

Body Cultivation in Contemporary China

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Body cultivation practices known as *qigong*¹ were the most widespread form of popular religiosity in post-Mao urban China between 1979 and 1999². It is estimated that at the height of “*qigong* fever” in the middle of this period, over 100 million people -- over 20% of the urban population -- practiced the gymnastic, breathing and meditative exercises of *qigong* in some form or another. Hundreds of charismatic *qigong* healers and masters rose to fame and built organisations which, in the two cases of Zhonggong and Falungong, could claim as many or more adherents as the 40-million-strong Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – the largest mass organizations independent of government control in China. Falungong has become well known in the West since April 25, 1999, when it staged a 10,000-person protest around the CCP headquarters. This was followed by a harsh state repression campaign against Falungong, which has also led to the dismantling of most other *qigong* groups.

Media images of Falungong repression and resistance should not, however, blind us to the complex reality of the *qigong* movement in the Peoples’ Republic. For much of the post-Mao period, government support played an instrumental role in the spread of the *qigong* craze. *Qigong* was touted as a cheap and powerful healing technology, as a “somatic science” that could lead to revolutionary discoveries for harnessing the powers of the human mind, and as a secularized training system that contained the key to the mysteries of traditional Chinese wisdom without the dross of religion or superstition. And yet, while these modernizing discourses lent legitimacy to *qigong*, practitioners plunged into the legends and symbols of Buddhist magicians and Taoist immortals, dabbled in talismans and divination, and often experienced, through trance states, visions of popular demons and deities.

¹ Pronounced “ch’ee-gong”

² For a detailed account of the subject matter of this chapter, and for references to Chinese sources, see Palmer 2002 or Palmer forthcoming.

The indeterminacy of *qigong*, as a type of body practice that allows one to pass in a breath from physical fitness exercises to mystic visualisations or apocalyptic militancy, opened a space for the massive spread of a body-centred religiosity under the cover of health, sports, and science, outside the supervision of the official Bureau of religious affairs. And yet, the enthusiasm of Party leaders for *qigong* in the 1980's, followed by their fear of Falungong and other *qigong* groups today, suggests that body cultivation can come dangerously close to the religious roots of Chinese political power and legitimacy.

In this chapter, I will begin with a brief overview of body cultivation in traditional China, followed by an account of the changing configurations of body cultivation in mainland Chinese society after 1949. I will attempt to show that while body cultivation was a fundamental aspect of traditional Chinese religion, it was also ideally suited for adaptation to the organization of modern life centred on the individual body. As such, *qigong* became a remarkably modern form of reappropriation and transformation of Chinese religious tradition.

Body cultivation in traditional China

Chinese notions of the body make no dichotomies between the mind and the flesh. By “body cultivation” I refer to Chinese traditions of training the body/mind to conform with the pattern and power flows of the cosmos. The greater the body's correspondence with the cosmos, the more it taps into cosmic powers that can flow through the body, towards other bodies and into the world. Body cultivation involves sets of movements and forms which aim for the attainment of specific goals, and are transmitted through a training process which forms the basis of a tradition. It is an individual practice that usually involves the self-disciplined control of diet, posture, breathing, and thoughts. It is also a social practice, in which techniques and interpretive frameworks are transmitted from a master to disciples, and in which the powers gained from practice are used for a variety of ends within specific social and historical contexts.

Throughout history, Chinese body cultivation has involved a diversity of techniques, which have been transmitted in different social settings, and have been used for various purposes within different cosmologies. The dances and ecstatic healing practices of ancient Chinese shamanism were probably the source of later traditions of body cultivation. Invisible forces represented as demons and winds were later

reconceptualized as cosmic breath (*qi*)³. During the warring states period (475-221 BC), gymnastics and breath training were practiced as forms of health cultivation, and were described in philosophical works, notably the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, as means of attaining unity with the Dao. Other texts mentioned body cultivation among the techniques for attaining immortality. In classical China, the proper training of the body through fasting and meditation was a prerequisite to self-cultivation and participation in rituals, which, to Confucius, aimed to foster social cohesion through the harmonious movement of bodies. The emperor's body was seen as the centre of the ordering of the cosmos: the appropriate movements of his body through the space of the realm and following the cycles of the seasons, were essential to preserving the cosmic order. The empire was seen as an extension of the emperor's body: the disorderly conduct of the emperor would cause chaos in the realm; natural disasters and calamities were seen as signs of the moral degeneracy of the emperor's body. The correspondence between the body of the emperor and the body politic was formalized in the medical theories of the Han dynasty, which applied the principles of government to the flows of *qi* in the body: the same Chinese word *zhi* refers to healing and government.

From the 1st century onward, Daoism developed a rich repertoire of body cultivation practices, ranging from the meditations on oneness of the Heavenly Masters movement to the Shangqing and Lingbao sects' visualizations of the divine landscape of the inner body. The inner alchemy tradition sought to refine the elixir of immortality through the manipulation and combination of cosmic energies in the body. Body cultivation was also practiced by Taoist priests as a key to the mastery and efficacy of rituals conducted for local families and communities⁴. Buddhism introduced yogic meditation from India, practiced as a means of nurturing awareness of ultimate reality and, in the case of tantrism, of nurturing and controlling divine powers. The Shaolin and Wudang traditions of martial arts developed the use of body cultivation as the foundation of techniques of combat.

By the Song dynasty, body cultivation had become widespread in many segments of society. Meditation by "sitting in tranquillity" became a popular practise of Confucian literati, while sectarian groups disseminated body cultivation techniques among the common people. These groups, which often espoused apocalyptic beliefs and delivered a message of salvation, commonly used the transmission of body techniques – including

³ See Unschuld 1985: 29-50.

⁴ On Taoist body cultivation, see Schipper 1993.

mantra recitation, breath control, sitting meditation, healing techniques, and martial arts - as a method of recruitment and expansion. Practice of the techniques could reinforce sectarian identity; the body became a vehicle for the nurturing and transmission of eschatological beliefs. Martial arts became more important in the sectarian repertoire in the 19th century, as increasing social chaos and banditry led to the multiplication of community self-defence groups. In the Boxer rebellion of 1899-1900, certain forms of martial arts were believed to confer invincibility against Western military technology⁵.

