

FEATURES

Monastery marketing

Officials in the capital of China's Yunnan Province are hoping a team of business-savvy Shaolin monks can help them boost tourism

BY ANDREW JACOBS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, GUANDU, CHINA



Clockwise from top: A Shaolin monk makes his way through a courtyard at Miaozhan Temple in Guandu, China; a visitor prays in Miaozhan Temple; two men place incense sticks in an urn outside Miaozhan Temple.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

The cluster of temples at the heart of this dusty, traffic-clogged town are picturesque reminders of China's faded Buddhist past. On a recent day, dogs warmed themselves in the winter sun as a few toothless devotees bowed before smiling Buddhas. The only sounds were the occasional clanging of wind chimes and the splash of coins tossed into a mucky pond.

While soothing to some, the tranquility is galling to Guandu's city fathers, who recently spent US\$3 million to rebuild the four temples. They had become schools and warehouses during an earlier era, when the Communist Party sought to suppress nearly all religious activity, including that by Buddhists.

To sweeten the lure for free-spending tourists, they tore down the jumble of ancient homes that surrounded the 1,000-year-old temples and built rows of antique-looking shops that sell bootleg DVDs, sneakers and stuffed Santas.

Still no one came.

"The temples have been money losers," grumbled Dou Weibao, the commissioner of ethnic and religious affairs in Guandu, which has long since been subsumed by the sprawl of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province.

Dou found a savior 2,000km away, in the Song Mountains of central China, where the warrior monks of Shaolin have long since mastered the art of monastery marketing. Since the early 1990s, the chief abbot, Shi Yongxin (释永信), has turned Shaolin into a lucrative draw for kung fu aficionados and has transformed his lithe disciples into global emissaries for the temple's crowd-pleasing mix of Zen Buddhism and fly-kick combat.

In November, the two parties struck a straightforward deal. In exchange for managing the Guandu temples for 30 years, the monks will keep all proceeds from the donation boxes and gift shops. In a news release announcing the arrangement, Shaolin said its primary goals were to carry out charitable activities, maintain the temples and "spread the faith."

Dou, who described himself as an atheist, sees things somewhat differently. "We're going to use their fame to attract more business," he said on Wednesday as he and a batch of newly arrived monks exchanged pleasantries.

Guandu officials say they will get no money from the deal but they hope the Shaolin mystique will pull in the kind of crowds that have turned the monastery's Henan province flagship into one of China's most popular tourist destinations. Dou said the government would save the US\$88,000 once spent on temple maintenance each year. They are also counting on the tax revenue from a vast new mall that is nearing completion next to the temple complex.

The management deal has provoked howls among some Chinese, with many critics decrying the commercialization wrought by Yongxin, who drives a Land

Rover and has established Shaolin branches in Italy, Germany and Australia.

"Shaolin Chain Store," read the headline of one recent posting written on Sina.com, a popular Web site. "There's nothing wrong with chasing profits and fame, but they can't use the name of Buddha."

Such sentiments are hard to find in Guandu, where people seem to enjoy the sudden uptick in tourism. Last Wednesday, a squadron of incense vendors surged around visitors, and the Liu family noodle shop was doing a brisk business feeding the famished. "Before the monks came, the only people who came were old and they didn't spend any money," said Cao Jinbu, the shop's owner.

Wan Liqiong, who runs a trinket stand across from the temple gate, said she would probably have to switch some of her stock to include Shaolin-oriented souvenirs. "We've really been struggling here," she said. Then she offered up an expression that roughly translates to "if you burn incense, they will come."

After reading about the Shaolin deal in his local newspaper, Ying Daojin, made the eight-hour journey by bus just to catch a glimpse of the monks. A 30-year-old corn farmer from northeast Yunnan, Ying described himself as a non-believer but seemed willing to give religion a try. "I've heard Buddhism can open your mind," he said wide-eyed as a monk glided by. "Kung fu is also good for your health."

According to his secretary, Yongxin, the head monk based in Henan province, does not give telephone interviews but he encouraged a reporter to seek out Master Yanjiang, the abbot assigned to run the Guandu complex.

Yanjiang, however, proved just as elusive and refused to discuss his plans for the temples. His monks were decidedly unapproachable.

The young men waved away inquiries. When one bespectacled monk found himself the subject of a photographer's interest, he grabbed the camera and then offered a menacing martial arts pose when his demand to have the picture erased went unmet. Negotiations proved fruitless and the pictures were deleted. The monk bowed, smiled and walked away.

Others were busy helping to renovate the new gift shop while another group of monks was handling the bequest of an adherent who stopped by bearing gifts.

A few days after their arrival, the monks taped a handwritten poster at the temple entrance advertising kung fu lessons. The cost: US\$44 for a month of instruction, nearly a full month's wage for some Chinese workers.

The security guard at the front gate said the classes were selling well, with more than 100 people already signed up. He showed off the student roster, most of them children and teenagers. "Everyone loves the Shaolin monks," he said with a smile.

