

Embodying Utopia

Charisma in the post-Mao *Qigong* Craze

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the dynamics of charismatic religious movements through the case of the *qigong* craze, which was the largest mass spiritual/religious movement in urban China in the 1980s and 1990s, until the banning of Falun Gong in 1999. Charisma can be apprehended at three levels: as the embodied experience of individuals; as the emotional affect between masters and followers; and as a collective movement within a macro-social context. This article examines the articulation between these three dimensions of the charismatic phenomenon, tracing how, through breathing and meditation exercises, the masters teaching them and the organizations promoting them, charismatic experiences could be generated within and between millions of individual bodies and articulated with utopian expectations at a specific juncture of modern Chinese history. The emic notion of *qi* as an objectified power that can be experienced, manipulated, and produced is discussed, showing how it both facilitated the emergence of charisma but prevented its consolidation, leading groups based on *qi* experiences towards post-charismatic outcomes of commodification, radicalization or traditionalization.

The *qigong* movement was the most prevalent form of urban religiosity in the People's Republic of China during the last two decades of the twentieth century. During this period, tens, if not hundreds, of millions of Chinese practiced *qigong* gymnastic, breathing and meditation techniques taught by thousands of self-proclaimed *qigong* masters whose networks of followers became the largest popular

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organizations outside the Chinese Communist Party—the best-known, but not the only one, of which was Falun Gong. This article focuses on the modalities of how charismatic experiences between individual bodies could be generated by mass organizations and articulated with utopian expectations at a specific juncture of modern Chinese history.¹ How are individual, subjective bodily experiences linked to historical changes at a macro-social level, creating a mass movement? I propose that the dynamics of charisma are the key to understanding the link between individual subjectivity and broader social process.

Following Ji Zhe's contribution in this issue, we may look at charismatic relationships in terms of three analytical categories: the *expectation* of the realization of utopian hopes among followers, the emotional *affect* between the followers and the leader who incarnates the imminent realization of their expectations of the extraordinary, and the *responsibility* of the leader, who, in order to sustain the relationship, must be *responsive* to followers' needs and confirm their expectations. As discussed in Feuchtwang and Goossaert's contributions in this issue, the leader's responsiveness is tested and confirmed through extraordinary deeds: self-sacrifice for his or her followers, and the ability to "move gods and/or men to react (*ganying*)" to his or her entreaties and commands. Charismatic relationships thus involve a circular exchange of responsiveness, in which the leader confirms the utopian expectations of the followers, who then confirm the extraordinary power by offering him or her their voluntary acquiescence. Based on such a Maussian "gift exchange,"² charismatic relationships cannot come into existence if expectations are absent among potential followers or if individuals seen as endowed with extraordinary powers do not respond to expectations.³ Likewise, once they come into existence, charismatic relationships are fraught with tension and inherently unstable: either they move in an upward spiral, with expectations of the extraordinary repeatedly amplified and confirmed, or their mobilizing capacity dissipates, when the leader is perceived as unable to confirm expectations, or if the expectations themselves change. In this article, then, I propose to define charisma as *a relationship based on the expectation of the extraordinary, which stimulates and empowers collective behavior*.

While expectations of the extraordinary may well exist in a culture, diffused within mythological narratives or ideologies, it is the incarnation within a single person of the realization of these expectations which brings them to life, gives them a human expression, induces the emotional responses characteristic of an intensely personalized relationship, orients the action of the participants, and becomes a focal point of collective behavior. Put this way, charisma can erupt when particular individuals come to incarnate commonly shared expectations of the extraordinary—be they traditional expectations of a messianic or millenarian type, or modern promises of futuristic wonders. What we see in

the post-Mao *qigong* movement is an instance in which masters incarnated the realization of both at the same time. It is at the moment when what is a commonly shared distant dream or fear suddenly appears on the verge of imminent realization, centered on one person or a small handful of individuals, that the collective excitement of a charismatic movement erupts.