By the early 20th century, body cultivation was practiced among common people and among the elites, and diffused in a wide variety of contexts – it was even a fundamental part of training for the Chinese opera and acrobatic performance, which are closely related to the martial arts. The techniques varied greatly, but in most cases involved breath training as a basic foundation. They were usually steeped in religious symbolism, and transmitted secretly from master to disciple: mastering the arts of body cultivation was part of being initiated into an esoteric tradition. The process of initiation could last many years, as in the case of the Taoist priesthood, or could take only moments, as in some sectarian movements which taught a secret mantra as a sign of membership. But in all cases, body cultivation was never an end in itself: it was always but one element of other social practices and conceptual systems: religion, government, medicine, mysticism, ritual, monasticism, defence, sectarian salvation, etc. There was no single category to encompass the various forms of what I here call “body cultivation”, much less a self-conscious community or network of practitioners who could recognize each other in their common practice of these techniques.

The status of body cultivation began to change in the first half of the 20th century, with the introduction of Western values and the construction of a modern state. The new institutions privileged a mechanical, disembodied ordering of the world: body cultivation was irrelevant to the ends of the modern bureaucracies, armies, and schools that mediated knowledge and power in the emerging society. And yet, body cultivation could find a niche within new social structures that atomized the individual body and privileged material technologies leading to rational ends. Marginalized, body cultivation techniques became visible, and could be conceptualised as a distinct category that would recast them either as a modern technology for the mass development of healthy bodies, or as a vehicle for a nationalist or mystical resistance to an alienating modernity, or, as would happen in the *qigong* boom of the 1980's, both at the same time.

⁵ See Esherick 1987: 50-53, and Cohen 1997: 16-30, 99-118.

Such a process began during the Republican era (1911 – 1949), when some authors popularised sitting meditation and other practices through widely circulated books that sought to eliminate the obscure esoteric language in which the techniques had traditionally been couched, and to present them in the idioms of psychology, physiology, and physics⁶. But it was under the Communist regime that body cultivation became the subject of a distinct category as part of a larger project of state expansion.

The birth of *qigong*

During the Chinese civil and anti-Japanese wars (1927-1949), Red Army and Communist Party units, retrenched in remote “Liberated Areas” and lacking access to modern medical facilities, encouraged the use of traditional local remedies for the care of injured and ill soldiers and officials. It was under such conditions that cadre Liu Guizhen, who had been suffering from ulcers and insomnia, obtained leave in 1947 to return to his native village in present-day Hebei province. While recuperating there, his uncle taught him a form of breathing exercise which, after 102 days of practice, cured him of his ailments. Upon returning to his work post, he enthusiastically reported on the method’s efficiency to his Party superiors, who charged him with experimenting with clinical applications of the method. Together with some colleagues, he researched classical medical texts on body cultivation, taught the techniques to other patients, and finally standardized two forms of exercise. The research group chose the term “*qigong therapy*” to designate the exercises.

The term *qigong*, though it had appeared as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907), had rarely been used in the past, and did not have the meaning of “breath training” intended by Liu Guizhen⁷. *Qigong* was promoted as a new category to encompass all body cultivation techniques that involved the training, control and circulation of *qi* or “vital breath” in combination with body and mental discipline. Provincial Party leaders supported his work and called on him to found a *qigong* clinic in the city of Tangshan in 1953, followed two years later by the foundation of a *qigong* sanatorium in the exclusive seaside resort of Beidaihe, a favourite retreat for the Party elite. Liu Guizhen was honoured by Vice-President Liu Shaoqi and treated several of the country’s top leaders. *Qigong* was recognized as a discipline of Chinese medicine, alongside herbalism,

⁶ See Kohn 2002.

⁷ On the etymology of the term *qigong*, see Despeux 1997: 267.

acupuncture, and massage, and national *qigong* workshops were held to train clinicians from hospitals and medical units from around China.

Benefiting from such high-level political support, *qigong* quickly spread within medical institutions. Seventy *qigong* units were founded by the end of the 1950s. A national conference on *qigong* was held in 1959 and a national *qigong* training course was organized a year later. Books were published on the subject and several research units began clinical and laboratory trials on the physiological effects of *qigong*. Over 300 scientific articles on *qigong* had been published in Chinese journals by the early 1960s.

Thus institutionalised and modernized, *qigong*, together with the other disciplines of Chinese medicine, could be marshalled to serve the health policy needs of the new state. Indeed, after decades of civil war, the country's medical system was in ruins by the end of the 1940's. The answer was to enlist the hundreds of thousands of traditional doctors -- whose practices had been suppressed by the previous Nationalist regime -- to the cause of improving the health of the Chinese masses. They were assigned to state medical work units and educated in scientific methodologies⁸.

At the same time, the practitioners of Western medicine, trained abroad or in missionary colleges, were tainted by their association with imperialist bourgeois culture, and accused of trying to place their scientific practice above political supervision. The institutions of Chinese medicine, on the other hand, as creations of the Communist state, were more docile and grateful to the Party authorities. With the growing rift between Maoist China and the Soviet Union, Chinese medicine further benefited from an increasing nationalism and appreciation of native civilization.

Modern *qigong* was designed to serve the needs of the new medical institutions of the Peoples' Republic: with *qigong*, body cultivation became an instrument of state power. Useful therapeutic techniques were secularised and extracted from their traditional social and symbolic settings: master-disciple lineages were replaced by cohorts of "medical workers" operating in institutional settings. Secret transmission was replaced by formal training courses and the publication of therapeutic methods in medical journals. Instead of becoming the source of esoteric knowledge, practitioners' bodies were used as subjects for clinical research based on biomedical categories. The effects of practice were described in physical and chemical terms, and concepts of yin-yang and *qi* were standardized and materialized as expressions of "primitive dialectics" compatible with Marxist philosophy.

⁸ On the institutionalisation of Chinese medicine, see Croizier 1968.

