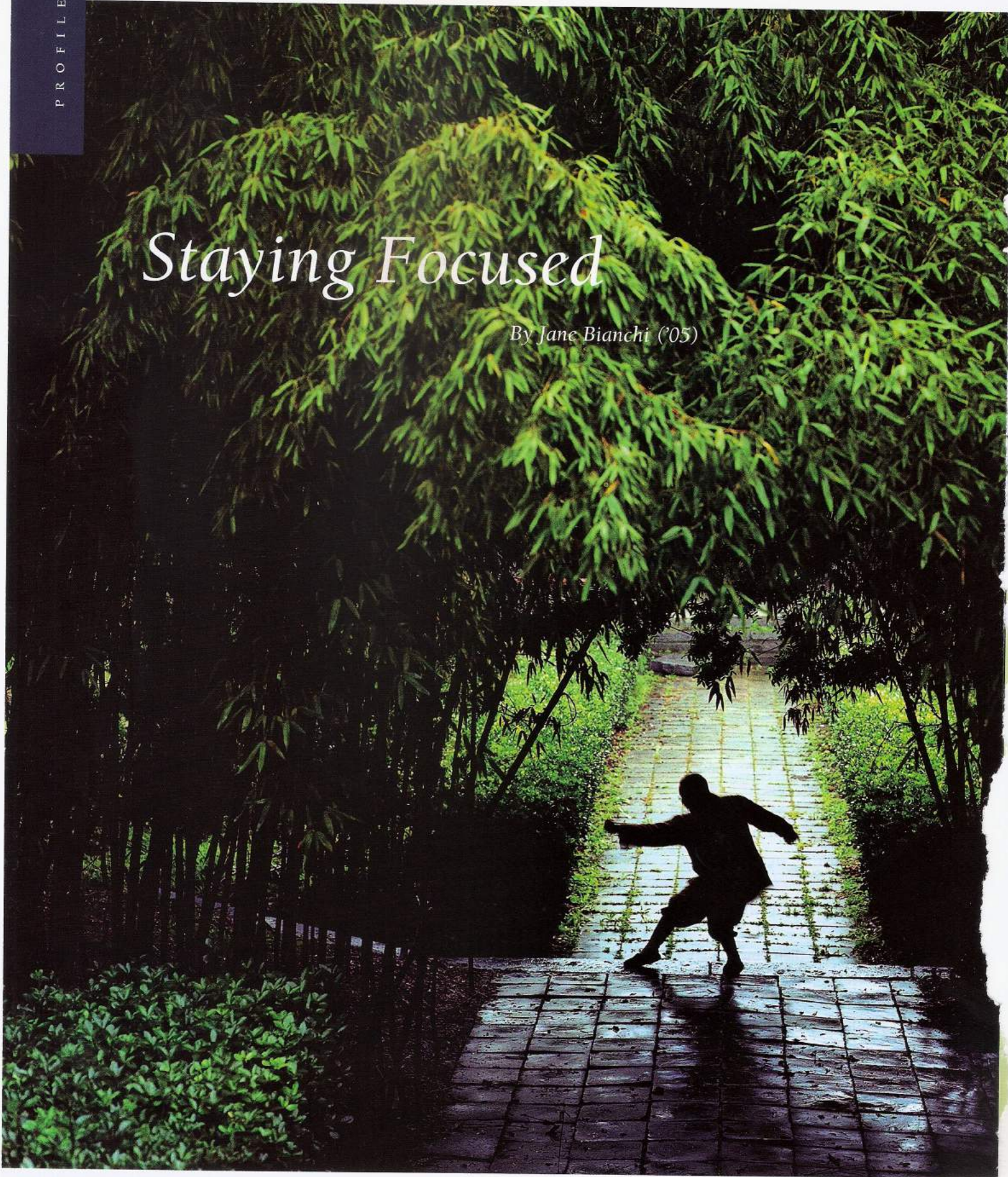


# Staying Focused

By Jane Bianchi ('05)





No photographer had ever gained access to China's 1,500-year-old Shaolin Temple, the birthplace of kung fu. But armed with a camera, an idea, and a plethora of patience, Justin Guariglia ('97) made history.



SHAOLIN TEMPLE OF SEN  
JUSTIN GUARIGLIA / AVERTURE  
COURTESY

AROUND THE YEAR 2000, Justin Guariglia ('97) was living in Asia, trying to make it as a professional photographer. During this period, he was surviving on the equivalent of five dollars a day by eating only street food, taking any small work he could get from newspapers and magazines, and staying in cheap hostels (one of which only provided him with a bed and a single sheet dotted with mosquito blood). But when a photo editor at *National Geographic Traveler* called him one day with an assignment—a call most photographers only dream of getting—he said he was busy. “I had to make her think I was in high demand,” says Guariglia, who got back to her the following day, saying that his schedule had suddenly opened up and he’d be able to squeeze in the job after all.

