

A Brief History of Qigong

Abstract

At the height of its popularity in China in the 1980s, it is estimated that one hundred million people were practising qigong in parks and public spaces. Crowds flocked to hear great masters speak and to be healed simply by being in their presence or hearing their words. Prime-time television showed miraculous acts being performed by the power of qi while China's top scientists and politicians were caught up in an extraordinary vision of qigong releasing the supernormal powers latent in human beings. This article attempts to describe how a self-cultivation practice - carried out in various forms for over two millennia with the aims of promoting physical, mental and spiritual well-being - gained tens of millions of followers at the height of 'qigong fever', and came to be associated with the development of super-powers such as distant healing, telekinesis and transformation of matter.

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Introduction

In August 2013, Wang Lin, businessman and qigong 'master', fled to Hong Kong from his home in Jiangxi province, China.¹ A self-proclaimed billionaire, Wang had covered two floors of his luxury villa with photos of himself with a host of Chinese celebrities including actors Jackie Chan and Jet Li and business figures such as Jack Ma (founder of Alibaba²). Famous for his supernatural powers, including materialising live snakes,³ driving a car without touching the steering wheel, cutting steel with his bare hands and curing cancer, Wang was a friend of - and protected by - the rich and powerful. Liu Zhijun for example, China's Minister of Railways, kept a stone imbued with Wang's 'special powers' to help ward off failure - unsuccessfully it turned out when he was given a suspended death sentence for bribery and abuse of power. Wang Lin's fall from grace began with an exposé by journalist Sima Nan - 'a well-known debunker of charlatans' - who offered ten million yuan to Wang Lin if he could prove he had supernatural powers.⁴ In response, Wang threatened to kill him with the power of distant qigong, although at the time of writing Sima Nan still lives.

Colourful and strange as this story is, Wang Lin is only the latest in a line of qigong 'masters' who have claimed - and been widely believed to possess - extraordinary powers. At the height of its popularity in China during the 1980s, it is estimated that up to one hundred million Chinese (a fifth of the urban population) were practising qigong - in parks and public places, at gatherings and rallies. And not only practising; qigong fever ('qigong re' in Chinese) had reached such a peak that great 'masters' were giving qigong healings to hundreds of thousands of people who did not even have to be present (many watched on television) nor to practise, but were told they could simply absorb the master's qi. As they did so, some fell to the ground, went into spontaneous uncontrolled movement and experienced intense visions and miraculous cures.

And the practice of qigong was no longer confined to China but had spread throughout the world. Ten thousand different teachers were offering ten thousand different styles to students who wanted to cure disease, maintain health, develop physical strength and flexibility, calm their minds, gain wisdom, extend their lifespans and even gain supernormal powers.

So what exactly is qigong? Is it ancient or modern? How can so many different practices described as qigong - from sitting quietly in meditation and focusing the attention on a repeated phrase or a part of the body, right through to breaking paving slabs with one's head - all be called the same thing? In investigating this phenomenon, I am indebted to a few key English language texts without which it would have been impossible to write this article, and the bulk of the material that follows is drawn from them. These are listed in the bibliography.

Body-breath-mind practices in Chinese history

The art/science of maintaining health, curing disease and extending lifespan has been a vital part of Chinese culture and medicine since the earliest written records, some two and a half thousand years ago. Known as yangsheng - or nourishing life - it incorporates a range of practices, principally cultivating the body, breath and mind, regulating food and drink (including the practice of bigu - fasting⁵), engaging in sexual alchemy, ingesting special herbs and medicines and conducting rituals.

Of these, cultivation of the body-breath⁶-mind, plays a key role in a multitude of traditions developed over the centuries. Some sprang from Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian sources; some were purely medical in origin; some aimed to achieve spiritual connection, transcendence and even immortality; some prioritised maintaining health, curing disease and lengthening life; some were still and quiescent, prioritising meditation, breath training, visualisations, mantra recitations, sexual cultivation and internal alchemy;

some were allied to the more physical realm of the martial arts,⁷ especially such ‘internal’ styles as taijiquan (tai chi), xingyiquan and baguazhang.

As befits this wealth of practices, a host of different names were used, for example daoyin (leading and guiding), neidan (internal alchemy), neigong (internal skill), xingqi (circulating qi), zhanzhuang (standing meditation), tuna (exhalation and inhalation), lianyang (refining and nourishing) etc. Many of these practices were passed on in secret, handed down only to initiates or within families, and first came to light during the twentieth century. The current term qigong has only been used as a general classification of these kinds of practices since the middle of the 20th century.⁸

In the brief historical account that follows, I have focused principally on those practices that include some degree of body cultivation, rather than the purely meditative or breathing practices which are universally found in Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions.

Shamanic origins

According to French sinologist Catherine Despeux, ‘gymnastic exercises [i.e. daoyin/qigong] are a later development of original shamanistic techniques’.⁹ A seven thousand year old Neolithic pottery vessel from China’s Majiayao culture, unearthed in 1975, appears to bear this out, showing a figure in a qigong-like posture which historians think would have been part of a method for priest-shamans to enter trance states.¹⁰ According to the *Lun Yu* (Analects of Confucius/Kongzi), to become a shaman required years of cultivation of concentrated and tranquil states.¹¹

The *Neiye* (Inner Training) 4th century BCE

The recorded history of these internal practices goes back to the fourth century BCE. The *Neiye*, a collection of 26 beautiful verses, is principally understood to be a core text of early Daoist quiescent meditation, yet all practitioners of qigong or the internal martial arts will resonate with the following passages:

‘For all [to practice] this Way:
You must coil, you must contract,
You must uncoil, you must expand,
You must be firm, you must be regular [in this practice].’

and,

‘If people can be aligned and tranquil,
Their skin will be ample and smooth,
Their eyes and ears will be acute and clear,
Their muscles will be supple and their bones will be strong.
They will be able to hold up the Great Circle [of the heavens]
And tread firmly over the great Square [of the earth].’¹²

The dodecagonal jade block, 4th century BCE

This jade block, thought to be a pendant or a knob for a staff and possibly of earlier origin than the *Neiye*, is inscribed with 45 characters, which are translated by Donald Harper as follows:

‘To guide the qi, allow it to enter deeply [by inhaling] and collect it [in the mouth]. As it collects, it will expand. Once expanded it will sink down. When it sinks down, it comes to rest. After it has come to rest, it becomes stable. When the qi is stable, it begins to sprout. From sprouting, it begins to grow. As it grows, it can be pulled back upwards. When it is pulled upwards, it reaches the crown of the head. It then touches above the crown of the head and below at the base of the spine. Who practices like this will attain long life. Who goes against this will die.’¹³

The *Zhuangzi*, 3rd century BCE

The Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang), though referring disparagingly to practitioners of daoyin (guiding and pulling), makes clear that these practices were common at this time:

‘To huff and puff, exhale and inhale, blow out the old and draw in the new, do the “bear-hang” and the “bird-stretch,” interested only in long life – such are the tastes of the practitioners of Daoyin, the nurturers of the body ...’^{14,15}

By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* says, ‘[Dao is in] the deepest obscurity; its highest reach is in darkness and silence. Nothing is to be seen; nothing to be heard. Hold the spirit in stillness, the bodily form will become correct. You remain still, you remain pure, not subjecting your body to toil, not agitating your vital force – then you may attain longevity. When your eyes see nothing, your ears hear nothing, and your mind knows nothing, your spirit will keep your body, and the body will live long.’¹⁶

This tension between ‘active’ practice on the one hand, which ‘willfully’ directs the body, breath and intention, and utterly quiet, passive, ‘letting go’ practice on the other, runs through traditional Chinese health and longevity cultivation to the present day and both can be found within the modern-day practice of qigong.^{17,18}