For reasons both practical and ideological, body cultivation thus flourished as a branch of institutionalised Chinese medicine in the 1950's. Entirely an instrument of state modernization and political campaigns, *qigong* during this period did not develop the alternative social networks and ideologies that would emerge in the 1980's. But it did acquire legitimacy and a niche within the state system, from which it could expand as a mass movement in the 1980s.

Mass *qigong*

Together with almost everything associated with traditional culture, *qigong* was attacked as a “feudal superstition” during the Cultural revolution (1964-1976), and its medical institutions were closed. There were no officially sanctioned *qigong* activities in China from 1965 until its rehabilitation in 1978. However, one woman, Guo Lin, an artist and cancer victim from Guangdong province who had cured herself by practicing *qigong* during the 1960s, was brave enough to teach *qigong* to other cancer victims in the parks of Beijing as early as 1970. Although she was often harassed by the police, the number of people who came to practice *qigong* with her grew, until she was able to train coaches to lead practice groups in other parks, and an informal organization of practitioners was created to study and publicize her method. In 1977, she submitted a report to the health ministry which, summarizing seven years of experience teaching *qigong*, claimed that *qigong* was a cure for cancer. Her method, which advocated training the mind and body for the “ideological struggle against cancer”, was published as the *New Qigong Therapy* and, at the end of the Cultural revolution, Guo Lin was invited to lecture in dozens of universities, factories and official units. Thousands began to learn her *qigong* method in parks and public spaces around the country.

Guo Lin inaugurated a new form of *qigong*, heavily marked by the mass culture of the cultural revolution: *qigong* was no longer confined to the medical institutions of the Party elite, but became a grassroots popular movement. Instead of professional medical workers providing one-on-one clinical instruction, amateur enthusiasts led free collective practice sessions in public spaces. The standardized set of exercises in Guo Lin's book could be learned by anyone and was replicable anywhere. Guo Lin became something of a celebrity. Her ‘*New Qigong Therapy*’ quickly spread to most cities in China and even to several Western countries. Other *qigong* methods were also popularized and spread to all parts of China within less than a year. By the end of the 1970's, it was not rare to see

more than a dozen different *qigong* methods being practiced in the same park on a given morning.

Ecstatic and charismatic *qigong*

Among the *qigong* methods which appeared in 1980, one of the most popular was “Great Crane *qigong*”, which signalled the appearance of religious and charismatic motifs in *qigong* practice. This method was propagated by Yang Meijun, a 77-year old woman who had been trained by her grandfather into a Taoist tradition in which one imitates the movements of the great crane, a symbol of immortality. Yang had participated in the anti-Japanese guerrilla and had lived in the Communist Party base of Yan’an before the establishment of the Peoples’ Republic, then had concealed her knowledge of body cultivation until the end of the Cultural Revolution. Her Great Crane *Qigong* was the first method to explicitly claim a Taoist heritage rather than an affiliation with modernized Chinese medicine. After Liu Guizhen, the cadre and communist clinician, and Guo Lin, the intrepid self-taught anti-cancer combatant, Yang Meijun emerged as the venerable inheritor of a secret lineage and as the possessor of concealed magical powers. Besides teaching her gymnastic exercises, she used her powers to treat the ill by projecting her qi onto patients. *Qigong* was no longer exclusively a self-training exercise: by receiving the mysterious qi emitted by the master, patients entered into a new type of relationship with her and with the powerful traditions she was perceived to embody.

Two other immensely successful *qigong* methods to be launched around that time -- “Flying Crane *Qigong*” and the “*Qigong* of the Spontaneous Movements of the Five Animals” – triggered states of “spontaneous movements *qigong*”. In these methods, after entering a state of deep relaxation through body and breathing exercises, the practitioner falls into a trance which lasts between thirty minutes and two hours, during which he hits or massages himself, spontaneously carries out kung fu, taijiquan, or dance movements, or even falls and rolls on the ground. In this type of *qigong*, visions of gods or aliens were frequent. Large numbers of people in such trance states became a common sight in parks.

Another widespread phenomenon during the *qigong* wave was glossolalia or “cosmic language”, a condition analogous to “speaking in tongues”. The most notorious promoter of this practice was Zhang Xiangyu, an actress who claimed to have been pushed by a puff of qi to run without stopping for days and nights on end, and who then

played host in her kitchen to the Jade Emperor, the Queen Mother, Guanyin, Sakyamuni, the Venerable Lord Lao, and other popular divinities. She heard a voice in “cosmic language” tell her to save humanity by teaching the *Qigong of the Centre of Nature* to the people, a method which attracted tens of thousands of devotees.

The spread of ecstatic *qigong* occurred in a context in which Deng Xiaoping’s policy of reforms and opening up had created the conditions for a religious revival in the 1980’s. In the countryside, this revival manifested itself through the rebuilding of temples destroyed during the Cultural revolution and through the reconstitution of ritual networks. In the cities, however, the renewed interest in religion was more diffuse: books on religious subjects found a large readership, and television serials on religious themes such as the *Journey to the West* were smash hits. “Martial arts fever” added to the spiritual ferment. Kung fu novels and films from Hong Kong and Taiwan flooded mainland theatres and bookstalls, fuelling the growth of a burgeoning martial arts subculture. Itinerant martial arts troupes resurfaced and entertained crowds with their exploits. Blockbuster movies such as *Shaolin Temple* triggered a cult following among youth, who flocked to the temples of Shaolin, Wudang and Emei in search of the secret teachings of a master.

These films and novels depict Buddhist monks and Taoist masters who can fly, disappear and reappear, and read peoples’ minds – abilities they are said to have acquired through the mastery of “inner cultivation” (*neigong*), which involves the body, breath and mind control exercises associated with *qigong*. For thousands of kungfu fans, the magical feats of the past and the stunts of pulp films were not fiction: they could be mastered through initiation by a master.