[LIFESTYLE]

Koreans' appetite for plastic surgery sags amid downturn

As the global economy goes into meltdown, Seoul's obsession with cosmetic procedures is waning, emptying doctors' offices and driving clinics out of business

BY MARTIN FACKLER
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SEOUL

A grim frugality has settled over this export powerhouse that once burst with optimism — and silicone.

Cosmetic surgery took off here after South Korea's spectacular recovery from its currency crisis a decade ago. Rising living standards allowed ever-growing numbers of men and women to get the wider eyes, whiter skin and higher nose bridges that define beauty for many here. Improved looks were even seen as providing an edge in this high-pressure society's intense competition for jobs, education and marriage partners.

But turmoil coursing through the financial world and then into the global economy has hit South Korea hard, as it has many middle-income countries. The downturn drove down the stock market and the currency by a third or more last year, and the resulting anxiety forced many South Koreans to change their habits.

A particular chill has seeped into the plastic surgery industry, emptying waiting rooms and driving clinics out of business.

"In hard times, people always cut back on luxuries like eating out, jewelry and plastic surgery," said one plastic surgeon, Park Hyun, who has seen the number of his patients drop sharply. "If this is a normal recession, then these

desires will eventually get reignited, and our patients will come back."

After a pause, Park added: "If this downturn is like the Great Depression, then we are all going to get killed off."

It is hard to measure the exact size of the industry here or the extent of the current downturn because no one keeps exact figures. Seoul-based ARA Consulting, which specializes in the plastic surgery industry, said reports from surgeons and local media suggest the number of patient visits each month is down 40 percent since September.

That would be a huge setback to this once fast-growing industry. From a luxury limited to the wealthy a decade ago, according to ARA, plastic surgery has become so common that an estimated 30 percent of Korean women aged 20 to 50, or some 2.4 million women, had surgical or nonsurgical cosmetic procedures last year, with many having more than one procedure.

That compares with 11.7 million cosmetic procedures performed last year in the US, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, meaning that the number of procedures in the US is 4.9 times the number in South Korea, though the US' population is more than six times larger.

"As South Korea became wealthier, it was just one more thing that women desire," said Yoon Sung-min, ARA's



Park Hyun, a plastic surgeon, counsels a patient at his office in Seoul.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

chief executive. He said many doctors were drawn to plastic surgery because payment is outside of the national health care system's price controls, allowing bigger profits.

Nowhere has the boom, and the currently unfolding bust, been more apparent than Seoul's fashionable shopping neighborhood of Apgujeong. More than half of South Korea's 627

registered cosmetic surgery clinics are here — their names, including Dr For You and Ivy Plastic, visible among the fashion boutiques and wine bars.

But their once-crowded waiting rooms are empty. For sale signs have begun appearing on clinic doors for the first time in memory, and some 20 clinics have already closed.

Park, the plastic surgeon, predicts a

third of Apgujeong's clinics could close by spring.

"This is the Mecca of plastic surgery in Asia," said Park, who sat in his lavishly decorated wood-paneled clinic overlooking the neighborhood. "But even a Mecca can fall on hard times."

Park said December would normally have been his peak season because high school seniors finish South Korea's grueling university entrance exams and prepare for winter graduation. He said the exhausted students — and their equally stressed mothers — often celebrated by getting cosmetic surgery.

Not last December. Though he would not disclose specific numbers, Park said his patient load was down by half, leading him to lay off three of his seven nurses and office workers.

Sung Myung-soon can sympathize. Like millions of South Koreans who recently emerged into the middle class, Sung, a 54-year-old homemaker, enjoyed a lifestyle of shopping at malls and lounging by her health club's pool, and — until a few months ago — regularly visiting the plastic surgeon, where she maintained her youthful appearance.

But the financial crisis in the fall has brought fears that South Korea's good times may be over, or at least on indefinite suspension, and Sung has cut back by making fewer visits to her plastic surgeon and bargaining hard

for discounts when she does visit. She refuses to give up her plastic surgery altogether.

"Even at times like these, women still want their plastic surgery," said Sung, who recently rounded her eyes and smoothed wrinkles on her forehead.

Typical of South Korea's more frugal patients, she chose less expensive procedures, like Botox injections to remove wrinkles, instead of her usual surgery. She also said she would reduce her number of visits to once a year, from twice.

Still, surgeons say the continued desire of women like Sung to look beautiful will keep the industry alive, although it may shrink greatly.

But Park and other plastic surgeons said the country's decline has brought one silver lining: South Korea's currency has fallen so far that procedures here are now cheap when calculated in dollars and other currencies. This has led to growing numbers of Japanese, Chinese and Korean Americans coming to Seoul for relatively inexpensive cosmetic procedures.

Some clinics said 20 percent to 30 percent of patients are now foreigners, up from 10 percent last year. A few larger clinics are even taking the opportunity of a downturn at home to open branches in China, the country seen as the industry's next big growth market.