The *Lushi chunqiu*, 239 BCE

The *Lushi chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü), an extensive text compiled under the patronage of the Qin dynasty chancellor Lü Buwei and dealing with such varied matters as government, politics, education, warfare and agriculture, includes three significant passages. In the first, the link between shamanistic or ritual dances and daoyin is ascribed an ancient origin:

‘Once under the reign of Emperor Yao,¹⁹ the power of

yin was in abundance, there were numerous stagnations and manifold accumulations. The ways of water were broken and obstructed, so that the flow was bad from the very sources. For the same reason, when the breath or energy of the individual is congested and stagnant, the muscles and the bones are contracted and don't flex well. One therefore prescribes certain dances which guide the breath and ensure that it moves throughout the body in a harmonious fashion.²⁰

The second passage introduces an explanation of the benefits of physical movement that is repeated in many later texts:

'Flowing waters (liu shui) do not stagnate (bu fu) and door hinges do not get mole crickets, because they move (dong). The ethers and bodily frame (xing qi) are also like this. If the bodily frame does not move, the vital essence (jing) does not circulate (bu liu); and if it does not circulate, the ethers (qi) will coagulate.'²¹

The third passage establishes the idea (to be repeated and amplified later in the *Neijing* and numerous subsequent cultivation texts) that if humans regulate their mind and emotions as well as their body, then neither external nor internal pathogens can penetrate or disturb the body to cause sickness.

'One wants the skin to be tight, the blood vessels to allow unimpeded motion; the sinews to be firm and the bones hard; the heart, mind, and will to be concordant; and the vital energies to flow. When this is happening, agents of disorder [sickness] have nowhere to abide and pathology has nowhere to be produced.'²²

On the question of dynamic versus quiescent practices, Lu Buwei suggested simply that those who are inclined to movement benefit from still practice and vice-versa.²³

Early tombs, 2nd century BCE

The first texts that describe specific health exercises date to a 186 BCE tomb unearthed at Zhangjiashan in Hubei Province in 1983. Inscribed on bamboo slips joined by cords to form scrolls, the *Yinshu* (Stretch Book) contains forty different exercises to maintain health and treat disease. They include work on the legs and feet (for example pointing and flexing the toes thirty times) and the back and neck (for example 'interlace the fingers at the back and bend forward, then turn the head to look at your heels'), with further sections on lunges, forward bends and exercises to open the shoulders. As Livia Kohn states in *Chinese Healing Exercises*,²⁴ 'Taken together the forty *Yinshu* exercises provide an integrated and complete workout for the body, bending, stretching and twisting its various parts and activating all the different joints and muscles.'

Better known are the slightly later 168 BCE tombs at Mawangdui in south-central China.²⁵ Among the numerous treasures found in the tombs was a silk scroll known as the 'Daoyintu', which depicts figures practising different stretching and bending exercises. The term 'daoyin', referring to the art or skill of 'leading and guiding' qi to flow through the body by a combination of physical movement and breathing practices, was widely used for the next twenty or so centuries.

The daoyin described in the Mawangdui texts was practised for its health-giving virtues and was one part of broader yangsheng (life cultivation) practices advocated in other Mawangdui scrolls that also included breathing exercises, dietary regulation and sexual cultivation.

Hua Tuo's Five Animals

Around four centuries after these tombs were sealed, the great doctor Hua Tuo²⁶ is said to have originated a famous series of daoyin exercises based on the five animals: the tiger, deer, bear, monkey and crane:

'[Hua] Tuo once said ... The human body needs exercise, but not to extremes. Frequently swaying and rocking the body causes digestion of grain-qi, unobstructed flow of the blood-vessels, and keeps illness from arising. This is like a door-hinge which does not rust (because it is constantly in motion). Among the transcendents of antiquity, up to Han times, there have been Daoist masters, lords and fellows, who performed the arts of daoyin, performed bear-hanging and the sparrow-hawk reverse look, drawing and pulling the inguinal crease, moving all the joints, in search of delaying the aging process. I have one art, called the Five Animals Frolic: The first is called tiger; the second, deer; the third, bear; the fourth, gibbon; the fifth, bird. These also cure disease, benefit both the hands and the feet - one should use these frequently to practice daoyin. If the core of the body is not feeling sprightly, one should therefore rise and perform one of the animal frolics. Stop once a light sweat is broken, and rub the body with powder, then the body will be light and agile, and one's stomach will have appetite.'²⁷

As Hua Tuo confirms, animal style practices were even then very old, probably having their roots in shamanistic dances. Despite the fact that the original form was lost, five animal qigong (also called the five animal frolics) is practised widely today, and this rooting of body cultivation in animal movements or natural phenomena such as flowing water, clouds or trees is a common feature of both the health and martial schools of exercise, reflecting the Daoist philosophy of observing, learning from and attuning oneself to nature.

The *Yangsheng Yaoji*, 4th century CE

The early emphasis on daoyin as a vital part of health preservation was continued through later health preservation texts. The *Yangsheng Yaoji* (Essentials of Nourishing Life)²⁸ included cultivating the body and practising daoyin exercises among its ten essentials – along with treasuring the spirit, loving qi (i.e. the breath), regulating food and drink, and practising health-enhancing sexual arts.

The *Daoyin jing*, 4th century CE

The Great Clarity Scripture on Healing Exercises and Nourishing Life (commonly known as the *Daoyin jing* - Daoyin Classic) was entirely devoted to daoyin practices that integrated movement, breathing, meditation and visualisation – the key features of what nowadays constitutes qigong. The text says,

‘The practice of healing exercises eliminates all wayward qi [i.e. unhealthy energy] from the limbs, skeleton, bones, and joints. Thus only proper [i.e. healthy] qi remains in residence, becoming ever purer and more essential. Practice the exercises diligently and with care whenever you have time. If you do them both in the morning and at night, gradually your bones and joints will become firm and strong, causing the hundred diseases to be cured ... By guiding the qi you can supplement the inner qi of the organs; by practising exercises you can heal the four limbs. Thus following the Dao of natural spontaneity as diligently as you can, you attain a state of mutual protection with Heaven and Earth.’²⁹

The *Zhubing Yuanhou Lun*, 7th century CE

The *Zhubing Yuanhou Lun* (Treatise on the Causes and Symptoms of Diseases) by Chao Yuanfang included some 213 Daoyin exercises for treating different medical conditions. It explained the practice of daoyin as follows:

‘The practice consists in drawing together in one’s body all the bad, the pathogenic, and the malevolent forms of qi, then one follows them, pulls them in and makes them leave forever. This is why the practice is called daoyin, to guide and pull.’³⁰

Speaking predominantly to the educated and wealthy it warned against laziness and advocated physical exercise, whilst simultaneously cautioning against the dangers of overuse of the body.