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It's a good thing he did. Thanks to that "big break," 33-year-old Guariglia now regularly contributes to *National Geographic Traveler* as well as *Smithsonian*, and his photos have appeared in nearly 100 different publications worldwide, including the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*.

Perhaps none are more stunning than the ones featured in his book, *Shaolin: Temple of Zen* (Aperture), which was published last October. The photos within it show the monks of the Shaolin Temple, a religious sanctuary located in the mountains of central China, practicing Shaolin kung fu. "Over thirty generations of monks have been using the martial art as a form

of meditation in order to achieve Zen enlightenment," says Guariglia, who was drawn to the Temple's



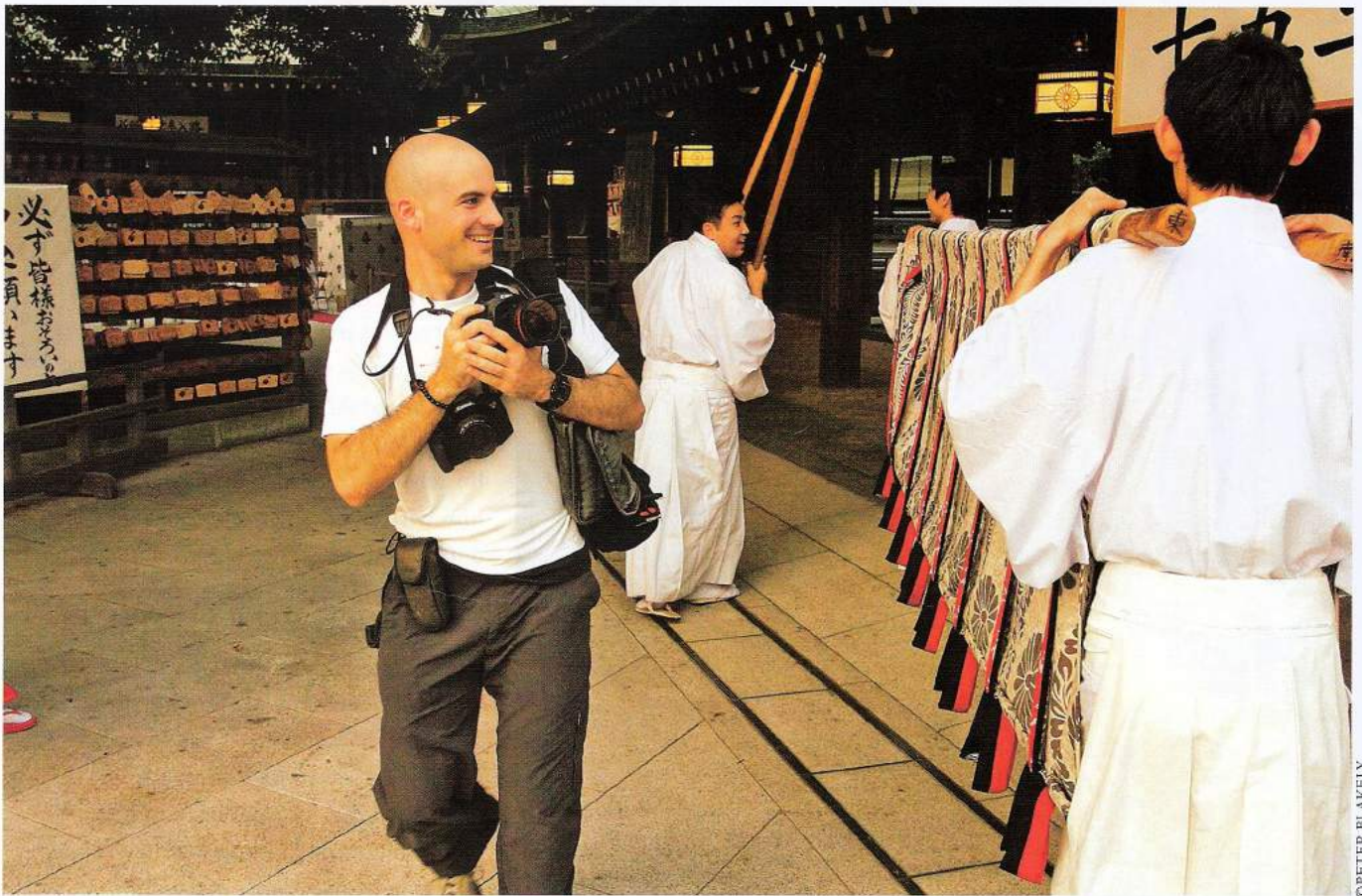
mystique during his travels. "When you're around them, you can sense the importance of the lineage and the tradition."