LOCAL EXPERIENCES OF *QI*

In May 1993, only weeks into my first stay in China, I was invited to a lecture on “*Qigong*science” at the Natural Gas Transportation Division of the Sichuan Petroleum Administration.⁴ The Division was a self-contained work-unit (*danwei*) located on a hill surrounded by rice paddies and connected to Chengdu, some 20 km distant, by a winding road which passed through hillocks and valleys, used mostly by farmers carting their produce to town on heavy baskets suspended from the rear of their bicycles. Commanding this pastoral landscape stood the Division—rows of ageless concrete edifices along a single street, housing the administrative offices, the residential units, the shops, the schools, and the leisure facilities of its two thousand employees and their families.

The lecture took place in the Division’s cinema, a large, bare hall with propaganda slogans hanging on the walls—“Persist in the Reforms and Opening Up,” “Strengthen the application of the spirit of the 14th Party Congress,” and so on. About one hundred people, male employees in their synthetic shirts and pants with keychains hanging from their belts, women in black stretch bootstrap stockings and flowery tops, and some quiet children, had come to listen to the lecture, filling about half the seats of the cinema. Two middle-aged men wearing Western business suits sat on the stage: they were the “*qigong* masters,” *qigongshi*. The older of the two sat silently on a chair, his hands on his laps, while the second delivered a long-winded speech during which he occasionally seemed to grasp air with his hands.

After about ten minutes, a woman in the audience fell into fits of uncontrollable shaking, followed by several others in attendance. A third of the audience broke into a cacophony of burps, yawns and cries, which continued for some twenty minutes, while the children hilariously imitated the grown-ups. Accompanying me out at the end of the session, Mr. Liu, an engineer in the Karamay Oilfield in Xinjiang who had been sent to the Division for training at its Petroleum Cadres’ College, excitedly exclaimed that the back pains he had been suffering from were now cured!

I had just witnessed a “power-inducing scientific lecture” (*daigong kexue baogaohui*), a type of event at which *qigong* masters emitted energy or *qi* while lecturing on the scientific principles of *qigong*, in order to induce healing and paranormal abilities among audience members. Such lectures had first appeared about five years earlier as part of the

qigong wave which was gripping China at the time, The event I had witnessed, in a suburban work unit and led by relatively unknown masters, was child's play compared to the mass *qigong* lectures which had electrified the people of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in the previous few years, where "star" masters such as Yan Xin (b. 1950) and Zhang Hongbao (1954–2006) filled sports stadiums with thousands of the enthusiastic, the sick and the curious. In the notorious case of Yan Xin, the power-inducing lectures lasted eight to ten hours without breaks or interruptions, while avid meditators stood still on their seats, breathing deeply, backs upright, hands on their laps facing upward to receive the master's *qi*, while others rolled to the ground in a trance and paraplegics stood up from their wheelchairs.

Far from those stadiums at the Natural Gas Division, I was shaken out of my slumber every morning at 6:30 a.m. by the Morning Program which blasted out of the Division loudspeakers until eight o'clock—a shrill auditory grind that included, besides news reports from China People's Radio and local announcements, the commands for the standardized nationwide calisthenics routine—*Yi! Er! San! Si! Wu! Liu! Qi! Ba!* But the group of six or seven old ladies who gathered outside my stairwell to exercise, and whom I walked past each morning with my enameled metal bowl to collect my ration of hot cow's milk and fried dough sticks, were not doing calisthenics but "fragrant *qigong*" (*xiang-gong*), standing, raising and lowering their arms, loosely shaking their palms over their heads, faces, chest and abdomen, purifying their bodies of negative *qi* and, they claimed, producing fragrances. Though I never *smelled* anything when I passed this particular group of ladies, I did *feel* things when I later started practicing *qigong* myself.