‘People should not yearn to indulge in pleasures. Hedonists don’t live long. However, they also should not force themselves into exertions beyond their capacity, such as lifting heavy things and pulling with force, digging earth and other hard labour, as well as not resting when tired. These things will simply exhaust them to

their sinews and bones. Actually, hard labour is better than indulgence and hedonism. It’s good if they have something to do from dawn to dusk, and do it without rest, but when they feel they’ve reached their limits and ought to rest, they should rest and then go back to work. Daoyin is no different from this. Flowing water never stagnates and door hinges never rust because they work so much.’³¹

Sun Simiao, 7th century CE

‘If people exercise their bodies, the hundred ills cannot arise.’ - Sun Simiao in *Baosheng Ming* (On Preserving Life).³²

Sun Simiao, one of China’s greatest ever doctors and popularly known as the God (or Buddha) of Medicine, devoted one scroll of his *Beiji Qianjin Yaofang* (Essential Prescriptions for Every Emergency worth a Thousand in Gold) to nurturing life, with advice on exercise, self-massage, cultivating qi and circulating the breath. Regarding physical activity he repeated the age-old advice of balance and moderation:

‘Even if you constantly ingest alchemical preparations but do not know the art of nurturing life, it will still be difficult to extend your lifespan. The way of nurturing life is to constantly strive for minor exertion but never become greatly fatigued and force what you cannot endure. Moreover, running water does not grow stale, the pivot of the door does not get bug-infested. The reason for this is that they move.’³³

The *Yangxing Yanming lu*, probably 7th/8th centuries CE

The *Yangxing Yanming Lu* (Records of Cultivating Nature and Extending Life) is a significant compilation of earlier yangsheng texts that is sometimes ascribed to Sun Simiao and sometimes to the earlier Tao Hongjing (456-536), the founder of the Daoist school of Supreme Clarity.³⁴ Its various sections cover yangsheng in general, diet, miscellaneous prohibitions, absorbing qi to promote healing, breathing exercises,³⁵ daoyin exercises and sexual behaviour. Its stern preface warns its readers not to ... ‘foolishly waste your intention to indulge in sights and sounds, apply your knowledge to scheme for wealth and fame, suffer a loss and harbour it permanently in your chest, rush about so you cannot even keep up with yourself, never heed the rules of rites and deportment, or eat and drink without moderation ... if you stumble along like this, how can you possibly avoid the afflictions of harm and early death?’

The section on absorbing qi includes advice on using the mind to help resolve pain in the body. This technique is commonly used in modern-day quiescent sitting, standing or lying qigong, as well as in the growing use of mindfulness techniques in pain clinics to alleviate chronic pain:

'If your head hurts, become aware of your head; if your foot hurts, become aware of your foot, using harmonized qi to attack the pain. From one moment to the next, the pain will dissolve by itself.'³⁶

The *Ershisi Qizugong Daoyin Zhibing Tushuo*, 10th century CE

The *Ershisi Qizugong Daoyin Zhibing Tushuo* (Twenty-four Illustrated Seated Exercise Practices to Heal Diseases), ascribed to the legendary Daoist sage Chen Tuan, offered 24 positions with an account of their therapeutic effects. Each was to be practised during a given two week period according to the Chinese calendar, for example in the 'Insects Stirring' period of the second month, the practice was to make tight fists, lift the arms to elbow level and turn the neck to look over the shoulders to the right and left 30 times.³⁷

Later methods and texts

The Song dynasty (960-1279) saw the appearance of the *Ba Duan Jin* (Eight Pieces of Brocade) form that is widely and popularly practised today. It developed into a Northern hard style, known as Martial *Ba Duan Jin*, and a softer Southern style known as Literary *Ba Duan Jin*, which itself subdivided into sitting and standing varieties. The standing form of the literary style is the one most commonly practised today.³⁸

The Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) saw the publication of numerous texts on self-cultivation and health practices. Towards the latter part of this period, the three principal internal styles of martial arts (taijiquan, xingyiquan and baguazhang) developed, with their core training methods (neigong) sharing many similarities with the body-breath-mind integration of self-cultivation practices.

Modern history of qigong

In the early twentieth century many of the multifaceted historical practices began to be gathered together under the broad name of 'xiulianfa' (cultivation methods), and a number of books³⁹ were published that aimed to modernise them, make them more accessible to a wider audience and redefine them as 'scientific'.⁴⁰ This movement anticipated the later 'scientisation' policy of the Communist regime towards traditional Chinese medicine and qigong.

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that the term qigong - the 'gong' (work or skill) of 'qi' (vital energy) - began to be used to incorporate all these traditions (although with a particularly leaning towards their ability to heal and prevent disease, rather than, for example, to foster spiritual development⁴¹). And this fact - that the term qigong is used as an umbrella term for a multitude of older traditions - explains the enormous variety of qigong practices. These range from meditative sitting and standing, quiet breathing, visualisation practices and

gentle movement on the one hand, right through to more powerful and strenuous exercises and even 'hard' qigong⁴² on the other.

According to David Palmer's extraordinary book, *Qigong Fever*,⁴³ to which I am indebted for much of the modern history of qigong in this article, the term qigong, at least in its modern application,^{44,45} was born on March 3rd 1949, its birth announced by Huang Yueting, a communist party cadre in the Huabei Liberated area in North China.

Surrounded by intractable health problems and lack of medical care, the local Communist administration had become intrigued by the story of Liu Guizhen - a young party cadre. After suffering from years of weakness, insomnia and gastric ulcers, he had returned transformed from a stay in his native village. He reported that he had been taught 'Neiyangong' (Inner Cultivation Exercise) by an old master.⁴⁶ Practising for 102 days by standing in silent meditation, regulating his breath, focusing his mind at Yongquan KID-1 on the soles of the feet and repeating a simple mantra,⁴⁷ Liu had recovered his health. With the support of the local Communist Party, he began to teach a method based on what he had learned, and by advocating qigong as a medical practice divorced from any spiritual or religious context, and promoting its scientific basis, Liu succeeded in making qigong acceptable to the Party, at least for a few years.^{48,49} Soon he had opened teaching and treatment clinics in Tangshan⁵⁰ and Beidahe, and in 1953 he published the first ever book on qigong - *Qigong Liaofa Shijian* (The Practice of Qigong Therapy), which eventually sold two million copies.

It is interesting that Liu's method, like that of the xiulianfa movement of the early twentieth century, was essentially a still, meditative practice, with an emphasis on breathing, relaxation and reflection. Later qigong tended to place equal or greater emphasis on movement, and in this respect the words of Mao Zedong in 1972 may have played a part:

'Human beings are active animals and they love to be active ... Activity is ultimately what nourishes life and satisfies the mind ... Sitting in meditation was advised by the followers of Zhu Xi⁵¹ and Lu Xiangshan⁵² over the ages, the most recent example being Master Yinshi's book.⁵³ He praises his method as wonderful and highly spiritual and says that activity destroys the body ... However, I do not share these ideas. In my opinion, there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not activity.'⁵⁴

Within a few years, officials at every level of the Chinese government, right up to President Liu Shaoqi,⁵⁵ were practising qigong. Papers on qigong were being published regularly in medical journals and rehabilitation centres⁵⁶, hospitals and universities had set up qigong departments - all officially controlled and sanctioned by the Communist Party. As a folk or proletarian practice (rather than an elitist science confined to experts) qigong particularly benefited

from the Great Leap Forward (1959-61) when 70 qigong clinics and sanatoria were established. But as was the way in China at the time, the tide turned treacherously, and in the early 1960s qigong was under vicious attack and was labelled as a 'rotten relic of feudalism' and the 'rubbish of history'. As the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976) unfolded, Liu Guizhen was criticised for advocating 'poisonous qigong',⁵⁷ expelled from the Communist party and sent to a 'reform through labour' camp for re-education, while the staff at Tangshan were made to clean the streets and public toilets and the Beidahe Sanatorium was shut down. The early pioneers of qigong suffered severely and some even died as a result of imprisonment and unremitting criticism.⁵⁸

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Although qigong was officially disowned by the state during the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976), one courageous woman – Guo Lin, a professional artist – began to hold classes in public parks, bypassing the state institutions that had hosted and controlled qigong up to then. Given six months to live as a result of cancer, Guo Lin had developed a form of walking qigong known as 'Guolin New Qigong', based on a practice she had learned as a child from her Daoist priest father. Her anti-cancer qigong rapidly became famous for its effects on reducing tumours. Suffering regular police harassment, she nevertheless continued to teach – moving from one park to the next, and her methods eventually attracted thousands of students, both in China and abroad. When the Cultural Revolution ended and qigong became acceptable again, Liu Guizhen and other older qigong practitioners were 'rehabilitated' by the state and Guo Lin herself was asked to run official courses at the Beijing Normal University.