But getting behind the Buddhist monastery's walls to take those pictures was no walk in the park. The

head monk, referred to as "the abbot," is committed to preserving the sacredness of the form, which can be difficult when fielding daily requests from all sorts of media types. "If he were to let them all in," says Guariglia, "the monks wouldn't be meditating—they'd be performing."

The problem is, a performance is what most tourists come to see. Films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and pop culture icons such as Bruce Lee, Jet Li, and Jackie Chan have encouraged moviegoers worldwide to associate kung fu with fighting. To keep the Temple profitable and operating, the abbot appeases the crowds by sending out a different set of "monks" who are not actually monks but

JUSTIN GUARIGLIA/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELER



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Guariglia on assignment at Meiji Shrine, Tokyo, Japan



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*A view across from Kawah Ijen, East Java, Indonesia*

local students trained to entertain. While they do wear robes and shave their heads like many of the real monks, they demonstrate a more competitive form of kung fu known as Shaolin wushu.

The true monks remain primarily behind the closed doors of the Temple—and these are the ones Guariglia captured on film. “I wanted to prove that Shaolin kung fu still exists and show people how deeply spiritual it is,” says Guariglia. “I hope people who see the book experience a slice of authentic Chinese culture.”

But how did a guy originally from Maplewood, New Jersey, who spoke only two words of Chinese when he first arrived in the country, end up

earning the trust of the abbot and the monks?

One potential reason: Guariglia is a student at heart. “He is innately curious about the world,” says Martin McNamara, director of Gallery 339 in Philadelphia, who has showcased Guariglia’s work. “He wants to see and understand a broad range of things, and this very rich life experience is what shapes and informs his art.”

The abbot had seen Guariglia visit the grounds of the Temple a dozen times to absorb his surroundings and simply observe. So when Guariglia requested a face-to-face meeting with him in 2002, flew in a translator, and waited eight days to

see him, the abbot agreed to talk to him. Guariglia had been thinking about doing a book since 1997, but had no crew, no budget, and, at the time, no book deal. “The abbot must have sensed my passion, because he granted me permission,” says Guariglia. “It was a very special moment.” Guariglia then spent the next three years making long visits to complete the project.

All that traveling would make most people weary, but Guariglia never seems fazed by it. “It takes a certain amount of fearlessness and stamina to wind up in the places he winds up and stick your camera in strangers’ faces,” says William Hamilton, associate dean of the



*Tai Chi practiced on the western bank of the Huangpu River, facing Pudong, better known as “The Bund”, Shanghai, China*

College and a close friend and mentor to Guariglia back when he was an undergraduate business major.

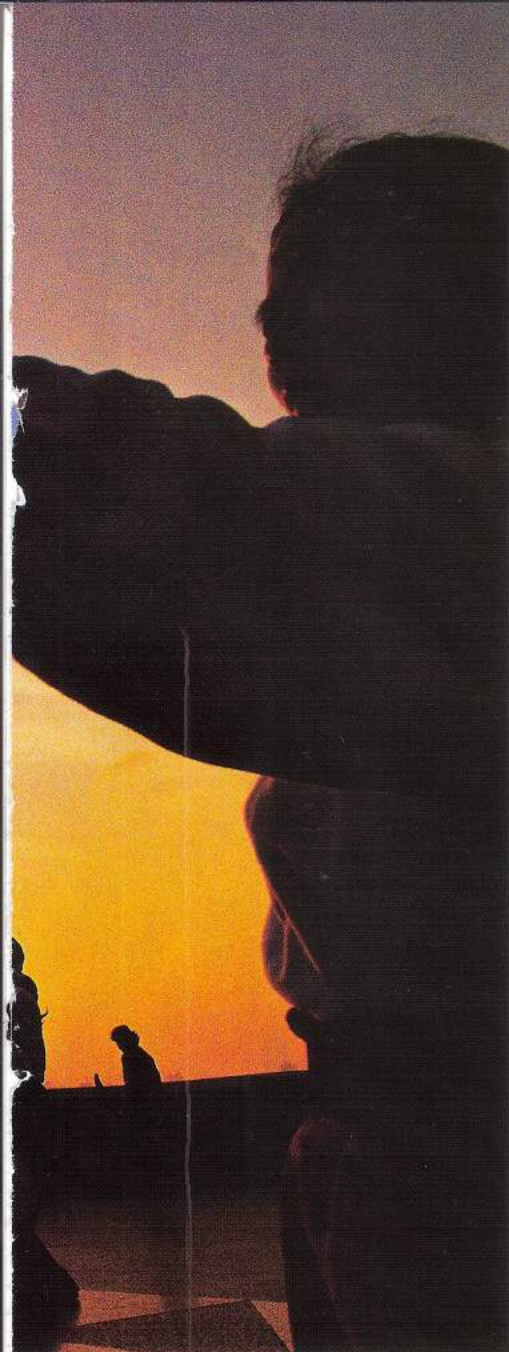
Yes, a business major. Even though nowadays you’re more likely to find Guariglia wearing a fitted black t-shirt than a suit, there were times in his past when he seemed more destined to become a CEO than an artist. In fact, by the young age of 13, Guariglia—the son of an interior designer and a salesperson—had created his own business cards and convinced