As an English teacher at the Cadres' School, my students were engineers who hailed from petroleum units in the deserts of Xinjiang, the refineries of Daqing and the gas fields of Sichuan, and are now likely using the language skills I taught them in the Chinese oil ventures in Sudan, Gabon and Venezuela. One of them, Mr. Xu, was the disciple of a *qigong* master, Celestial Imprint (*Tianyin*), and organized a group to practice his method, the *Power of the Nine Resonances* (*Jiuying shengong*), in the Division's basketball field each morning. I joined this group of 25 middle-aged geologists, engineers and accountants, men and women intellectuals who had spent the prime of their youth as Mao's sent-down youth in the countryside. They were eager to make up, through intensive study and an insatiable curiosity about the world, for their lost years of schooling during the Cultural Revolution. For them, official slogans about "reforming and opening up to the world" had a deep personal meaning in relation to their own trajectories of discovering new knowledge from abroad, new approaches to doing things, and constantly questioning the revolutionary dogma in which they had been indoctrinated during their youth—while technologies such as television, modern

home appliances, elevators, karaoke and disco lights were propelling them, in the space of a few short years, from the steam-train era of the industrial revolution to the consumerism and information celebration of late modernity. This “opening up” revealed endless, exciting possibilities to them—possibilities in stark contrast to the drab reality of their lives in self-contained work units, in which opportunities were few and achieving any aim depended on complex, and exhausting, manipulations of webs of personal connections.⁵

Having grown up in the Mao years and living in the totally secularized environment of the work-unit, they also had little direct exposure to China’s religious traditions. As intellectuals, most were intimately familiar with the characters of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*⁶ and of the magical exploits of Monkey in the *Journey to the West*⁷—which had been serialized on TV a few years earlier. Hong Kong kung fu films, which were all the rage in the cinemas and aired each night on TV, were populated with Daoist wizards, Buddhist sages, and extraordinary virtuosos of the body. These novels and films opened an imaginary, fantasy world in which anything was possible and all physical limitations disappeared.

When I asked them about *qigong*, they would ask me if I *believed* in it—a question that always threw me off, and still does, because wasn’t *qigong* just a set of exercises? Believers excitedly cited the famous master Yan Xin, who had, by emitting *qi*, put out a huge fire in the boreal forests of Daxing’anling in Northeast China, and had conducted laboratory experiments in which he had transformed the molecular structure of water by emitting *qi* from a distance of 2000 km. And they recounted endless cases of people they knew—or themselves—who had been healed of incurable illnesses through *qigong*. To “believe” in *qigong* and in its “extraordinary powers” (*teyi gongneng*), then, was to believe that anything was possible, that *qigong* masters, if not potentially anybody, could break beyond the limitations of the ordinary world.

Belief wasn’t necessary to practice the exercises, however, and the group, composed of believers, skeptics, and all intermediary shades of opinion or lack thereof, assembled in rows every morning at 6:30 a.m. at the basketball field, where Xu taught us the *qigong* method’s set of nine movements. After a few days, when we were able to complete the postures without watching him, he would walk between us, scanning his hands over parts of the practitioners’ bodies, sometimes making movements as if to expel negative energies and send us *qi*—which I could distinctly feel as tingling “clouds” passing through my body.

To me, the feeling was slightly nauseating. Nonetheless, for someone to be able to produce such a sensation in me, without physical contact, was a mind-blowing experience, shattering my understanding of the nature of reality. For others in the group, though not all—some felt nothing while others were highly sensitive—the reaction was similar. A new world suddenly opened up to us, one which seemed to operate

according to laws radically different from the ones we had learned in all the materialist education we had received. Discovering this reality triggered an intense desire to know and to explore more—a curiosity which was further stimulated by the strong sense of energy, vigor, and power that many of us felt after a few weeks of practice, and the ability we acquired to mentally feel *qi*, to stimulate and direct its circulation within the body, and then to project it outwards.

The practitioners felt and discussed unusual bodily experiences among themselves and with Xu that included a feeling of heat, of tingling, of a “current” in the hands and fingertips, as well as in the lower abdomen; short headaches; penile erection and increase in sexual appetite; an increase in mental activity; the feeling of becoming a giant, the head constantly rising; a slight tingling in any part of the body toward which the fingers were pointed; a light pain in any part of the body touched by the hands; a feeling of heat or coolness emanating from the palms; burping and flatulence; the feeling of a current of *qi* emitted by the palms; the feeling of creating a “ball of *qi*” by holding the two palms facing each other, which could be increased in size or shrunk by moving the palms closer or farther apart; a feeling of immobility of the body, a loss of control over the limbs; “currents” moving up the spine into the head, and which could be mentally directed toward any part of the body; flashes of light perceived when the eyes were closed; deep respiration; and slowing down of the rhythm of breathing.