A legend grew around the most famous *qigong* masters, many of whom were said to have demonstrated miraculous powers from their early childhood in a poor countryside surrounded by mountains, grottoes and temples. Typically, they received initiation from as early as four years old from a succession of mysterious sages, monks, and masters representing all the esoteric traditions of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Chinese medicine and martial arts. Such an initiation is said to be the result of karmic predisposition (*yuanfen*) – the *qigong* master is one of the elect of the initiates, who possesses extraordinary power over the forces of the universe. After a period of incubation, during which the young master conceals his abilities, his initiators command him to “go out of the mountains” (*chushan*) – to manifest his powers and his knowledge to the public, in order to deliver the world from its agony.

Ecstatic *qigong* has been interpreted as a popular cathartic vehicle for the release of pent-up emotions after the torment of the Cultural Revolution⁹. *Qigong* also offered the possibility for the private appropriation of public spaces in the socialist republic¹⁰. Indeed, ecstatic and charismatic *qigong* went beyond the earlier categorization of *qigong* as a therapeutic technique. After having been engulfed in a collective fusion with Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, people could, by practicing *qigong*, rediscover their own bodies and subjectivities. Through exploring the inner universe of the body and directing the circulation of its energies, entering mystical realms through trances and visions, and connecting oneself, through a master, to ancient esoteric traditions, practitioners could enter an alternate world from the monotonous, regimented life of the socialist *danwei* (work unit) and its totalitarian, industrial-bureaucratic organization of bodies. The *danwei* was a walled compound, in which work, leisure, housing and family life were contained and managed by a cadre of *danwei* officials, the *lingdao*, who were in perpetual internecine struggle for the control of state resources and prestige. Work was rarely challenging or rewarding, and often idle, as unit members subtly resisted arbitrary authority through enjoying the lifetime job security of the “iron rice bowl” by putting in as little effort as possible. Information was mediated by a propaganda apparatus that impressed itself on the mind several times each day through the blaring of the Peoples’ Radio on loudspeakers. For those who weren’t politically ambitious, the *danwei* offered no hope for personal development or advancement, little contact with the outside world, and little space for personal subjectivity. In the cracked concrete yards of housing compounds and between the scraggly bushes of urban parks, however, practicing *qigong* could open endless new horizons of experience and knowledge. Here, the body became a receptacle and a conduit of traditional wisdom and mystical symbols. Hitherto unknown forms of energy inside and outside the body could be experienced, monitored, directed, and emitted, leading to a sense of better health and, often literally, of heightened power. *Qigong* offered a way of personally appropriating and embodying this new world of knowledge, power, and experience – an alternative to the alienating world of the *danwei*, one which could be legitimately and openly pursued under the guise of physical fitness¹¹.

⁹ Ots 1994

¹⁰ Chen 1995.

¹¹ For other interpretations of the *qigong* boom, see Penny 1993: 179; Ots 1994: 126; Micollier 1999; Chen 1995: 361; Zhu and Penny 1994: 7; Zhu 1994 [1989]; Hsu 1999: 24; Heise 1999: 110; Xu 1999; Chen 2003.

Qigong science

The experimentation of inner states through body techniques could also be conceived of as doing science. The inner body became an instrument for observing the cosmos. Contrary to institutionalised science, in which a small number of specialists produce knowledge for passive consumption by everyone else, this was a type of scientific activity that anyone could engage in. Thousands of amateur scholars devoted themselves to studying classical texts on body cultivation and trying out different methods, exchanging observations and commentary in popular *qigong* journals. This was a conscious project of engaging in the prestigious activity of scientific research. Here, the body became the laboratory. A scientific attitude was seen as necessary to save body cultivation from centuries of superstitious dross, but to enable *qigong* to create a new type of science: “science will save *qigong* and *qigong* will save science”. Here, scientism was not an abstract ideology, but an embodied practice.

As a source of knowledge, *qigong* also fascinated the Chinese scientific community itself. By the end of the 1970’s a handful of scientists began to conduct experiments on ‘external Qi’, the energy which is said to be sent by *qigong* masters toward their patients. Dr. Feng Lida began research at the National Navy Hospital, and Gu Hansen of the China Academy of Sciences Nuclear Research Centre announced that he had discovered the material basis of the “external qi” said to be emitted by *qigong* masters.

Meanwhile, the strange phenomenon of children reading with their ears made a sensation in the mass media. After the first case of such a child in Dazu county, Sichuan, was covered by an official newspaper, similar phenomena were reported all over the country. Researchers from Beijing University published an article in *Ziran*, a popular science magazine, claiming that they had trained 60% of a sample of children to read without their eyes. The magazine subsequently published a series of articles on similar paranormal phenomena, stimulating widespread debate and speculation on what were called “extraordinary functions of the human body”. On May 5 1979, however, the *Peoples’ Daily* denounced ‘extraordinary functions’ as quackery, anti-science and idealism, leading the media to momentarily cease publishing reports of such phenomena.

In spite of controversy, interest in ‘extraordinary functions’ of the human body did not diminish. Researchers from several universities gathered in Shanghai in January 1981 to share their findings and discuss how to counter charges of idealism and pseudo-science. Extraordinary Functions research groups were formed in several scientific

institutions. A few months later, a second academic conference led to the foundation of the China Human Body Science Research Society, dedicated to research on Extraordinary Functions. Some persons with alleged extraordinary functions, such as Zhang Baosheng, became media celebrities. In 1982, scientists from several key universities conducted tests on some of these individuals and announced that their powers were “proven”. Debate raged in the press. The state propaganda bureau moved to put an end to speculation. But China’s most influential scientist, Qian Xuesen, a graduate of MIT who was the principal architect of China’s nuclear weapons program, successfully intervened before the central leadership on behalf of Extraordinary Functions research, which was now officially permitted and legitimised.

Meanwhile, researchers were continuing their experiments on *qigong*. In 1980, the Shanghai Chinese Medicine Research Institute announced that it had successfully tested ‘*qigong* anesthesia’ by emission of external Qi onto patients undergoing surgery. Qinghua, China’s most prestigious university for the physical sciences, also began experiments in 1980. Scientists began to theorize on the nature of Qi and the effects of *qigong*. The ability to emit external qi appeared as a type of Extraordinary Function which could be trained and nurtured through practice. Some *qigong* masters were also reported to have paranormal abilities such as ESP and telekinesis. *Qigong* increasingly came to be conceived as a technique for attaining Extraordinary Functions.

