wants something. The other monks have very definite ideas of what America is like, thinking of it as a place where a person can become very rich, and so as a place where dreams come true. They think that it is a greedy and decadent place, but also wonderful. Their own preconceptions, just like Matt's, only tell one small part of the story of what America really is. Matt tries to show the people he meets that not all foreigners are bad, but gets quite frustrated when they are not willing to show him the same acceptance that he shows them.

Despite some of the prejudice against foreigners, Matt does experience mutual understanding and respect with the monks at Shaolin. Through living together they come to understand each other better, and they admire each other's bravery, determination and passion. Above all, they are bound by friendship and respect, showing that cultural differences do not have to mean people cannot get along.

# Style

## Point of View

The book is told from Matt's point of view, as he is the main character as well as the author of the book. The story is made up of real events that happened to him, but as he admits, he has edited these for dramatic effect and changed the order in which some of them happened. Because Matt is an American, the reader sees China through an American man's eyes. This allows for cultural differences to be explained, and also sets up many of the humorous anecdotes, which would not be so amusing if the reader was not sharing the joke with the main character in this way. Because Matt is similar in many ways to his intended readers, it is also easier for the reader to relate to him. The reader understands him and so can understand why he acts and reacts in certain ways.

By seeing events from Matt's perspective, the reader also sees how Matt is being unfair or making the mistake of judging others on his expectations. Seen from this point of view, the reader can understand why this behavior is wrong or misguided. The reader also gains a greater insight into how Matt is changing, and how training at Shaolin is affecting him. The reader sees all Matt's inner thoughts and feelings, and so can really see how his confidence is growing as a direct result of the challenges he faces.

Matt is not a rude, mean, aggressive or unpleasant person. He is generally nice to people, tries to get along with everyone, and is willing to learn about and adapt to a new culture. This makes him likeable and so easier to sympathize with. The reader finds themselves caring about Matt and his list, and willing him to succeed.

## Setting

The story is set in China in 1992-1993. At this point China is a place of changing ideas and ideology. China has been a communist country for a long time, but is now beginning to embrace new capitalist and nationalist ideas. As Matt travels through the country and experiences life at Shaolin, he sees many conflicting and contrasting ideas. He sees leftovers of the country's extreme communist past, attempts by the government to control its citizens, and personal enterprise and business. He sees members of the Communist Party acting greedily, which surprises him, as well as the country's general obsession with money and with America. America is held up as some kind of flawed but wonderful ideal. It is a place of decadence and greed, but also a place where people can become fabulously rich. For many of the Chinese, who are still battling poverty, this is an appealing concept. China seems like a country that is confused and trying to change. In this way, the setting reflects Matt's character. Matt is also confused, and is not quite sure what to believe about himself and the kind of person he hopes to become. He comes to China to change, and like the country, he does. He opens himself to new ideas, and he embraces some while rejecting others.



Most of the story is set at the Shaolin monastery, which includes a village and marketplace, restaurants and a hotel, the Wushu Center where the monks train in martial arts, and the Buddhist temple. There are also a number of cheap, tacky tourist attractions. The nearest city is Zheng Zhou, which has to be reached by bus or car. Along the road are a number of martial arts schools for Chinese children, but these have nothing to do with Shaolin or its monks. Zheng Zhou is situated in Henan, a province in the north of China, and it is an overnight train journey away from Beijing.