The method taught by Mr. Xu claimed that no effort of concentration was needed, that one could practice it any time, even while watching TV, in contrast to other methods which involved meditation and mental training, which were reputed to trigger, among some *qigong* practitioners, a pathological fascination called *zouhuo rumo*. Indeed, these deep breathing and visualization techniques could trigger mystical visions and peak experiences, heightened sensitivity, a melting of the boundaries between self and other and a blurring of the distinction between imagination and external reality, and a sense of being able to act on the world through mental action alone.⁸

Bursting with energy, I, too, began to feel that anything was possible, that with further training I could accomplish anything by dancing with this mysterious power. How I came to the conclusion that such fantasies, whether true or false, present the spiritual danger of a hypertrophy of the ego, is another story which I will not recount here. Certainly, nothing held back my friend Bai, a 23-year-old teacher at the Division’s primary school. He and his wife attended a week-long training retreat of the Zhonggong movement, the largest *qigong* organization at the time, claiming 30 million adherents. It was headquartered in a reconverted army bunker behind Mt. Qingcheng, just west of Chengdu, famous as the birthplace of Daoism. At the Zhonggong headquarters, a few miles from the Lord Lao pavilion with its statue of Laozi riding a black ox,

followers could absorb the master's *qi* by laying their hands on his first car. At this retreat, Bai had learned to make his fingers longer through the power of his concentration, while his wife's nearsightedness was cured, and she threw away her eyeglasses. The couple were bursting with excitement when they recounted their experiences to me over a steamy and spicy hot pot. And they proudly wore the pendants they had bought at the retreat, bearing a holographic image of the master, the youthful Zhang Hongbao, sitting in the lotus position in a Western suit, his hair oiled and slicked to the back.

Bai now plunged into all branches of knowledge, from Chinese philosophy to Christianity and world history, sleeping only three hours a day, in weeks transformed from an earnest small-town teacher into a man of knowledge, confidently expounding his theories and explanations on everything from the origin of the universe to the interpretation of the Bible. Other Division residents began to visit him in his dormitory room to seek advice on problems of health and life. He began healing, sending *qi* to his visitors and to patients who called him by telephone. He began to see himself as in the same league as Buddha and Jesus, and to train his pupils to receive American TV signals merely by leaning back and looking at the ceiling.

Bai clearly went over the top, and most practitioners didn't follow his path, but his experience was still significant because it was enthusiasts like him who were the movers and shakers of *qigong* at the grassroots level, and often grew into the role of *qigong* masters. Bai himself did not succeed, however: a few months later he moved to a coastal city to become a manager in his uncle's business, where *qigong* was of little help to him. He later returned to Chengdu as a self-employed entrepreneur in the information technology field, interested in religion and spirituality but no longer practicing *qigong*.

These ethnographic vignettes can give us an idea of the *qigong* movement at a grassroots *danwei*. Everybody knew about it, on any given morning one could find, at different spots in the *danwei*, between two to four practice groups of different methods, formed by enthusiastic individuals, which would go on for a few months then peter off, until someone else came along with a new method. People went to the healing lectures and watched a documentary series on *qigong* on TV, showcasing the extraordinary powers of the grandmasters. At the Division Party Secretary's home, I spotted on the tea table the bestselling book *The Great Qigong Master Comes Out of the Mountains*, a hagiographic account of the miracles of grandmaster Zhang Hongbao. Some practiced a method for a while then gradually gave up because they couldn't get up so early in the morning, or were too busy, or the curiosity wore out. Others found their health problems improve or their illnesses cured, and their stories circulated in the local gossip, and they persevered in their practice. But the most assiduous were older people, for whom

nurturing health was the highest priority, and regular daily exercises in small groups were also a good time to socialize.