Qigong, Extraordinary Functions, and martial arts began to merge in the popular imagination. Through assiduous *qigong* practice, anyone could hope to develop the Extraordinary Functions latent in his body. The supernatural feats of ancient Chinese popular legends, literature and culture had been proven through real-life experience and scientific observation. *Qigong* became the scientifically tested key to breaking the laws of classical physics. The old legends were true, *qigong* would turn them into science, and China would be at the forefront of a new global scientific revolution.

***Qigong* Fever**

In early 1986, the China *Qigong* Scientific Research Association was founded on a triumphant note, as Professor Qian Xuesen proclaimed the new scientific revolution. The creation of this academic body was heralded as a turning point in the history of science, as *qigong* advocates cried: “*qigong* has left religion and folklore to enter the Temple of Science!”

Official recognition of *qigong* grew. On the instigation of Zhang Zhenhuan, revolutionary hero, retired Red Army General and president of the new association, a large gathering of national leaders witnessed master Zhang Baosheng demonstrate his Extraordinary Functions at a meeting in Canton in September 1986. Leaders of the Commission of Science and Technology for National Defense, which managed the country's huge military-industrial complex, promoted the military applications of *qigong* – it was speculated that *qigong* masters could use their qi to deflect incoming ballistic missiles. One master was employed by the space agency to telepathically detect faults in a satellite before launching. Other masters were invited by the geological prospection agency to detect underground mineral deposits. The National Sports Commission organized *qigong* training to increase the abilities of Chinese athletes in international competitions. The National Education Commission experimented with *qigong* training in primary schools to increase the intelligence of children.

Meanwhile, *qigong* fever was raised to a frenzy by a young and previously unknown *qigong* master, Yan Xin, who claimed to have been initiated since his early childhood by over 30 traditional masters of medicine, martial arts, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. In early 1987, researchers at Qinghua University publicized results of experiments showing that his External Qi had changed the molecular structure of water at a distance of 2000 km. Yan Xin became an instant celebrity. He began a series of public lectures in large auditoriums and sports stadiums across the country. Entitled 'Force-filled Experimental Lectures', they drew audiences of up to 20,000, lasted up to ten hours without interruption, and were the scene of transe reactions and miraculous healings. Yan Xin gave over 200 mass healing lectures between 1987 and 1989. Before long, other *qigong* masters began giving Force-filled Lectures, and an industry was spawned selling 'force-filled' audio and video tapes of Yan Xin's lectures. The *qigong* grandmaster became a popular idol combining in one body the powers of the ancient wizard and of the pioneering scientist.

"*Qigong* Fever" expressed and combined many strands of utopianism in post-Mao China. At the level of the individual body, the practice of *qigong* can produce profound sensations and experiences that often lead to a heightened sense of health, empowerment and understanding. These changes can produce a radical transformation in one's relationship with one's body and with the world, and a sense of connection with the ultimate power of the cosmos that is absent in the alienated routines of modern industrial culture. As a mass movement, *qigong* multiplied such experiences in millions of

bodies, whose number grew exponentially, presaging the day when, eventually, all of China, and even the whole world, would experience and participate in the transformation – a transformation that would lead to universal health, the spread of superhuman and paranormal abilities on a wide scale, and the eventual end of disease and suffering.

Such fantasies evoked visions of Taoist immortal realms, the Pure Land of Buddhism, and the millenarian eschatology of the sectarian tradition. They also revived the tradition of utopian consciousness which had been fostered through forty years of Communism and Maoism – but one which, after the failure and pain of the Cultural Revolution, was turning inwards, into the body, into tending its sufferings, into a mass movement which didn't contest the structure of social relations but spread from body to body, dreaming that all would change once each body had been transformed. As such, because the effects of *qigong* could be viscerally felt by the practitioner, soothing and curing illness and pain, and providing experiences of power and knowledge, *qigong* could stimulate the enthusiasm of the masses of all social and educational backgrounds. At the same time, for intellectuals and scientists, *qigong* reconciled the scientism of mainstream modern Chinese thought with pride in the achievements of Chinese culture. *Qigong* thus legitimised the study of Chinese traditions and held forth the promise of a revolutionary Chinese science, one which would restore Chinese civilization and wisdom to its true dignity and propel it to the vanguard of world scientific discovery. For Party leaders and state officials, many of whom personally experienced the transformation of their bodies through practicing *qigong* themselves or through being treated by *qigong* masters, *qigong* thus offered the promise of national empowerment vis-à-vis the West, not only through creating a healthier, stronger, paranormal race of men, but also through developing a new system of knowledge both more advanced than that of the West and unfathomable for uninitiated foreigners¹². Qian Xuesen and others saw in *qigong* the key to a renewed and reinvigorated Marxism based on the mind-body dialectic. Even after the Tiananmen student protests of 1989, which led the Party to become more suspicious of popular movements, some of its leaders saw in *qigong* a form of substitute faith : its exercises and mystical flights could distract people from political preoccupations.

¹² *Qigong* masters often refused to initiate foreigners to higher levels, fearing that they would discover the secrets of *qigong* power, allowing them to eventually surpass the Chinese. Some leaders were also concerned that, through paranormal research, Western countries were already becoming more advanced in an area in which China had a natural advantage. China risked seeing the West make better use of *qigong* than China, just as it had done with the “four great inventions” of China: paper, gunpowder, the printing press and the compass.

End of utopia

Throughout the 1990's, a worn regime, devoted primarily to preserving its power and to achieving international normality, notably through membership in the World Trade Organization, became increasingly distant from its utopian origins. The focus was now integration into world capitalism. Money, competition and corruption ruled. The new generation of Party leaders, led by Jiang Zemin, were technocrats rather than revolutionaries, more interested in economics and hard technology than in the power of consciousness to accomplish transformation, be it of society or of the body.