And now, like seeds sown wherever there was green and open space, qigong began to blossom. Following Guo Lin's lead, other teachers began to hold sessions in public parks and squares, usually in the early morning. As the official grip steadily loosened, qigong exploded into a mass practice. As David Palmer says in *Qigong Fever*,

'At its height in the late 1980s the qigong movement may have attracted over one hundred million practitioners in some form or another – over 20 per cent of the urban population – making it the most widespread form of popular religiosity in post-Mao urban China. During this period, breathing and meditation techniques were disseminated to a degree perhaps never before seen in Chinese history.'⁵⁹

This post-Cultural Revolution resurgence of qigong stemmed from at least three important developments. The first was the loosening of some of the stricter aspects of Communist ideology. As a consequence of the resultant social and economic liberalisation, qigong 'masters' began to appear 'out of the mountains',⁶⁰ essentially operating private businesses and in some cases building up massive (and extremely profitable) followings. Furthermore, they were now free to link their teachings to Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian traditions. An early 1990s Chinese medicine textbook⁶¹ for example, classified qigong into six categories: Confucianist qigong, Daoist qigong, Buddhist qigong, medical qigong, qigong martial arts and popular qigong.

The second was the announcement of scientific 'proof' of the existence of externally transmitted qi, which appeared at the end of the 1970s. This slotted in neatly both with government policies that sought to make Chinese medicine (and medical qigong) more scientific, and the needs of the Chinese medicine profession who were under intense pressure to modernise, but wanted to do so without overly 'Westernising' their medicine. Evidence for the existence of qi transmission – a fruit of China's unique (i.e. non-Western) health traditions – would surely help this process.

The third development – which also happened in the late 1970s – was the phenomenon of 'extraordinary' or 'supernatural' powers and the link made between them and qigong. This relationship of external qi, qigong and extraordinary powers is discussed later in this article.

At its height, qigong fever coursed through all levels of Chinese society. It was reported that every one of the 'eight elders' of the Communist Party in the late 1980s, including Premier Deng Xiaoping, personally retained several qigong masters, not only to help counter the ills of ageing but even for soothsaying purposes, and that the Zhongnanhai leadership compound in central Beijing kept around two hundred qigong adepts on the payroll.⁶²

In the end however, as yinyang theory teaches, every extreme must inevitably turn into its opposite, and the collapse of qigong fever came with the extraordinary rise and inevitable downfall of the Falungong cult. Promoting Falungong with the highest spiritual aims of purifying the heart and attaining spiritual salvation, its leader, Li Hongzhi, changed his birthday to that of the Buddha and forbade his followers from reading any other spiritual, philosophical or religious books than his own. He pontificated against the mixing of different races, claimed extra-terrestrials were infiltrating human society, and declared himself saviour of humanity and rectifier of all forms of life and matter in the universe. By 1997, when he was boasting 100 million followers, Falungong had begun to alienate itself from the state's official China Qigong Science Research Society. Although there was already a growing official backlash against the increasing power of qigong masters and their followers, attacks on Falungong were initially fairly cautious as the organisation had friends

in powerful places, and journalists who dared to criticise it soon found themselves hounded out of a job. Eventually, however, with intermittent state support, media outlets gained courage. The *Guangming Daily*, for example, criticised Li Hongzhi's book, *Zhuan Falun*, as 'pseudoscientific ... propagating feudal superstitions', Beijing's TV station aired a programme referring to Falungong as an 'evil cult', China's principal Buddhist journal compared Falungong to rebellious sectarian movements from China's past and other critics compared the movement to the Boxer Rebellion. In response to such attacks, Li Hongzhi (now resident in New York) mobilised his followers to hold mass demonstrations outside newspaper offices and TV stations.

Given the extraordinary sensitivity of the Chinese government to public demonstrations, it was slow to react – possibly because Falungong's followers included many scientists, university professors and retired officials, or because a state Sports Commission investigation of Falungong reported that 97.9 per cent of its adherents reported improved health outcomes, estimated to be saving the state 1700 yuan per person per year.

Matters came to a head, however, when 10,000 Falungong supporters demonstrated outside Zhongnanhai – the very citadel of the Chinese government in Beijing. Communist Party chairman Jiang Zemin wrote to Party leaders saying that if the Party could not defeat Falungong 'it will be the biggest joke on Earth'. Within a few weeks the full measures of a repressive state were brought to bear on crushing the movement. A massive anti-Falungong campaign was launched in the Chinese media, demonstrators were beaten and arrested by riot police, the movement's leaders were arrested and imprisoned along with many thousands of followers, and Falungong was declared an illegal organisation.

Within a few years, qigong fever had passed – almost as though it had never happened. Morning practice in parks and public spaces still continues, but although taijiquan, qigong and martial arts can still be seen, as often as not they have been replaced by 'healthy' activities such as ballroom or traditional dancing, backwards walking, walking without shoes on specially constructed cobble paths, and the use of special exercise machines.

External qi, extraordinary powers and qigong

In 1979, Ms. Gu Hansen, a researcher at the Shanghai Institute of Nuclear Research, announced that she had developed a machine which could detect the existence of external qi emitted by a qigong master.⁶³ Other experiments carried out by a Dr. Feng Lida reported that external qi emission was real and that she had demonstrated that it could weaken or even kill various viruses as well as colonic, typhoid and dysentery bacilli and silver staphylococci.

To practitioners and proponents of qigong these announcements were earth-shaking. No longer the weird practices of ancient religious and mystical sects, qigong was

now truly 'scientific', fitting comfortably alongside modern medicine and the dialectical materialism of Communist theory. As a result qigong quickly gained high-level support in both the political and scientific worlds. Tan Gaosheng of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, for example, likened the discovery of external qi to the discoveries of Galileo. It was hailed as the birth of a new science – and a Chinese one at that – which had the potential to transform the world.

Dr. Feng Lida reported that external qi emission was real and that she had demonstrated that it could weaken or even kill various viruses as well as colonic, typhoid and dysentery bacilli and silver staphylococci.

And the excitement within the science community was being surpassed by the frenzy triggered in the public sphere by a tangentially related phenomenon – the discovery of children with paranormal powers. The story began in 1978 with Tang Yu, a 12-year-old schoolboy who discovered one day that he could 'read' with his ear.⁶⁴ Tang's teacher heard that the boy was showing off his powers to his friends, tested him and found that Tang could read whole sentences written on pieces of paper that were crumpled up and placed in his ear. When a reporter from the *Sichuan Daily* also tested him successfully and wrote a piece in the newspaper, the news spread. Within a short time, children were being discovered throughout China who could 'read' with their ears, hands, armpits and feet. Even when a team from the Sichuan Medical Institute announced that Tang Yu's abilities were an elaborate hoax, the enthusiasm for paranormal powers was unabated, provoking intense conflict between believers and non-believers.

Wondering whether these paranormal abilities could be taught, researchers from Beijing University trained ten-year-olds in basic qigong (relaxation, breathing and repetition of certain phrases) and announced that within a few weeks more than half were able to recognise words or illustrations hidden inside cloth bags or ink bottles. In 1980, scientists at Yunnan University reported that they had taught children to read pages hidden behind a wall, to find concealed objects, to communicate by telepathy, to break objects without touching them, and to move items such as cigarettes, keys and knives by mental power alone.