What signs of charisma can be seen in these vignettes? Many people practiced *qigong*, in various degrees of intensity, for various periods of time, with unstable levels of enthusiasm. Few were personally involved in a charismatic relationship. Of those I have described, only Xu, and a classmate of his, was a follower of Celestial Imprint, and Bai and his wife were followers of Zhang Hongbao. Both Xu and Bai animated *qigong* practice and healing activities in the Division, in which scores of less committed residents participated. The enthusiasm of people like Xu and Bai, though a small minority, had a significant impact, in that it helped to disseminate *qigong* experiences to a large proportion of Division residents. Indeed, *qi* experiences created the soil out of which charismatic relationships could grow. They were often experienced as something “extraordinary,” and could be linked by association with expectations (or the imagination of) the extraordinary which were present in the popular culture of China at the time—from magical fantasies associated with mythical figures and kung fu movies, to utopian visions of technological modernity. Miraculous tales of *qigong* grandmasters such as Yan Xin provided confirmation that such hopes and expectations were within reach, and many, though they didn’t become followers of a single master, did “believe” in *qigong*, opening what we could call a collective charismatic field of masters and practitioners. Within this field, Bai, by taking a course in Zhang Hongbao’s method, had *qi* experiences which were directly linked to a single master. Even though he had never met him in person, Bai attributed to him, through his method, the extraordinary ability to lengthen one’s finger or cure near-sightedness. For Bai and his wife, Zhang Hongbao incarnated the extraordinary expectations which had been fanned by the *qigong* movement through *qi* experiences. And yet, Bai’s charismatic relationship with Zhang Hongbao was short-lived, since he soon came to see himself as having equivalent powers, and, thanks to his own healing abilities, began to acquire a charismatic following of his own in the Division.

POWER AND CHARISMA

Qi experience was clearly an important factor in the emergence and nurturing of charisma. The interest of *qigong* in relation to charisma lies in its embodiment of the extraordinary through what the actors themselves describe as the experience and circulation of a mystic power called *qi* between masters and their followers. This power is the subject of highly elaborate emic discourses and theories, which name the power, describe its operation, and indicate how to manipulate and control it. Associated with these theories are sets of body, breathing and mental exercises which produce embodied experiences of this power. Because

the power is experienced viscerally—literally so, the lower abdomen being the vortex of this power in the body—it is more than, or other than, abstract faith or belief; and because it is understood as circulating between masters and practitioners, it produces a visceral, embodied relationship between them, creating a very special type of charismatic bond. *Qi* experiences can thus trigger and enhance charismatic relationships. On the other hand, because the power is so strongly objectified, and seen as universal and accessible to anyone who practices the exercises, it ultimately undermines the authority of masters whose charisma rests solely on their *qi*, and empowers individual practitioners who may work with it independently of a master, and indeed opens the possibility for *anyone*—indeed, *everyone*—to have access to it.

The *qigong* master is a peculiar type of charismatic figure: in the case of individuals with the ability to project *qi* to others, creating an “energy field” of mutual responsiveness between themselves and multitudes of followers, we can speak of a “somatized” charisma which is felt in the bodily sensations of flows of *qi* and healing experiences.⁹ In notions of *qi*, we find indigenous concepts which, in a way, specify a particular type of charisma, which is conceived of in a virtually, and often explicitly, material sense, as a substance or force which circulates and can be physically experienced. Furthermore, while the etymology of the term *charisma* evokes a gift which is mysteriously restricted to the “elect” or, by secular extension, to the “genius” or the “virtuoso,” in *qi* we find a power which is understood as potentially nurtured, cultivated, manipulated, even circulated at will by anyone who undergoes *qigong* training. Since *qi* is seen as being present everywhere in the universe, requiring only a specific form of technical training to be harnessed, it becomes conceivable to develop increasingly rationalized and efficient technologies of the body to make this power accessible in the largest possible quantity to the largest number of people. *Qi* thus became both the source of the grandmasters’ charisma, and the object of rationalized extraction and exploitation under the rubric of “somatic science”—making “extraordinary” powers accessible to ordinary people practicing very ordinary sets of exercises.

Qigong is described by practitioners primarily in terms of immediate experience, one which is felt directly in the body; these experiences are a crucial component of the charismatic phenomenon. It is not my purpose to define what these experiences are in physiological terms, nor to explain their mechanisms. What is important here is that the practice of *qigong* produces such types of experiences, and since most practitioners have no previous experiences of such types of experiences before practicing, they feel them as something special or extraordinary and *specific* to *qigong*. And precisely because they usually do not have prior experience of such phenomena, they will tend to adopt *qigong* cosmologies and discourses to understand and describe their experiences, inscribing themselves within the cosmology and concepts of *qigong*.