China's scientific institutions, through increasing international exchanges, embarked on a process of integration with the worldwide scientific community. The "Chinese science" of *qigong* became less of a fascination, especially when scientists applied international standards to evaluate its claims. In 1988, members of the China Academy of Sciences invited the American Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) to visit China and investigate Extraordinary Functions. The committee's delegation witnessed 15 demonstrations of alleged Extraordinary Functions by subjects selected by *qigong* organizations. None of the demonstrations passed the CSICOP's criteria. Articles critical of Yan Xin began to appear in the press, and Hong Kong newspapers became the forum of a heated anti-*qigong* polemic.

The media reported an increasing number of cases of *qigong* quackery and of *qigong* practitioners unable to come out of trance, starving themselves to death while fasting, or displaying psychotic behaviour. Psychiatric wards opened special sections for *qigong*-related disorders¹³. Some alleged *qigong* techniques, such as Electric *Qigong* and Lightweight *Qigong*, were exposed as simple tricks bearing no relation to *qigong*. A growing number of researchers, including some within the *qigong* community, claimed that so-called 'external Qi' was merely psychological suggestion and self-hypnosis.

In response to these controversies, the government issued a new policy on *qigong* in October 1989, which included licensing *qigong* masters and taxing *qigong* organizations. Within a few months, over half of *qigong* masters, unable to obtain licenses, lost their jobs, and several *qigong* organizations and clinics, unable to pay taxes, closed their doors. Yan Xin's popularity began to wane. A 'force filled lecture' he gave at the Shanghai Municipal Stadium in March 1990, though attended by 23000 persons, was surrounded

¹³ On *qigong* deviation, see Chen 2003: 77-106.

by controversy (an audience member died during the lecture) and widely regarded as a failure. Anticipating political criticism, General Zhang Zhenhuan, the highest official in the *qigong* community, advised Yan Xin to leave China for the United States and promote *qigong* in the West.

Through a policy of ‘no criticism, no promotion, no debate’, the government enforced a precarious truce between advocates and opponents of *qigong*. But with the death in March 1994 of General Zhang Zhenhuan, who had been an influential promoter of *qigong* among the country’s leaders, the adversaries of *qigong* seized the chance to lead a vigorous anti-*qigong* campaign. Throughout 1995, former *qigong* master Sima Nan waged a heated polemic against ‘pseudo-*qigong*’ in a series of television and radio interviews, newspaper articles, and a controversial book entitled *The Inside Story on Miraculous Qigong*¹⁴. Anti-*qigong* articles appeared in the press all through 1995. The chairman of the China Academy of Sciences and several other influential Chinese scientists spoke or wrote against *qigong*, calling it pseudo-science, superstition, quackery, and a dangerous cult similar to the Aum Shinrikyo sect of Japan.

Qigong itself became increasingly commercialized, as masters and semi-official sponsoring organizations saw the mass profits that could be made from turning *qigong* into a product. *Qigong* groups became better organized, as masters competed for the allegiance of the millions of practitioners willing to pay to attend force-filled lectures, training workshops, healing clinics, and to buy *qigong* books, tapes, videos and paraphrenelia. The young master Zhang Hongbao, for example, attempted to regroup *qigong* adepts under the umbrella of a vast commercial organization owning *qigong* universities, *qigong* hospitals, *qigong* cadre training institutes, and *qigong* business enterprises. His Zhonggong method condensed *qigong* techniques into eight ascending levels. As early as the second level, adepts were integrated into the organization’s nationwide *qigong* training sales system. In 1994, Zhonggong claimed 30 million adepts and had become the largest mass organization in China outside the Communist Party¹⁵. By the mid 1990’s, the government began to discreetly limit the activities of the movement. Zhang Hongbao disappeared around that time¹⁶.

¹⁴ Sima 1995.

¹⁵ The name Zhonggong is a homophone of the abbreviated name of the Chinese Communist Party, Zhonggong.

¹⁶ He reappeared in the summer of 2000, seeking political asylum on the American Pacific island of Guam.

Many *qigong* groups revealed, in their structure, their ideology and practises, an affinity with the heterodox sects of the pre-communist era¹⁷. Increasingly, *qigong* was being propagated by structured organizations that used the teaching and practise of body cultivation to recruit adepts and disseminate a specific ideology. This ideology, which varied from one group to another, typically included an ideal of universal salvation which integrated elements of magical thought, millenarian eschatology, scientism, and romantic nationalism around the charismatic figure of the *qigong* Grandmaster¹⁸. It was inevitable that *qigong* transmission would lead to organized groups, as the circulation of body cultivation techniques, qi, healing, and money formed bonds between masters and practitioners that needed to be managed and formalized.

The attempt, which had been encouraged by the government, to enlist Chinese body cultivation into the service of socialist construction and then of a new Chinese-led scientific revolution, had ended up as a failure. *Qigong* had led to the emergence of a sectarian milieu, of organizations independent from the state whose structure, ideology and practises weaved an alternative culture in the interstices of official structures. In 1996, the government launched a campaign to ‘rectify’ *qigong* associations, removing official recognition from groups that had strayed too far from official Marxism. A large number of *qigong* masters settled in other countries, opening new markets for *qigong*’s development abroad. In China, *qigong* circles were divided and disoriented by the criticism and increased control. But one group, Falungong, though a target of this purge, continued to expand, even as its master Li Hongzhi fled to the United States in 1996.

Apocalyptic *qigong*

While public opinion turned against the greed and quackery of many masters, Li Hongzhi condemned the commercialisation of *qigong*. Falungong – the *qigong of the Dharma Wheel* -- linked the body cultivation of *qigong* to a moralistic, messianic and apocalyptic doctrine. This strategy allowed the method to spread rapidly, attracting

¹⁷ On *qigong* and the Chinese sectarian tradition, see Ownby 2002 and Palmer 2003b. The term “sect” is here used in a sociological sense in the Chinese context, in reference to voluntary popular groups with charismatic leaders which are distinct from the state-recognized institutional religions and from traditional cults based on lineage, clan, village, social status, or profession. For a detailed history of Chinese sectarianism, see Seiwert 2003. On breath circulation techniques in “White Lotus” groups, see Overmyer 1976: 188-191; Naquin 1976: 26-32 and 1985. On the political use of such labels as “White Lotus”, see ter Haar 1992. On sectarianism during the Republican period, see Perry 1980: 152-203 and Duara 1995: 96-109. On sectarianism in Taiwan, see Jordan and Overmyer 1986. On the resurgence of sects in rural China, see Munro 1989.