his neighbors to hire him to mow their lawns, rake their leaves, and shovel their snow. And when he arrived at Wake Forest years later, he designed and sold boxer shorts to make extra money. Even after graduating, he first accepted a lucrative job in Silicon Valley, where he worked briefly as the assistant to the president of a data cryptography company.

What sparked his interest in travel and photography was studying abroad. Guariglia spent one semester at

Casa Artom in Venice, Italy, and then decided to enroll in another semester abroad—this time at Capital Normal University in Beijing. He initially went only to learn the Chinese language, but was so mesmerized by the country that he was determined to go back.

So he left behind the world of data cryptography (and the six-figure salary that went with it), to move back home and get an internship at Magnum Photos, a prestigious photography agency filled with pros who



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helped teach him the craft. He also took an introductory photography class at New York City's International Center of Photography. When he'd saved enough pennies and frequent flyer miles, Guariglia returned to China to take photos and ended up spending the next decade in various Asian countries, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Taiwan.

Though Guariglia has left Winston-Salem, North Carolina, behind, Wake Forest University does seem

to follow him—no matter how far he wanders. “Once I was on the street in Tibet and saw Tim Duncan’s face on the side of a Coke can that was being sold off a wooden cart,” says Guariglia, who took a computer science class with the NBA superstar.

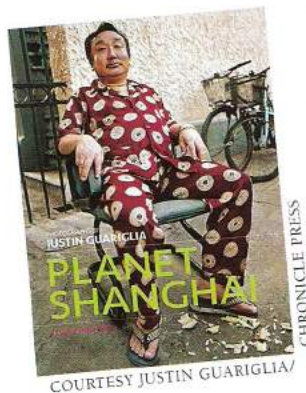
When he isn't in Asia, Guariglia can be found living and working in his Brooklyn, New York, apartment, which he shares with his wife Zoe Chen—a Taiwanese fashion designer. He met Chen at a party in 2003 while she was working for the designer Issey Miyake in Japan. “I asked her to come with me to the city of Kyoto for an assignment and carry my bags,” says Guariglia. “She was put off by it at first but was intrigued enough to go with me.” They were engaged six months later.

The two have even begun collaborating. Upon finishing his project at the Temple, Guariglia asked Chen, a Buddhist, to help him figure out new ways to use some of his photographs, while expressing the same meditative tone. Together, they have created over forty pieces of art (displayed at [www.guariglia-chen.com](http://www.guariglia-chen.com)). Some are large composites, comprised of many small images of monks in various poses, while others focus abstractly on a single, blurred image of a monk practicing kung fu.

Chen is inspired by geometry, and when looking at their work from different angles, patterns emerge. “I thought of his images as textiles, and incorporated the same weaving, stitching, and fabric skills that I use with clothing,” says Chen. The effect is calming, almost hypnotic.

Guariglia sees their joint work as a fun way to think outside the box. “With editorial photography, you have to work within strict constraints—you can't play with the size or color of the image, and you can't add or subtract anything,” he says. “But in the art world, they do that kind of stuff all the time.”

While he continues to create art with his wife, Guariglia has been busy preparing for the launch of his second book, *Planet Shanghai* (Chronicle



Books), which will be released in May. The photos in this book focus on the “long tang” towns in the back alleys of Shanghai. What is surprising: In these communal living spaces, it's common for locals to wear

pajamas in the street. “The area immediately outside their doorway becomes an extension of their living room,” says Guariglia.

As China modernizes, communities like these are quickly disappearing. But luckily for us, photographers like Guariglia who are adventurous to travel into uncharted territories (and skilled enough to shoot) can freeze-frame these moments in history and document them for all to see.

“I would like to continue exploring different cultures and tell their stories through imagery,” says Guariglia. It's that childlike sense of wonder that reminds us he's forever a student—one who is eager to learn about the world, and would blow you away at show-and-tell.

*Jane Bianchi '05 is the associate health editor at Family Circle magazine.*