At a national conference held in Shanghai, it was agreed that extraordinary powers were, 'a physiological potential, universal and innate in man' and could be developed through qigong training both in adults and – ideally – in children between the ages of six to fifteen.

Elsewhere, machines were invented (and used for treatment) that could emit qi just like qigong masters and – in one of the most dramatic demonstrations of 'qigong power' – patients underwent thyroid and gastric surgery through the use of qigong anaesthesia alone (qigong emitted through a practitioner's fingers into acupuncture points).

A further significant boost for believers in such extraordinary powers research came when they gained the support of Qian Xuesen, one of China's pre-eminent scientists and the designer of its nuclear weapons programme. He spoke at the 1986 founding of the China Qigong Research Society where it was proclaimed that qigong would be able to improve everything from agricultural productivity⁶⁵ to the performance of astronauts and athletes.⁶⁶ Qian proposed a new definition of qigong that went far beyond its health-promoting benefits to encompass supernatural powers, including 'overcoming the barriers of space' (i.e. telekinesis⁶⁷). When, in 1986, the China Qigong Science Research Society was founded, Professor Qian Xuesen, proposed that if ten million Chinese could be persuaded to practise qigong, of whom 100,000 could go on to become masters, it would be 'a truly great thing.'

One qigong master, Zhang Baosheng, became famous for setting fire to clothing with his bare hands...

Despite opposition from a number of sceptical voices, there was widespread acceptance of – and research into – extraordinary powers within the scientific and political communities. Links were made with Western paranormal research and close attention was paid to rumours of Soviet and American experiments into the military application of extraordinary powers.⁶⁸ Meanwhile back at home, qigong masters were demonstrating more and more impressive powers – lighting electric bulbs and cooking meat on skewers by qi power alone, detecting underground gold deposits, predicting earthquakes, solving criminal cases, seeing into human bodies and so on. Many believed that the new science of qigong would allow humans to fly unaided or to be in two places at once.

One qigong master, Zhang Baosheng, became famous for setting fire to clothing with his bare hands and, more prosaically, making chocolates disappear in front of an audience of officials and journalists, as well as removing pills from a sealed bottle. A hospital employed him as a living x-ray machine, and when Marshal Ye Jianying, who masterminded the overthrow of the Gang of Four, became ill, Zhang magically removed clumps of 'phlegm' from his throat without touching him.

Another qigong master who came to be worshipped 'like a god'⁶⁹ was Yan Xin, a young martial arts practitioner and doctor of traditional Chinese medicine. After the story spread that he had cured a patient's crushed vertebrae (he had been told that he would not walk for six months) in a half hour qigong healing session, Yan Xin was catapulted to fame. Moving from city to city healing the sick, he refused to take payment for his work and was soon treating high government officials. On a visit to Japan he was reported

to have thrashed a number of top martial artists without even moving (let alone breaking sweat). In experiments conducted by Qinghua University, he transmitted his 'gong' when prompted by telephone calls and altered water and cell samples in a laboratory seven kilometres away. When a massive forest fire broke out in Liaoning Province, Yan Xin was reported to have induced a storm which put out the fire. He began to give 'power-inducing' lectures that lasted for up to fourteen hours at a time, where attendees fell into trance states, were cured of various diseases and spontaneously developed paranormal powers.

During a Chinese New Year special – the most watched TV programme in China – another qigong master, Zhang Hongbao, fried a fish in his bare hands with 'electric qigong' and a colleague, Zhang Jialing, a master of 'light' qigong, stood first on a balloon and then on a sheet of paper suspended between two chairs.

In 1988, master Zhang Rongtang, who was reported to be able to spin his body 1700 times in 20 minutes, fasted for nine days under supervision and was still able to climb Yuhuang Mountain. News of this feat sparked a frenzy of fasting (bigu) among qigong adherents.

Another phenomenon of this time was the development of what was called spontaneous qigong, where practitioners were encouraged to enter trance states and spontaneously express themselves in the form of uncontrolled movements, shouting, weeping, screaming, belching, yawning etc. While some may have benefited from such catharsis,⁷⁰ one of these methods – Flying Crane Qigong – gave rise to reports of 'qigong deviation' (zouhuo rumo) – a state of extreme emotional and psychological distress accompanied by abnormal physical sensations, depression, insomnia, paranoia and hallucinations, amongst other symptoms.⁷¹ Psychiatric hospitals opened special clinics to deal with the growing number of distressed patients suffering from psychotic states ascribed to inappropriate or overly intense qigong practice and unskillful teachers. When people started dying from obsessive fasting or jumping off buildings believing they could fly, ammunition was provided for a growing anti-qigong movement. More material for this backlash was provided by the blatant profiteering of famous qigong masters who began to charge ever-higher fees for healings or the sale of products such as qi-infused tea or paintings.

In 1990 Zhang Xiangyu, a qigong master, was arrested for quackery after holding mass healing sessions that earned her over one million yuan. And the famous Yan Xin slipped out of China to take up residency in the United States after a man died during one of his power-inducing lectures – going into trance-like spontaneous movement and collapsing with foam dripping from his mouth, all the while being ignored by those around him who believed he had simply entered an altered state.

The apotheosis of qigong fever came with the rise and inevitable downfall of the Falungong movement. Qigong

masters were arrested or sought refuge abroad and its practice was taken back under the wing of the state sports authorities who declared that only four traditions could officially be practised: the Eight Pieces of Brocade (baduanjin), the Five Animal Frolics (wuqinxi), Sineo Transforming Exercises (yijinjin) and the Six-Character Formula (liuzijue). State support and encouragement was increasingly given to taijiquan and other martial practices, particularly competition and demonstration versions. Inner development was frowned upon.

My experience

When I first began to practise qigong seriously, at the beginning of the 1990s, I had read about Chinese research on external qi and how it could be used to heal, to alter bacteria in test tubes and to induce anaesthesia. Whilst I am fairly sceptical by nature and certainly did not believe the wilder claims made for qigong, I was inclined to believe there might be some truth in these ones. And though I didn't really believe in telekinesis, I did like the idea of qigong/martial masters being able to disable opponents without touching them.⁷²

Over the years, I studied with a wide range of teachers, several well-known, and practised assiduously. Occasionally I tried external qi healing on patients in my clinic and felt that I was really doing something, a belief that was sometimes backed up by the sensations they reported experiencing when I held my hands over part of their body, focused my intention and attempted to transmit qi from my palms.

However, as the years went by, I saw no sign of the development of any external qi/paranormal powers in myself, nor did I witness them in any of the teachers I studied with.

What I did encounter, however, was a widespread (and often unexamined) belief in extraordinary powers among students of qigong, in the new age community and of course among followers of many different religions. As far as qigong is concerned, students seemed to delight in recounting the uncanny powers of their teachers and interpreted their (to my eyes) most prosaic and even unskillful interactions as being imbued with profound and even paranormal content. Their yearning to place their teachers on a higher plane sadly seemed to be matched by the need of some teachers to encourage them. There does seem to be something about qigong and the martial arts – perhaps because of the sense of personal power and specialness they generate – that leads emotionally underdeveloped teachers to exploit and manipulate their students in both crude and subtle ways.

This relationship is antithetical to what I believe a good teacher should be committed to fostering – true autonomy in their students.⁷³ And while aided immeasurably by a good teacher, qigong is ultimately a self-dependent practice where we are transformed and refined in the crucible of

our own dedicated work rather than being dependent on passively receiving the external qi or wisdom of others.