¹⁸ For an analysis of these themes, see Palmer 2003a: 90-96.

millions of *qigong* adepts, retired people and marginalized intellectuals. Indeed, by the mid 1990's, the *danwei* system of life-long security, which had structured the lives of urban Chinese for almost fifty years, was beginning to unravel under market-oriented reforms and an ever-deeper corruption. This was not a time for flights of free subjectivity in an over-structured environment, like the *qigong* of the 1980's, but for finding certainty in a disintegrating social world. Exploiting nostalgia for the altruism of the Maoist days, Falungong organized a movement of resistance against the growing social, moral and spiritual decadence¹⁹. Around 1994, Li Hongzhi began to teach that the purpose of body cultivation was not good health, but spiritual salvation: a goal that must pass through the physical and social suffering that can result from practicing the fundamental virtues of truth, compassion and forbearance. Falling ill, or suffering from the abuse of colleagues, bosses, or the police, become salutary trials through which the practitioner could reimburse his karmic debts. Falungong no longer presented itself as a *qigong* method but as the Great Law or Dharma (*Fa*) of the universe, a doctrine with its own sacred scripture, *Zhuan Falun* ("Turning the Dharma-Wheel")²⁰ which transcends all forms of material organization, superior to all philosophies, laws, teachings, religions, and body cultivation methods in the history of humanity, and offering the only path of salvation from the apocalyptic end of the kalpa or universal cycle, in which the universe is destroyed²¹.

There is no training of the breath in Falungong gymnastics and meditation. Li Hongzhi acknowledges the existence of *qi*, but claims that it is a lower and impure form of energy which the Falungong disciple should not pursue. Where *qigong* involved opening the body to the cosmos -- "collecting *qi*" from trees, the sun, and the moon, sending and receiving *qi* between practitioners, dabbling in all types of techniques, symbols, and concepts -- the Falungong practitioner must close his body to the lower influences of the world. He should not practice other techniques, nor read other *qigong* or religious books, nor engage in healing by emission of external *qi* -- practices which all lead to possession by demons lurking in other methods, books, and bodies. According to Li Hongzhi, the body contains two types of matter, the demonic "black matter" which is an accumulation of bad karma for sins committed in past and present lives, and the "white matter" of virtue, which increases with good deeds and through the practice of Falungong. When someone is rude, dishonest, or violent to another, he unwittingly gives

¹⁹ For a sociological analysis of Falungong, see Madsen 2000.

²⁰ For an online edition of *Zhuan Falun*, see the Falungong website: www.falundafa.org

²¹ For an analysis of Li Hongzhi's doctrine, see Palmer 2001.

his white matter to the victim and absorbs his black matter. All the more so if a Falungong practitioner is verbally or physically abused while defending the *Fa*. In order to eliminate the karmic black matter and attain salvation, the disciple should attach himself exclusively to the Great *Fa* – a connection which is embodied by the swirling inverted Buddhist swastika which Li Hongzhi telepathically implants into the bellies of each of his followers, and by the countless invisible *Fa*-bodies with which he protects the sincere practitioner. In Falungong, then, the body is closed and protected from a demonic outside world; becomes the site of a moral struggle between right and wrong; and is viscerally attached to the master and his *Fa* through the implanted swastika and *Fa*-bodies. The disciple becomes a “*Fa*-particle” in the great body of the *Fa*. Falungong became a new social body, in which the practitioners’ bodies were the theatres of both personal struggle and of the apocalyptic battle between the demonic old world and the righteous *Fa*²².

The moral rigour, the active missionizing, and the strict discipline of Falungong’s organization allowed it to recruit successfully in all sectors of society, attracting tens of millions of adepts, particularly among retired people. In spite of its illegal status and its occultist philosophy clearly at odds with the official ideology, Falungong propagated itself openly and with impunity. Only a handful of journalists and scientists dared to criticize the group in the press, stressing its ‘superstitious’ character and reporting on cases of adepts who had become seriously ill or even allegedly died due to following Li Hongzhi’s teaching to refuse medical treatment.

At the same time as he moved his base to the United States, Li Hongzhi explained that salvation could only be attained through the public defence of Falungong, without fearing the consequences of such action. The network of practice site supervisors was activated to mobilize the practitioners to react against any criticism through letter-writing campaigns, sit-ins, and peaceful protests directed at media and government offices. The resistance, anchored in public displays of bodies in movement, was spectacular. Thousands of disciplined adepts appeared at strategic times and places, and managed to obtain apologies, rectifications, and even, in the case of the Beijing TV station, the firing of a critical journalist. Such actions had never been seen in Communist China: an organized group²³ with tens of millions of potential militants from all social strata and geographic areas, which did not hesitate to display its power on the public

²² For a study of Li Hongzhi’s body, see Penny 2002.

²³ Note that Li Hongzhi and Falungong practitioners emphatically deny the existence of a Falungong organization. See Tong 2002.

square and intimidate the media which, after all, are mouthpieces of the Party. In the beginning, the authorities were hesitant to intervene. A large number of CCP members were Falun Gong adepts or sympathisers. Some leaders considered Falungong's daily gymnastics as a harmless and economical way to keep the masses of Chinese seniors occupied. Others feared the true influence of Falungong and the risk of alienating Li Hongzhi's tens of millions of disciples.

Following the arrest of two leaders of a Falungong protest against a Tianjin magazine, however, over ten thousand adepts silently surrounded Zhongnanhai, the nerve centre of the Party's power, on 25 April 1999. Perceived as a dangerous provocation by President Jiang Zemin, this demonstration triggered the deployment of the Party's classic repressive apparatus, through a systematic campaign launched on 22 July 1999, which continues to this day: propaganda, mobilization of official organizations, work camps, psychiatric internment, torture, etc. Most Falungong practitioners immediately gave up the practice and were spared from negative consequences. But a minority of adepts remained loyal to Falungong and, in a spirit of martyrdom, continued to protest the repression, ready to sacrifice their bodies to display the power of Li Hongzhi's Great *Fa*. Most of the other large *qigong* organizations were discreetly dismantled by the government. Only Falungong has survived as an underground resistance movement that continues to flout government repression, under the eye of the international media²⁴.