At first, Matt finds Shaolin surprising as it does not live up to his expectations. He had thought it would be a place of respect, spirituality and tranquility, but instead it is tacky and touristy. Matt's preconceptions are based on movies that he has seen, and when he finds out that reality is not like this he is disappointed. Shaolin is not a way of life for the monks, but more like a university in which people come to learn what they need to and then leave. Matt himself intends to do this, but at first he is critical of everyone else who does. He is also disappointed by the lack of importance placed on Buddhism and meditation, and by the obvious personal ambitions and interest in money that the monks display. Clearly Matt wanted to find a revered old religious site, with wise ascetic monks who could teach him how to better himself through their own morality. Matt does not find this. However, he comes to see that pre-judging Shaolin and its monks based on movies and stories was foolish and unfair. He has been patronizing to them. Just because Shaolin is not what he expected does not mean it cannot teach him anything. In fact, Matt does learn a lot while he is there. He does pick up some wisdom from the monks, and he even has a religious experience while training. Once Matt is willing to accept Shaolin for what it is, and not what he wants it to be, he can let it affect and change him on its own terms. When he opens up in this way, he begins to fit in and is happier.

## Language and Meaning

The language in the book is relatively simple. Matt talks to the reader in a conversational tone, as if he is sharing the jokes and shocks personally with them. He speaks as an ordinary college-educated American might, and he throws in a lot of references to American popular culture. He does not explain these, whereas he does explain the Chinese ones. The reader is clearly expected to know who David Carradine and Steven Segal are, but they are not expected to know what "Beijingers in New York" is. In other words, Matt's intended readership is obviously American. Because of this, he explains unfamiliar Chinese expressions as well as any aspects of the culture or history that Americans may not be familiar with.

Matt includes Chinese words and phrases in the story, even when there is an adequate English word that would work in its place. For example, 'laowai' is usually used instead of 'foreigner.' When translating phrases he will often use a literal translation, such as 'eating bitter' instead of 'being stoic' or 'facing pain and hard work.' This is to throw the reader a little out of their comfort zone and to remind them that Matt is in a foreign country with different customs and different ideas. Matt cannot simply translate the whole country and its culture, as some things can only be understood in relation to





Chinese ideas. For example, 'laowai' might mean 'foreigner' but it is clearly so much more than that. The word seems to be loaded with associations of unease, sometimes fear, and a lot of disrespect. For Matt, it may have come to sound like an insult, and so began to take on new meanings that the word 'foreigner' does not convey. Literal translations like 'eating bitter' also get to the heart of what the Chinese intend by the phrase. Eating bitter is not quite about working hard; it also means pain, unpleasantness, sacrifice and humiliation. It means suffering in order to achieve a greater reward. Although Americans believe in the value of working hard, there is not really an equivalent idea.

By using Chinese words and phrases, Matt also shows his love of and respect for the culture. He might laugh at some of the things he sees and experiences, or make jokes about misunderstandings, but it is obvious that life in China has deeply affected him and that some of these Chinese ideas are now a part of who he is. This is reflected most strongly in the word 'amituofo' which can mean a number of different things. Matt uses it to express resignation as well as a sense that justice has been done. Sometimes it seems to mean 'that's life' and sometimes it is a thanks, a blessing, an expression of hope, or an apology. Matt uses the word a lot throughout the story, demonstrating how he is adapting and accepting Chinese ideas. He also ends the book on it, as if to say 'thank you China.'

## Structure

The book is broken into five books, each with six or seven chapters. There is also a prologue and an epilogue. This gives the story a sense of being an epic adventure, which is reflected in the titles chosen for the books: Wanderer, Novice, Initiate, Apprentice, and Disciple. The titles of the books relate to the names of different levels of monkhood at Shaolin. They also carry movie associations, poking fun at the fact that Shaolin and kung fu have been romanticized to the point that the expectations bear no resemblance to reality. This relates to Matt's own experiences, as he had to learn that Shaolin is not as it appears in the movies.

Each of the books also relates to the stages of Matt's stay at Shaolin. At the beginning he is a wanderer trying to find his way, at first to Shaolin, and then at Shaolin. He thinks of himself as a hero on a quest, and deliberately makes things harder for himself. When he reaches Shaolin, he has difficulty fitting in and wrestles against feelings of loneliness. He is also a wanderer at this stage because he is still trying to understand Chinese culture and to fit in.