As far as the complementary/Asian medicine community is concerned I have frequently encountered belief in the existence of external qi and/or extraordinary powers. Practitioners talk of sensing qi with their hands (even claiming to distinguish between the qi flowing through different channels/meridians⁷⁴), while many acupuncturists believe that their own qi is transmitted through the needle into their patient. More widely, among new age groups I have often heard people say that food cooked with love and mindfulness actually absorbs the 'energy' of the chef and that this healing qi can be transmitted to those who eat it, even if the food is carried to another place – a variation on the blessing of holy water which is practised in some qigong circles as well as Christian and Hindu ones.⁷⁵ Similarly, it is widely taken for granted that intent to heal creates an actual healing force that can be transmitted to another person, present or far away – in the same way that many Christians believe in the healing power of prayer.

As far as the complementary/Asian medicine community is concerned I have frequently encountered belief in the existence of external qi and/or extraordinary powers.

Yet – whether one is by nature credulous or sceptical – subjective belief should always be altered in the light of persuasive evidence. What then of those Chinese studies reporting the reality of external qi and the existence of extraordinary powers, as well as the many persuasive accounts by scientists, journalists and political figures? Could they really all have been wrong?

In 1989, Zhang Honglin, Director of the China Academy of Chinese Medicine's Qigong Research Laboratory wrote a number of articles in which he condemned the idea of external qi. He said that external qi had never been mentioned in classical texts of Chinese medicine and that there were no external qi masters in the traditions from which qigong was drawn.⁷⁶ Regarding experiments that seemed to show the existence of external qi, he claimed they were of poor methodology and had never been replicated. For example Gu Hansen, who invented the qi-measuring device that kick-started the external qi craze, refused to divulge the nature of the experiment or the design of her equipment to allow other researchers to repeat it.⁷⁷

Regarding the supposed power of charismatic qigong healers, he suggested they only succeeded through a combination of psychological suggestion, speech, body movement, facial expression and other influences. Anybody could become a famous qi healer, he said. Go to an area where you are unknown, claim a powerful lineage and make utterances, 'half incomprehensible to the ordinary person, and you will become an "external qi master" in a

wink. At that moment, you will only need to stretch out your arms for people to feel your “external qi” ...⁷⁸

Along with five other authors, Zhang Honglin co-authored a book, *Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience*,⁷⁹ which offered a detailed rebuttal of the various pieces of research that claimed to prove the existence of external qi. All of the experiments had proved to be unrepeatable – a basic tenet of acceptable research – either because the methodology of the original experiments was unexplained or was of such poor design it was meaningless, or because replicating the same experiments failed to produce positive results. In some cases, the universities and other institutions that were reported to have conducted the studies denied any knowledge of them. The book also claimed to expose the demonstrations of extraordinary powers by qigong masters as a mixture of common magic tricks and mass suggestion.

‘There exist no miraculous methods in the world, only plain ones, and the perfection of the plain is miraculous’

Fei Boxiong

When James Randi, the American stage magician and professional sceptic, visited China on behalf of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, the complete failure of any of the qigong masters tested was put down to Randi’s own ‘magical’ powers which were apparently strong enough to disrupt the experiments. This repeated the proposition put forward by many extraordinary powers enthusiasts that the ‘sarcasm’ of sceptics creates an ‘information field’ strong enough to disrupt those special powers.⁸⁰

It is worth noting, too, that modern Chinese books on medical qigong⁸¹ now regard the emission of external qi as controversial and unproven, while some books written and published in the West⁸² still take it as a given.

I think it is important to put China’s extraordinary powers research into context. This was a society that during the Great Leap Forward regularly reported grain production figures ten times higher than normal, and – as every Chinese medicine practitioner who is old enough can remember – filled research journals with studies that rarely reported improvement and cure figures lower than 90 per cent. Hierarchies in every sector tended to produce the results that their superiors and/or political masters desired. As for the healings and transformations experienced during mass sessions held by ‘qigong masters’, they do not seem that different from the hysteria surrounding Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, nor from the healings induced by Christian evangelists. Indeed the massively popular (and often extremely wealthy) qigong masters bore an uncanny resemblance to such kinds of evangelists.

An additional factor may be the prevalence of tales of super-powers throughout Chinese culture, for example in

the great 16th century novel *Journey to the West* (*‘Monkey’*), in endless folk and fairy tales, in Chinese operas, and in hundreds of kung-fu movies made over the last few decades.⁸³ Actually these stories date back to the 4th century BCE at least, the *Zhuangzi* asking, ‘How does the man of Tao walk through walls without obstruction, stand in fire without being burnt?’⁸⁴

It seems clear to me that qigong – like its antecedents during the long history of the yangsheng tradition – is a form of self-cultivation. Where healing or transcendence occurs it is as a result of one’s own application and understanding, and this cannot be given to or received from others in the form of external qi.

That does not mean, however, that we are islands of self that have no effect upon each other. Far from it. Through our presence, posture, movement, facial expression, our eyes and our words, the sounds we make, the quality of our touch, our attention and even our smell – we affect, and can teach and inspire each other, profoundly for good and for ill. As the fourth century BCE *Guanzi* says,

‘The complete mind cannot stay hidden in the body. Rather, it takes shape and appears on the outside. It can be known from the complexion of the face. When people meet someone whose appearance and mind are full of positive energy, they will feel happier than if they had met their own brother. On the other hand, when people meet someone with negative energy, they will feel more hurt than if they had been confronted with arms. His words without words [his radiance] will sound better and further than the vibrations of an eight-sided drum. When the complete mind appears on the outside, it shines brighter than the sun, and people recognize such a person easier than their own children.’⁸⁵

When practised correctly, qigong and the internal martial arts simultaneously cultivate the body (physical strength, flexibility,⁸⁶ structural integrity, balance, rootedness below and extension above), the breath (slow, deep, profound, nourishing) and the mind (presence in the moment, stillness, quietness, intention, emptiness and connectedness⁸⁷). Working with ordinary bodily and mental functions in this way these practices help us, first of all, to be ‘healthy, happy and human’,⁸⁸ and then – if we are lucky – to ‘hold up the Great Circle [of the heavens] and tread firmly over the great Square [of the earth]’, our human bodies connected to both.⁸⁹ Only if our practice deviates from this simplicity does it result in feelings of overweening power and delusions of grandeur.

As the great 19th century doctor Fei Boxiong said, ‘There exist no miraculous methods in the world, only plain ones, and the perfection of the plain is miraculous’.⁹⁰ Or as the renowned internal martial arts master Wang Xiangzhai said, ‘The ordinary is the extraordinary’.⁹¹ In my view, the yearning for the extraordinary often obscures the miracle

of the ordinary – the ordinary miracle of existence that we are surrounded by every moment of our lives, and which qigong and similar practices can help us to experience with ever greater intensity. What a shame to walk through this garden of a planet, surrounded by its every day miracles, but only have eyes for those pesky fairies at the bottom of the garden.

