

# MOMENTS WITH A WARRIOR MONK

When a 34th generation warrior monk from the Shaolin Temple comes to Dubai, a wealth of history comes with him. **Danae Mercer** spends an afternoon with the monk talking childhoods, trials and tai chi

## A 34TH GENERATION WARRIOR MONK KNOWN AS MASTER CAN IS WALKING ME BACK TO MY TAXI.

It's dusk in Dubai and toward the end of our three-hour interview. Can (full name of Guangcan Wang) has finished teaching me the most basic of Tai Chi moves and talking me through his life. Barefoot, he moves alongside me.

We are making small talk, idle talk. I ask him about the first time he saw TV. "Not until I was older," he explains how initially, he was startled. "There were people inside the screen." Given Can spent much of his young life training at the Shaolin Temple, located at the base of the Songshan Mountain in China, the lack of TV isn't surprising.

It is, however, fascinating. I tell Can as much and he laughs. It's something he does easily, his entire face crumpling with the sound. "Yes."

We fall quiet enough to hear the birds. I think of Can's childhood, about a life spent waking at 5am and training four times a day, eating noodles and Chinese bread and then running up mountains. Before meeting, I had read Can's resume: numerous awards in martial arts competitions; a sixth Duan in Chinese Martial Arts; expertise in broadwords, straight swords, big swords, hammers; expertise in Shaolin, Bajji, Bagua Palm, Fanzi, Eagle Form, Tai Chi; the title of National Master Sportsman – the list was too long to list here.

As we walk, I ask Can his age. "Twenty-five," he tells me. With his shaved head and his simple outfit, he looks ageless. With his expertise, I expected older.

"I started when I was seven-and-a-half years old. I just wanted to do it. I felt like, if I became a monk, I would be so proud."



The Shaolin Temple where Can studied is a UNESCO world heritage site. Founded in 495, the forest-lined temple is famous for Shaolin Kung Fu, a martial art that embodies the doctrines of Chan Buddhism. “Incorporating aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, it stresses the combination of movement, stillness, quickness, slowness and breath,” to quote UNESCO’s website. “Shaolin Kung Fu blends martial arts with meditation to attain a better knowledge of Chan Buddhism, in particular, regarding insights into nature and the universe.” So famous is the Shaolin Temple for martial arts that academies have sprung up in surrounding areas. The region is colloquially called the ‘cradle of Kung Fu’.

“My hometown is, by car, only 15-minutes away. Everybody knows Shaolin martial arts. It’s the culture of my town. I was born in that town, so I felt I very much wanted it,” explains Can.

“But my family refused me, because it’s hard. In practice, food, living, the quality, everything. For a kid it’s hard, living there without parents, practicing everyday. They didn’t want me to do it. I just insisted. Kids have their own goals. I kept saying I wanted it. I wanted it. I even wouldn’t eat. I just wanted them to say ok, give it a try.” Eventually, before Can was eight-years-old, his family did. Can moved to the temple at the base of Songshan Mountain near China’s Dengfeng City.

“My monk life started.”



Over the next 15 years, Can studied martial arts, every day, all day, four times a day.

“You practice things like this, a hop stance, just like this,” Can demonstrates during our interview by shifting smoothly into a squat. “You hold it for 20, 30 minutes. Your muscles just shake in front of you.” Wake-up varied by season, but during summer it was 5am. “We would run the mountains six, eight times. Then we do some basic movements, then breakfast of soup and Chinese bread. After breakfast, we take a 30-minute break, then we train again. We do basic moves, or forms with weapons. Every session is different.” At noon, there was lunch (“noodles with Chinese bread”) followed by a nap, training, dinner, and training. The last session was about thinking back through the day on “what you did wrong, then working by yourself to correct it.”

By 10pm, it was time to sleep. “That,” Can responds when I ask him about downtime, smiling as though sharing a bit of a joke, “is our relax.” As for weekends? “We don’t, we don’t...”

By 14, Can was being sent out for competitions all around China. It’s a time in his life he doesn’t linger on in conversation, yet it’s one that saw him receiving numerous accolades: 2009 National Martial Arts Competition in Yichun, first place in fist, first place in staff; 2009 National



Clockwise from above: Young monks at the Shaolin Temple; two Shaolin monks demonstrate Kung Fu; Master Can practices Kung Fu.



Youth Championship in Chongqin, second place in sword form; 2010 National Competition in Zhengzhou, first place in Changquan; first place in staff; and on and on through to 2012, with awards crossing multiple martial arts styles.

Films from this time show Can flipping through the air with a sword flicking over his head, landing in splits before arching to his feet; or rapidly stepping forward, then back, a staff purposefully moving alongside him. The power and skill is undeniable. Eventually Can was awarded the title of ‘National Master Sportsman’.

“After that, I started teaching in China. My master said: ‘you should go out to see and pass your knowledge to the young people,’” Can remembers.

“I have to [teach]. And it’s one of my dreams. I don’t want to hold the knowledge, just hold it. I want everyone to know it, because it’s good for their life. Maybe only one word will change their life.”



When I meet Can, he’s teaching Tai Chi and Kung Fu classes with Talise Spa at Madinat Jumeirah. It’s the second time the group has brought him to Dubai. He will stay in the UAE until the end of April. It’s a city he likes, he explains, even though everyone is “busy. Extremely busy.”

During our interview, Can seems quiet, polite but a bit shy. When it comes to our lesson, everything changes. Can adopts an easy confidence, calmly reminding me to drop my shoulders, breathe, not be embarrassed, and relax again and again. “Just follow me,” he suggests. We stand on the grass and a few golf carts drive past. “With time,” he promises, “you won’t notice the sound.” With time I will find the mental discipline to avoid distractions.

Can makes the Tai Chi moves seem effortless. My legs shake and the next morning, my muscles are sore. Can adjusts the sweep of my arms, the way I sway. His iPhone, settled near his sandals in a straight line, plays soothing music. “Relax,” he reminds me again. “Breathe.”

I breathe. By the time we are done, I relax. Can is an excellent teacher. It’s his goal, he tells me later as he walks barefoot beside me toward the front of Al Qasr.

“I want to build up my own Shaolin martial arts Kung Fu academy in China. It will accept all the people from all around the world. They can go there, learn about Chinese cultures, learn Chinese Kung Fu.”

Through teaching, he tells me, he feels he’s done something that matters. “After a session, when you see people feeling very confident, very good, and they say that ‘this is what I want, this is what I’m looking for’... I feel very good. I feel like I did something for the world, for humans.” ❖

**Master Can will be at Talise Spa, Madinat Jumeirah, until the end of May 2015. For more information, visit [Jumeirah.com/mjtalise](http://Jumeirah.com/mjtalise) or call +971 04 366 6818.**