In book two Matt is a novice because he is now accepted and has settled, but is still only a beginner. He is learning what it means to live at Shaolin, how to interact better with the Chinese people, and how to conduct himself with humility. He begins to make friends with the other monks and even has a religious experience. By the end of this book he is starting to actually feel at home in Shaolin.



In book three Matt comes back to Shaolin after a Christmas break, determined to make the most of all his time there and to really achieve something by the end of it. He is now an initiate because he has been accepted, and has a clear goal. He decides to train in sanda and the new sanda team is set up. He starts proving himself, and finds that his willingness to 'eat bitter' has allowed the others to accept him as one of their own. He learns more about Chinese customs and understands the Chinese people much better. He can now quite easily get by here, despite any differences. He is also beginning to adapt to and accept some Chinese ideas.

In book four, Matt is one of the boys. The other monks rarely think of him as a foreigner, and when they do it makes Matt uncomfortable because he is used to being one of them. He is now like an apprentice. He starts looking for sex or a girlfriend, but does not have much luck. He travels to other places in China and meets new people. His confidence has improved massively and his kungfu skills are much better. He can now even win some fights. He proves he can be completely accepted even by strangers when he tells a dirty Chinese joke and makes people laugh. At the end of this chapter, another American student arrives and Matt knows that he has enough knowledge to help him out and to act like his big brother.

In the final book, titled 'Disciple,' Matt does literally become a disciple. He performs a ceremony to take on a master, and so makes important connections at Shaolin. He defends Shaolin's honor in a fight, and competes in the Zheng Zhou martial arts tournament. He realizes that he has finally conquered his fear. His confidence shoots up and he manages to get a proper girlfriend. By the time he is ready to leave China, he has accomplished everything he set out to do.

## Quotes

"I do not fear the 10,000 kicks you have practiced once; I fear the one kick you have practiced 10,000 times." - Martial arts maxim, one of Dequing's favorites. Prologue, p7.

"As the birthplace of Zen Buddhism and kung fu, Shaolin was, basically, the father and mother of both my obsessions." - Book 1, chapter 1, p16.

"Hearing that the Shaolin Temple actually existed in the present day was like destiny tapping me on the shoulder." Book 1, Chapter 1, p16.

"So the people and the government had come to an implicit social contract: The Government (i.e. the Communist Party) would help the people lift themselves out of poverty, and in return, the people would not protest the repressive political power of the government." Book 1, Chapter 2, p30.

"The isolated monastery had been turned into Kung fu World, a low-rent version of an Epcot Center Pavilion." Book 1, Chapter 4, p45.

"They were the first party apparatchiks I had met, and I was still new enough to the country to find it ideologically disconcerting to discover that Communists were greedy bastards. Bastards, I had expected, but greedy was a surprise." Book 1, Chapter 4, p51.

"And like most people who are not careful of what they wish for, my dream was granted. And, after the initial thrill of success passed, I was completely miserable." - Matt admitting that he is lonely and that Shaolin is not quite what he expected. Book 2, Chapter 2, p89.

"I'd never imagined how crucial English was to my sense of a unified self - part good and part bad, but all of a whole." Book 2, Chapter 2, p89.

"The Shaolin monks were my hosts, and I was their guest. The problem was I didn't want to be a guest. I wanted to be part of the family." Book 2, Chapter 3, p99.

"...it took me several days to realize I was suffering from a minor case of Orientalism. I felt like I had grown up in a shallow, materialistic society and wanted the Chinese to be wise and profound - in short, bracingly poor - so I could get my deepness fix before returning home." Book 2, Chapter 4, p110.

"It had bothered me that while I was trying to become more like my romantic fantasy of the Chinese, they were trying to become more like their avaricious fantasy of Americans. We were two ships passing in the night." Book 2, Chapter 4, p110.

"With a tone of bitterness I'd never heard out of him before, Cheng Hao said, 'Bao Mosi, this is China. The leaders' children are like the descendents of Heaven. This is their world, not ours.'" Book 2, Chapter 5, p131.