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Endnotes

- 1 *South China Morning Post*, December 19th 2013, available at <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1293677/wang-lins-last-trick-magic-act>>
- 2 A 170 billion dollar a year internet based e-commerce agency.
- 3 Wang claims that in the one hundredth of a second before the snakes materialise, he travels to a distant mountain to lift rocks and find the snakes, bring them back and place them under the box or basin from which they appear.
- 4 *Global Times*, China, 24.7.2013.
- 5 The practice of bigu (abstention from cereals, i.e. abstention from normal food) aimed to replace food with herbs, mineral drugs and special breathing practices.
- 6 '... the perfected breathe all the way to their heels, unlike ordinary folk who breathe only as far as their throats.' *Zhuangzi*, 3rd century BCE (in Kohn, 2008, p14).
- 7 For example, a late 18th century sect led by Wang Lun in Northeast China was divided into 'civil' and 'military' wings, the former focusing on fasting and breathing exercises, the latter on martial arts, breathing exercises and incantations. See Esherick, J.W. (1987). *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*. University of California Press: Berkeley.
- 8 According to Liu (2010), the term qigong first appeared in a Daoist text (*Jing Ming Zong Jiao Lu*) in the Jin dynasty (265-420 CE).
- 9 Despeux, C. (1989). *Gymnastics: The Ancient Tradition*, in Kohn (1989).
- 10 See http://literati-tradition.com/qi_gong_origins.html [accessed 24/11/2013].
- 11 Liu (2010), p36.
- 12 Roth, H. D, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism*. Columbia University Press: New York. p76.
- 13 Harper, D. (1998). *Early Chinese Medical Manuscripts: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts*. Wellcome Asian Medical Monographs: London.
- 14 Graham, A. C. (1986). *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Allen and Unwin: London, p265.
- 15 This is repeated, more or less in, 'Therefore, the authentic men in their roamings do not let their hearts be disturbed by puffing and blowing, inhaling and exhaling, expelling the old, taking in the new; bear lumbering, bird stretching, duck ablutions, monkey jumping, owl gazing and tiger staring – all that is for men to nourish the body.', in Bromley, M. et al. (2010). *Jing Shen: A Translation of Huainanzi Chapter 7*. Monkey Press.
- 16 From *Zhuangzi* chapter 11, Zai You (Letting Things Be), translation from Liu, 2010, p39.
- 17 Of course even 'active' practices (as compared to what Kongzi/Confucius called 'mind fasting' or 'sitting and forgetting') can be very internal and quiet and there are a host of techniques where the body is held still in standing, seated or lying meditation while one uses visualisations, special breathing methods such as inhaling sun or moon essence, and mental direction of qi flow to different regions of the body.
- 18 As a general rule, quiet and still practice is considered to be more nourishing and more conducive to mental and spiritual development, while active practice is more moving and strengthening. But as the yin and yang of practice they inevitably overlap.
- 19 A legendary Emperor, traditionally dated 2356-2255 BCE.
- 20 Despeux, C. (1989). *Gymnastics: The Ancient Tradition*, in Kohn (1989), p238.
- 21 Knoblock, J, Riegel, J, 2000. *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study*. Stanford University Press.
- 22 Quoted in Kohn, L. (2005). *Health and Long Life: The Chinese Way*. Three Pines Press: St. Petersburg, p.12.
- 23 Liu (2010), p40.
- 24 Kohn (2008), p49.
- 25 The thirty manuscripts containing 45 separate texts found in a lacquered box at Mawangdui included maps, texts on astronomy, versions of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes) and *Daodejing*, medical texts and six manuscripts devoted to longevity and health practices. Two - the *He Yinyang* (Harmonising Yin and Yang) and the *Tianxia Zhidao Tan* (The Perfect Dao in the World) - deal with sexual practice, discussing the timing and frequency of intercourse as well as herbal remedies for impotence and weakness. Two - the *Yangsheng Fang* (Recipes for Nourishing Life) and the *Shiwen* (Ten Questions) - focus on breathing, diet and herbal medicine. And two - the *Quegu Shiqi* (Eliminating Grains and Eating Qi) and the well-known *Daoyintu* (Exercise Chart) - focus on breathing practice and physical exercises. The former promotes the use of breathing exercises ('eating qi') to replace food ('eliminating grains'), while the latter is a chart of forty-four figures practising different daoyin (stretching and pulling) techniques.
- 26 Of Huatojiaji acupuncture point fame.
- 27 Stanley-Baker (2006), pp.121-2.
- 28 The *Yangsheng Yaoji* (Essentials of Nourishing Life) by Zhang Zhan now only survives in fragments and mentions in other texts.
- 29 *Taiqing Daoyin Yangsheng Jing* (Great Clarity Scripture on Healing Exercises and Nourishing Life) quoted in Kohn (2008), pp.100-102.
- 30 Despeux, C. (1989). *Gymnastics: The Ancient Tradition*. In Kohn 1989. p239.
- 31 Daoist Master Azure Ox (a title used for Feng Heng), a longevist known for eating coptis root