With the master's exile and the international media coverage of the crackdown, Falungong became a U.S.-based world movement that presented itself as the innocent victim of a totalitarian genocide²⁵. Through the systematic use of protests, the media, cyberspace, the hijacking of Chinese TV signals, and the legal systems of Western countries, Falungong strove to systematically embarrass Party leaders on the world stage and to attract international condemnation of the repression. Today, the Communist Party and Falungong continue to wage a propaganda war before world public opinion – a war that draws heavily on gory images of mutilated bodies²⁶. Official Chinese sources show images of alleged Falungong practitioners who, for instance, set themselves on fire or cut open their bellies to pull out the rotating swastika planted by the master²⁷. Falungong

²⁴ On Falungong as a popular protest movement, see Perry 2001.

²⁵ For lack of space this chapter does not discuss the overseas expansion of Falungong. For studies of Falungong practice in North America, see Palmer, Susan 2003 and Porter 2003.

²⁶ On the styles of Chinese government and Falungong propaganda, see Powers & Lee 2002.

²⁷ See for example <http://english.eastday.com/epublish/gb/paper9/18/class000900002/hwz21198.htm> (accessed on 18 Feb. 2004)

literature and websites provide photographic documentation of the scarred and burnt body parts of tortured practitioners²⁸.

The CCP is now committed to the complete eradication of Falungong. Although non-violence characterizes Falungong militancy, its symbolic power is all the more disruptive: the Zhongnanhai demonstration, where thousands of adepts quietly surrounded the heart of the Party for a whole day, evokes images of a siege or of strangling. Through this act, Falungong projected the image of a powerful organization, capable of mobilizing the masses, and *which was not afraid* of the Party. Until today, political power in China is only partially exercised through a machinery of control, and more so through the subjective perception of its power and the fear of falling into trouble. The reinforcement of such impressions through propaganda and the visible manifestation of power is thus crucially important. The Zhongnanhai demonstration threatened to shatter the fear of the people and to transfer symbolic power onto Falungong. Thus, a Chinese practitioner who converted to Falungong after the demonstration told me, in a menacing tone: “if the Party dares to act against Falungong, Li Hongzhi will show his power”. Indeed, between 1998 and 1999, each Falungong demonstration seemed to bring about an increase in the number of practitioners.

The history of Chinese sectarianism shows that, if the majority of such groups have not become involved in politics, some have, at certain points in their development, turned into rebel organizations. In like manner, Falungong evolved from a *qigong* method geared to health and healing, to become in 1994 a doctrine of salvation based on a sacred book, and then, beginning in 1996, the path to salvation included the “defense of the *Fa*” through an activism that would necessarily be interpreted in China as political behaviour aiming to confront and weaken the political order. In the repression campaign and in Falungong’s responses, the historical scenario of the sect rebelling against the state plays itself out once more, each side entrenching itself in its predetermined role and provoking the enemy’s retaliation²⁹.

Conclusion

²⁸ See for example http://www.faluninfo.net/women/s2_photos.asp; <http://www.faluninfo.net/torturemethods/index.asp>. (accessed on 18 Feb. 2004)

²⁹ For further analyses of Falungong, see the special issue of *Nova Religio* (vol. 6, no. 2, 2003) on Falungong, edited by Catherine Wessinger. See also Leung 2002.

The Falungong conflict can be understood in terms of classical Chinese notions of the body and of the state. The Chinese state perceives itself as a single body englobing and organizing the entire society. The centre of the social body is the body of the emperor, whose power comes from its virtue derived from heaven, and which flows to the people, uniting their hearts through the ritual ordering of their bodies. This is the enduring inner source of political power, to which the external, military force of the state is but an auxiliary, used to suppress foreign bodies. Falungong challenged the state's authority and legitimacy on four counts: (1) it attacked the moral corruption and lack of virtue of the Party's leaders and presented an alternative source of moral authority in the body of Li Hongzhi and his *Fa*, thus touching at the very core of political legitimacy. (2) Around the master's moral authority, and against the corruption of society, Falungong formed a new social body, a foreign organism which challenged the unitary nature of the state. (3) The public protests and displays of Falungong – notably the Zhongnanhai incident and other demonstrations before and after it, disrupted the state's ritual ordering of space and bodies and undermined its symbolic power; (4) The deployment of a massive material apparatus of state propaganda and repression, and its inability to crush the bodies of practitioners, revealed the inner weakness of a political formation that, unable to base itself on a higher moral ground, could only resort to the tried and tested methods of Leninist political campaigns.

This chapter began with an overview of traditional Chinese notions of body cultivation, and then showed how body cultivation evolved in the Peoples' Republic of China through the modern *qigong* movement. In the 1950's and early 60's, body cultivation was reformulated and institutionalized as part of the Communist state's project of developing the health of the masses and of extracting and transforming all useful elements of traditional culture in the service of building the New China. During the Cultural revolution, body cultivation was banned but the mass *qigong* model, pioneered by Guo Lin, was born. In the 1980's *qigong* vehicled a shift from social utopia to the individual body, and became a pathway to find inner freedom and alternative worlds, often expressed in a religious idiom and symbolism, within the interstices of the state. Though still promoted and monitored by the state, *qigong* in this period increasingly escaped state control and became the locus for alternative networks of masters and practitioners. In the 1990's, these networks gave birth to autonomous social bodies in the form of organized commercial and/or sectarian groups, one of which, Falungong, focalized resistance to the state and to the destructuring and corruption of a rapidly-

changing society. Each phase of Chinese socialist modernity – from its period of utopian state-construction to its post-revolutionary and market-driven phases -- witnessed the appearance of new mutations of the Chinese tradition of body cultivation and, through them, different uses of religious symbols and forms of social organization, and a different relationship between the individual body and the body politic.

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