"I knew very little about Afghanistan. Like most of my fellow countrymen, I preferred not to learn too much about dysfunctional countries until after my government invaded them. It's emotionally easier that way." Book 3, Chapter 3, p173.

"Earlier European and American writers called the Chinese fatalistic and passive. This was a mistake. They aren't passive; they are introverts. They study the patterns and wait for their opportunity." Book 3, Chapter 5, p188.

"According to a traditional Chinese proverb, 'An able person does not boast. A boaster is not able.'" Book 4, Chapter 2, p225.

"Male violence isn't an aberration; we are hardwired to enjoy it." Book 4, Chapter 6, p256.

"The difference between a man and a monster is demarcated by moral lines, and I'd drawn mine around the leilai. In that instant, I'd crossed over, becoming the thing I had hated most, a bully, looking for weakness and feeding on it." Book 4, Chapter 6, p258.

"'Bao Mosi, now your eyes have fierceness,' Deqing said. 'This is good. You cannot be a good fighter if you are always afraid of what might happen.'" Book 4, Chapter 6, p259.

"A good fighter must enjoy hurting his opponent. A good human being has to feel remorse about it. The only way for me to square the circle was to separate who I was and what I did inside the ring from how I acted outside it." Book 4, Chapter 6, p259.

"Getting back up on that platform and fighting a hopeless round was the bravest thing I'd ever done. I'd won by losing and in so doing accomplished the goal I'd set out to achieve at Shaolin. I was grinning at the Champ, because I'd finally found my courage." Book 5, Chapter 3, p324.

One day I was looking inside myself and discovered that the revenge fantasies I'd been quietly nursing for years against my playground tormentors had magically disappeared. Once you know you can beat someone up, it takes most of the fun out of dreaming about it." Book 5, Chapter 6, p339

"I finally realized that while I could eliminate items on the list, there'd always be more to replace them." Book 5, Chapter 6, p340

"When I was twenty-one what I admired most was the tremendous skill of the monks. I wanted to be that good at something, anything. But as I watched this old man, what most impressed me was the devotion. It was what had allowed this culture to survive - and now thrive - despite the traumas." Epilogue: Shaolin Reunion, p361.

## Topics for Discussion

In what ways is China shown as a country that is changing and/or confused? Why? How does this reflect Matt's own character?

Why does Matt use Chinese words and phrases among the English ones in his book? Why does he sometimes translate the Chinese literally rather than use an equivalent English expression?

How does Matt change and grow up throughout this story? What causes this? Do you think he is a better or stronger person by the end?

Discuss the clash of cultures as it is presented in this story. In what ways is Matt surprised or disappointed by what he experiences in China? What misunderstandings arise? How is Chinese culture different from American culture and how does Matt adapt?

Discuss the theme of capitalism and communism in this book. How do these ideas affect China, Shaolin, Matt, the Chinese culture, and Matt's experiences in China?

How does Matt cross off each item on his list and what does he learn about himself in the process? Why does he come to the conclusion that the list need not be a negative thing, and that he will be adding to it his whole life?

Discuss Matt's attempts to get sex and a girlfriend while in China. How is this used for humorous effect? What does it add to the book, if anything? What does it say about Matt's character?

Discuss the author's portrayal of China and the Chinese in this book. Is he respectful? Do you think he has been inappropriate or racist at any point? Is it an honest approach, and are Matt's feelings and reactions relatable? Would this book make you want to visit China?

How important is kung fu to Matt's experiences? Could he have learned everything he did simply from living at Shaolin, or is the training a vital part of what helped him to change? Does winning, or being skilled at kung fu, really matter, or is this missing the point?

Matt talks a lot about how Shaolin affected him, but how do you think Matt affected the monks and the other people he met in China? Has he taught them anything or made their lives better? Has he made anyone's life worse? Who do you think will remember him and why?