Qi experiences can be felt by any person who practices *qigong* exercises. Some may experience such sensations immediately, others only after a long period of sustained practice, and others not at all. The exercises provide the means for willfully triggering and controlling such experiences, so that one acquires the ability to become aware of *qi*, to increase its sensation, to mentally direct and control its flows, both within and outside the body. As such, there is nothing intrinsically charismatic about them, since they can be produced alone by virtually anyone, merely by following technical instructions, without the presence of a master.

However, such experiences can be induced even more powerfully through group practice. Phenomena such as burping, swaying and spontaneous movements appear to be contagious and triggered more easily in a group setting, which creates what is emically termed a “field of *qi*” (*qichang*) which facilitates the flow of energy and its appearance among practitioners. This was often reinforced through atmosphere-setting devices such as playing tapes of relaxing music or of lectures by a master. In practice groups in which I participated, it was also common for trainers to circulate among practitioners who were doing their standing exercises, and to emit *qi* toward them as they passed by.

Experiences of *qi* can be even more powerfully induced when the technical instructions are combined with *qi*-emission by a master in a group setting (or by playing an audio or videotape of the master, said to contain *qi*-filled “messages” *xinxi*). Typically, instructions on how to sit, to breathe, relax, and so on are combined with theoretical disquisitions on *qigong* science, accounts of healing through *qigong*, and other educational information. In this case the “field of *qi*” is orchestrated by a master, in person or through audio or video tape, who is seen as a virtuoso in *qigong*. The *qi* sensations felt by the practitioners are understood as occurring as a direct result of the power of the master himself or herself, through the emission of *qi*. The stage is thus set for the emergence of a charismatic relationship: the bodily experiences of the audience are felt as confirmations of the master’s extraordinary powers; the master is seen as an exemplary virtuoso, a model of accomplishment in *qigong* practice. Charisma is thus generated and confirmed through bodily experience.

The objectification of *qi* further makes it possible to imagine and implement its scientific and rationalized production in the context of modern, bureaucratic organizations: identify the somatic manifestations of *qi*, increase efficiency in the production and control of *qi* by designing body cultivation technologies to that end, by isolating and refining traditional techniques, create an apparatus for the mass dissemination of these techniques to as many people as possible in the shortest possible period of time. This project of rationalization could appeal to both masters seeking to create mass followings, and to state

agents excited by the prospect of turning “gems of Chinese tradition” into modern instruments for spreading health to the masses, and even into a revolutionary science which could propel China and the world into the utopia of human omnipotence.

Through the transmission networks established by hundreds of the masters in the 1980s and 1990s, *qi* experiences were indeed generated on a massive scale. These networks followed a relatively homogenous model of organization and transmission, linking the master and his core followers to the mass of practitioners throughout the country and abroad. At the grassroots, local practice points—such as those described in the ethnographic vignettes above—situated at specific spots in parks and public spaces, offered free exercise sessions led by volunteers in the mornings and evenings. These volunteers were coordinated by local branches at the regional or municipal level. They dealt with local state-sponsored *qigong* associations and government authorities, ensured the smooth running of practice points within a specified jurisdiction, and organized fee-charging training workshops at which one could learn the beginning and intermediary levels of the master’s method. Capable and enthusiastic participants in these workshops would then be chosen to lead practice points and teach the basic postures of the method. Higher-level training was normally provided only by the master in person. At this level of training, which often included management techniques, leading members of the organization were recruited. The central organization, which directed the overall expansion of the network, was controlled by the master, either officially as president, or behind the scenes with close disciples acting as officers, and was usually affiliated to a state-sponsored *qigong* association. The *qigong* masters could thus build massive transmission networks to generate *qi* experiences among millions of practitioners at thousands of practice points all over China and even overseas. It was on the basis of these experiences, and along these networks, that charismatic relationships could be established.

