



Master of Zen

**** (Audio: B-, Video: C-, Features: F)

Derek Yee, Fan Shui Wong, Chen Sung Yung, Ng Ma.

Released by CAV Distribution. Hong Kong - Cantonese/Mandarin.

95 minutes. Not rated. No extra features.

The fourth film, which features a proper Chinese-language audio track, takes a more realistic approach to the Shaolin legend by way of a pseudo-biography of Dharma, the Buddhist disciple who is alleged to have introduced the first seeds of martial arts knowledge to the Shaolin monks. Derek Yee stars in this extremely well-made picture which takes massive liberties with historical fact, but pays it all off handsomely enough that most who don't know the details won't really care. Obvious similarities to a host of better-known pictures manifest themselves throughout -- "Tai Chi Master," "Wing Chun," "Once Upon a Time in China" and numerous others (most which seem to star Jet Li) all seem to thematically crisscross with "Master of Zen" which must be considered one of the best "philosophical" martial arts films of the past thirty years. This disc is far superior to the others in terms of overall production quality and features a fine widescreen transfer though the menu screens re a bit cryptic. The first two selections are in Chinese characters and represent selections of Cantonese or Mandarin tracks. the next set of three menu selections represent the chapters... only three in total for a feature-length movie. Still, it's better than nothing at all. Together, this quartet of very enjoyable pictures presents a well-rounded and solidly entertaining cross-section of the "Shaolin" genre in all its various shades and colors. In watching these films, anyone curious as to why the genre has survived for so long with such consistent appeal will understand the phenomenon completely. **-By Wade Major** Collector Rating: WORTH FULL PRICE.

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Rating: ****



Mark Pollard
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Synopsis

During the first century in India, a prince is troubled by visions and his desire to master the ways of Buddha. After his father dies, he forsakes the throne to become a monk and is renamed Dharma. After studying Buddhism for sixty years, Dharma travels to China to preach Zen. Dharma eventually arrives near the Shaolin Temple where he walks into a nearby cave and proceeds to sit for nine years in meditation. When a monk who is plagued by unsettling dreams visits the Dharma, he awakens and takes the monk as his student. Before the Dharma leaves, he teaches the Shaolin monks exercises to strengthen their bodies that forms the foundation of Shaolin kung fu.

Review

Brandy Yuen's "Master of Zen" is a rare gem in the realm of martial arts film. It contains equal parts action, drama, and philosophy. Yuen manages to create an action-filled homage to Bodhidharma, the mythic father of kung fu while staying true to the figure's intentions of spreading Buddhism to China. The legend portrayed should be familiar to most aficionados. Dharma, also known as Bodhidharma traveled from India to China to spread the teachings of Buddha and by his incredible level of physical fitness, is responsible for teaching the exercises that formed the basis for Shaolin kung fu and therefore basically all martial arts in China. Anyone attempting to recreate this fascinating tale would be up against some tough challenges.

First, is this a drama or a kung fu film? The truth is that the original story has precious little action. In fact, the Dharma's inaction is one of the critical events in the film as he sits in meditation for nine long years. If it ever actually took place, Dharma certainly was not teaching martial arts to the Shaolin monks. He was advanced in years and focused intensely on living the quintessential Buddhist life. Trying to appeal to kung fu fan audiences, Brandy Yuen ingeniously works in a number of exciting fight scenes that make extensive use of wires. The Dharma is portrayed as a skilled martial artist in his youth who must defend himself from a plot by his brother to succeed to the throne. Later, we see a Chinese monk who has reoccurring dreams of fighting in battle, a metaphor for his struggle to find harmony. Finally, Dharma is seen in old age defending himself from attackers. The extensive use of wires has rightly been criticized, given the nature of a film that supposedly offers up the origin of real kung fu. On the other hand, tales of the Dharma's exploits vary and often include elements more mythical than historical. Yuen's film plays consistently and successfully as a folk tale, incorporating the legends of Dharma with contemporary martial arts choreography.

If for no other reason, "Master of Zen" receives high marks for simply attempting to show the origins of Chinese kung fu. But it doesn't stop there. The photography, music, and acting are all carefully executed. The wirework and fight choreography is creative. And for once, many of the overused Buddhist monk clichés such as grueling training exercises and oppression from outside forces is replaced by the monks' central concern with attaining spiritual harmony.