- (Huang Lian) and liquid silver, in Stanley-Baker (2006), p.97
- 32 Kohn (2008), p.134.
- 33 Wilms, S. (2010). "Nurturing Life in Classical Chinese Medicine: Sun Simiao on Healing without Drugs, Transforming Bodies and Cultivating Life", *The Journal of Chinese Medicine*, 93: 5-13.
- 34 The Daoist School of Supreme Clarity (Shangqing) emphasised cultivation through meditation, visualisation and breathing practices as well as physical exercises, although the quiescent meditative practices took priority.
- 35 The *Yangxing Yangming Lu* is the origin of the (still current) Six Healing Sounds practice: 'There is one kind of inbreath, and six kinds of outbreath: The one kind of inbreath is called xi (inhalation). As for the six kinds of outbreath they are chui (blowing), hu (exhaling), xi (sobbing), he (huffing), xu (sighing), and xi (panting). They all expel the qi.' in Stanley-Baker (2006), p.110
- 36 Kohn (2008), p.143.
- 37 The combination of seasonal solar changes with the twelve lunar months gives 24 two-week periods essential for the agricultural rhythm of the year. Kohn (2008), p.170.
- 38 Liu (2010), p.54.
- 39 Many were translations from Japanese texts.
- 40 Otohede, U. "*The Creation and Emergence of Qigong*", in Ashima & Wank (2009), p.243.
- 41 According to Li Ling [(2001). *A Study on Chinese Occult Arts, Zhongguo fangshu kao*. Beijing: Eastern Press (quoted in <http://literati-tradition.com/qi_gong_origins.html>)], qigong also absorbed modern scientific concepts such as 'field', 'energy' etc. as well as 'chemical and magical tricks which had a long history in Taoist practices'.
- 42 A traditional martial practice designed to strengthen the body so that it can withstand blows. Some hard qigong practices can be seen at the popular Shaolin monk shows, for example bending spears with the throat or having paving slabs broken over one's head.
- 43 Palmer (2007).
- 44 The term qigong appears first in a Tang dynasty Daoist text, and then again in two Song Dynasty documents but was otherwise mostly unknown. Palmer (2007). p.18
- 45 An interesting occurrence of the term qigong is the boast by Xin-cheng (Sincere Heart), one of the leaders of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, that, 'my whole body has qigong [literally "breath-efficacy"]; I can resist spears and guns.' Quoted in Esherick, J. (1987). *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*. University of California Press, p.223.
- 46 Possibly his uncle, the fifth successor of the Neiyanggong lineage.
- 47 'My organs move, my mind is still.'
- 48 According to Otohede, U, in *The Creation and Reemergence of Qigong in China*, in Ashima & Wank (2009), he sought to remove qigong's 'superstitious and bad elements'.
- 49 While medical tradition was considered to be part of the people's working class heritage, religion was associated with the 'deplorable feudal class'.
- 50 The Tangshan City Qigong Sanitarium was the first qigong organisation in China, drawing patients from Beijing and other large cities.
- 51 Zhu Xi was a 12th century Confucian scholar who practiced jingzuo – a meditative practice characterised by quiet introspection.
- 52 Lu Xiangshan (also known as Lu Jiuyuan) was another 12th century neo-Confucian scholar and philosopher.
- 53 *Tranquil Sitting* by Yin Shizi, currently available in an English translation published by Singing Dragon.
- 54 Miura, Kunio. (1989). *The Revival of Qi: Qigong in Contemporary China*, in Kohn (1989) pp.329-58.
- 55 Liu Shaoqi, President of the People's Republic from 1959 to 1968.
- 56 By 1954 The Tangshan Workers' Sanatorium was devoting 100 beds to qigong patients, most suffering from 'neurasthenia' and gastric disorders, who practised for seven hours a day. This was followed by a larger sanatorium at Beidahe where the Beidahe Rehabilitation Hospital still exists, under the auspices of Liu Guizhen's daughter Liu Yafei.
- 57 Otohede, U, in *The Creation and Reemergence of Qigong in China*, in Ashima & Wank 2009, p.250.
- 58 Chen Shou, who had dedicated himself to developing qigong, died aged 46 from the stress of intense criticism during the Cultural Revolution, while Zhou Qianchuan, a lineage holder of the Emei tradition, died in prison in 1971.
- 59 Palmer (2007), p.6.
- 60 This commonly used term was usually accompanied by tales of having been taught by hidden masters from an early age.
- 61 Song Tianbin, ed. (1994). *Qigong Study in Chinese Traditional Medicine (Zhongyi Qigongxue)*, Beijing: Renmin Weisheng Chubanshe.
- 62 Thornton, P. M. *The New Cybersects: Resistance and Repression in the Reform Era*. in Perry, E and Selden, M. (eds.), 2010. Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance, Routledge, p.253.
- 63 In the form of microwave energy, infrared rays, increased static electricity, electromagnetic waves and weak magnetic signals.
- 64 When his head brushed the clothes of a schoolmate and he 'saw' the brand of cigarettes hidden in his friend's pocket.
- 65 For the record, during the Great Leap Forward of 1958, Qian proposed that 20,000 kilograms of rice could be produced from a single 'mu' (0.16 acre) by closer seed planting. This assessment was used by Mao Zedong and may have been a factor in the disastrous famines that killed many millions of people. See Yang, D. L. (1998). *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society and Institutional Change Since the Great Leap Famine*. Stanford University Press, p.271.
- 66 During the 1990 Asian Games, six qigong masters helped athletes by using external qi healing and recorded tapes including qigong messages.
- 67 Otohede, U. in *The Creation and Reemergence of Qigong in China*, in Ashima & Wank (2009), p.252.
- 68 Such as telepathic spying, distant killing by mental powers, locating submarines, communicating over great distances and beneath the sea, and, of course, killing goats by staring at them (see Ronson, J. (2012). *The Men Who Stare at Goats*. Picador.)
- 69 Palmer (2007), p.137.
- 70 In a culture where strong expression of emotion has traditionally been frowned upon, the opportunity to 'let rip' may be very attractive. It has been suggested, also, that the catharsis of spontaneous qigong was an outlet for the repressed pain so many people held from their suffering during the Cultural Revolution.
- 71 There is a useful discussion of qigong deviation in Liu (2010) and at: <<http://www.iari.ru/qigongileng.html>>
- 72 The most impressive example of this I have seen was by Derren Brown (UK stage and TV illusionist) who painfully floored a tough-looking martial artist with a 'one-inch' punch that didn't actually connect physically. This can be viewed at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dmVfHZgHMUK>>. Brown always explains that his 'supernormal powers' are a result of suggestion and trickery.
- 73 As the Buddha said, 'Do not believe in something because it is reported. Do not believe in something because it has been practiced by generations or becomes a tradition or part of a culture. Do not believe in something because a scripture says it is so. Do not believe in something believing a god has inspired it. Do not believe in something a teacher tells you to. Do not believe in something because the authorities say it is so. Do not believe in hearsay, rumor, speculative opinion, public opinion, or mere acceptance to logic and inference alone. Help yourself, accept as completely true only that which is praised by the wise and which you test for yourself and know to be good for yourself and others. (*Anguttara Nikaya* 3.65)
- 74 An elegant experiment into energy sensing was conducted by Emily Rosa, aged nine - the youngest person ever to have a research paper published in a peer-reviewed journal. The study, which appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, simply tested whether blinded, experienced energy healers could tell whether an investigator's hand was hovering over their own left or right hands. Results were marginally poorer than chance. <<http://jama.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=187390>>
- 75 See for example <http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com/gangajal-carton_11815.php4>, and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_waters>.
- 76 Liu (2010), however, mentions that during the Sui dynasty (581-618 CE), the practice of buqi jue (the skill of spreading the qi outside the body) was practised. A school of buqi healing became very popular in the West in the late 20th century under the direction of the late Shen Hongxun.
- 77 Palmer (2007), p.52.

- 78 Palmer (2007), p.126.
- 79 Zixin Lin et al. (1998). *Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience*. Prometheus Books: Amherst.
- 80 Palmer (2007), p.127.
- 81 See for example, Liu (2010).
- 82 See for example Johnson, J.A. (2005). *Chinese Medical Qigong Therapy: Volume #3 - Differential Diagnosis; Clinical Foundations; Treatment Principles and Clinical Protocols*. International Institute of Medical Qigong.
- 83 It seems possible to me that in the absence of a commonly held theistic religion – which elsewhere has satisfied (or dulled) most people's desire for the transcendent and magical – China has been prone to be swept by cults, from the Boxer Rebellion, through the cult of Mao, to qigong fever. This would be similar to the argument made by religious leaders in the West; bemoaning their dwindling flocks, they point the finger at host of new age beliefs and cults that they complain are rushing in to fill the gap.
- 84 Wholeness, 19:2 in Merton, T. (1965). *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New Directions.
- 85 Ishida, H. in *Body and Mind*, in Kohn (1989).
- 86 'When people are born, they're supple and soft; When they die, they end up stretched out firm and rigid; When the ten thousand things and grasses and trees are alive, they're supple and pliant; When they're dead, they're withered and dried out. Therefore we say that the firm and rigid are companions of death, while the supple, the soft, the weak, and the delicate are companions of life. If a soldier is rigid, he won't win; If a tree is rigid, it will come to its end. Rigidity and power occupy the inferior position; Suppleness, softness, weakness, and delicateness occupy the superior position.' Henricks, R. G. (1993). *Te-Tao Ching*, 76. Random House Inc.: New York
- 87 I hesitate to use the word spiritual, as it means so many different things to people. In my view, however, this practice is spiritual in that it cultivates mindful awareness of the present moment, connects our microcosmic selves to the macrocosmic universe, and – at least temporarily – dissolves the ego that separates us from the Dao.
- 88 The primary and initial aim of practice according to my first teacher, the Buddhist monk Sangharakshita.
- 89 'Only the wise, above, make themselves companions of heaven to maintain the life of the head; below, they make themselves into the image of earth to maintain the life of the feet; just as, in the middle, they occupy themselves with human affairs to maintain the life of the five zang.'
- Rochat de la Vallee, E. (2013). *The Rhythm at the Heart of the World: Neijing Suwen, Chapter 5*. Monkey Press.
- 90 In *Yichun Shengyi* (Refined Medicine remembered), in Scheid, V. (2007). *Currents of Tradition in Chinese Medicine 1626-2006*. Eastland Press: Seattle.
- 91 Wang Xiangzhai, 1890-1963, was a great advocate and teacher of Zhan Zhuang (Standing like a tree). He also said, 'In silence there must be movement, and in motion, there must be silence. A small movement is better than a big, no movement is better than a small, silence is all the movement's mother. In movement you should be like a dragon or a tiger. In no movement you should be like a Buddha.' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wang_Xiangzhai>