But, at the same time, these networks and *qi* experiences were not sufficient for masters to generate and sustain charisma. It was not enough to create and to teach a *qigong* method to millions. *Qigong* masters were a group of mostly middle-aged men, of ordinary status in society, marginal vis-à-vis both traditional and modern institutions.¹⁰ The role of *qigong* master, however, required that they be supermen, holders of a mystic force inherited from secret traditions going back to high antiquity, and transmitters of a path of utopian realization for humanity. How could they come to be identified with such an image? The career of the *qigong* master was a process of creating a public persona surrounded by a legend, until s/he came to be naturally and unconsciously perceived as an incarnation of cultural expectations. The essential factor in the emergence of the master was the public aura: the identity between the master and the mythical figure had to be convincing

and not artificial. She or he had to cultivate an image of a “true” *qigong* master and not of a charlatan, in a context where “phonies” were increasingly numerous. The status of “*qigong* master” was never objectively acquired nor universally recognized: it was the subject of a perpetual struggle. I have discussed elsewhere the ingredients which need to be combined and played up for a master to acquire charisma;¹¹ these correspond to the four “idioms” listed by Goossaert in this issue as typically conjoined by one person in charismatic relationships in China: (1) miraculous or healing powers deriving from virtuosity in self-cultivation; (2) mastery of scholarship and knowledge expressed in the idiom of science; (3) connection to tradition through claims to discipleship and genealogy; and (4) moral leadership accruing from self-sacrifice and virtue. Thus, while *qi* experiences could enhance expectations of the extraordinary, masters were expected to confirm their status through recourse to a combination of those four idioms.

THE MACRO-SOCIAL CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL JUNCTURE

In the previous section, I focused on technical operations: how *qi* experiences can be induced and controlled through sets of body exercises, and how they can stimulate and reinforce affect between a master and practitioners; how masters acquire the aura that enables them to incarnate the realization of extraordinary expectations; and how these sets of exercises, this image, and this bond can be replicated among millions of practitioners anywhere in the world. All of these elements can be rationalized and constantly refined to produce higher efficiency and impact. In the *qigong* movement, then, it would appear as if we could identify all of the necessary ingredients for the rationalized manufacture of charisma on a massive scale.

Indeed, it would be safe to estimate that at least one-fifth of China’s urban population—well over 100 million people—was directly exposed to *qigong* during the 1980s or 1990s, either attending healing lectures or practicing *qigong* gymnastic and breathing exercises in parks and public spaces. This phenomenon, called *qigong fever* by commentators at the time, which began in the late 1970s and came to an end with the state’s suppression of Falun Gong in 1999, was the largest mass cultural, social, and religious movement in urban post-Mao China. In the years immediately following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the health authorities of the new state attempted to secularize traditional body cultivation techniques and to institutionalize them as a discipline of the modernized “Chinese medicine,” under the category of *qigong*.¹² Initially practiced in sanatoria and clinics for the party elite, modern *qigong* was banned during the Cultural Revolution but reappeared in the late 1970s, as a form of mass exercise practiced in parks,

which acquired a new legitimation not only as a branch of medicine, but also as the foundation of a new science which could develop paranormal abilities or “extraordinary powers” and usher a new scientific revolution. With the support of leading members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and scientific institutions, thousands of *qigong* practice networks led by entrepreneurial masters blossomed throughout the 1980s. The repertoire of practices expanded to include techniques that induced trance states of “spontaneous movements” (*zifa donggong*), glossolalia or “cosmic language” (*yuzhou yu*), divination, and mass *qi*-emitting healing sessions, while some masters became national celebrities who could easily draw thousands to their healing lectures. Sensational healing stories and accounts of miracles performed by *qigong* masters were widely reported in the media, fanning the “fever,” while state-sponsored national federations attempted to coordinate the movement into a single constituency.

Qigong fever was one of the countless cultural crazes which swept post-Mao China in the 1980s and 1990s, ranging from “culture fever” to “Mao fever” to “stock market fever.” The fever (*re*) can be situated somewhere between the political campaigns or movements (*yundong*) of the Mao era, and the consumer fads of capitalist societies. A fever is a form of collective effervescence in China’s post-totalitarian phase which occurs when official policies and informal signals sent from above correspond with, open the space for, and amplify popular desire, which appropriates these spaces in unexpected ways, simultaneously complying with, disrupting, and mirroring the projects of state hegemony. Thus, in *qigong*, the official campaign to promote science and technology as the foundation of Deng’s Four Modernizations, was enthusiastically taken up by the *qigong* milieu and recast as a call to encourage the mass propagation of breathing exercises as a stage in China’s cultural and scientific renaissance. As “moments when an entire cultural area (often all of urban China, sometimes the nation as a whole) is unified by a common activity,” as described by Ellen Hertz,¹³ fevers create a social sphere in which all the actors operate within the roughly corresponding spatial and temporal frames of the nation and its historicity.

By the early 1990s, many masters began to consolidate their networks by building large nationwide organizations, while issues of the commercialization, traditional authenticity, and scientific validity became the subject of heated debates both in the press and within *qigong* circles. From the mid-1990s, political support for *qigong* had dissipated, and the *qigong* movement fell into disarray. One of the masters, Li Hongzhi, rejected *qigong* and developed his method of Falun Gong into a system of belief and practice that added a strongly moralistic message of universal salvation with apocalyptic undertones to the healing dimension of the body exercises—all expounded in a sacred scripture, *Zhuan Falun* (*Turning the Dharma Wheel*).¹⁴ This more fundamentalist movement grew

rapidly, drawing millions of followers, and came into increasing tension with the Chinese state. In addition, the Chinese media grew more critical of Falun Gong; followers responded by staging sit-ins and demonstrations around newspaper and television offices, and ultimately, on 25 April 1999, by mobilizing more than 10,000 followers around the Zhongnanhai headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party—the largest popular protest in China since the 1989 Tiananmen student movement. The CCP then outlawed Falun Gong and launched a ruthless repression campaign to exterminate the movement, which continues to this day. Most other *qigong* groups were also disbanded and, while *qigong* is still practiced today in Chinese parks, only five standardized sets of exercises can be taught, by trainers certified by the State Sports Administration.

Qigong as a mass movement was thus an ephemeral social phenomenon. Although hundreds of *qigong* masters, including the most famous and charismatic of them, emigrated to Taiwan, Australia, Canada, the United States and Europe, contributing to the growing popularity of *qigong* in those countries, none of these places has experienced anything even remotely approximating the magnitude of the fever which had gripped mainland China. While masters such as Yan Xin and, especially, Li Hongzhi, built a devoted following overseas, attesting to their charisma, nonetheless, their appeal has remained limited, even among the overseas Chinese.

It is to the macro-social environment, then, that we must turn to understand why *qigong* became so “hot” in China and not elsewhere. There are several immediate factors to consider, one of which is that by virtue of the sheer size of China’s population and the high level of integration of Chinese society, any fad or mass phenomenon easily grows exponentially, reverberating on itself and producing a high social impact. Another factor was the absence of alternatives in a tightly regulated religious field. In such a context, reinforced by both traditional collectivism and socialist standardization, the most important factors in my view are (1) the secularization of post-Mao Chinese society, which paradoxically increased the “extraordinariness” of *qi* experiences and *qigong* masters; and (2) the strong presence of utopian expectations in the culture, that could be amplified by *qi* experiences and masters. It was when *qigong* was experienced as extraordinary and connected with utopian expectations that *qigong* masters could incarnate the hope of an imminent realization and produce an explosion of charisma.

As defined by Feuchtwang and Wang, “Charisma is the expectation of the extraordinary. It is the expectation of finding an agency through which a turn of fortune towards utopia will be brought about in historical time.”¹⁵ New forms of charisma thus proliferate in modern times, in which expectations of the extraordinary, in the form of deliverance from illness and poverty, are given expression through modern utopias,

bureaucracies, and medical advances. Following this reasoning, faith in science and scientific institutions can generate charismatic expectations when they can be incarnated in the figure of a single person. This was precisely accomplished in the *qigong* movement, when famous masters were labeled as life scientists, their healing lectures as scientific experiments, and their methods as forms of scholarly activity. *Qigong* masters could incarnate the charismatic expectations of scientism, and practicing *qigong* as a form of science allowed the practitioner to utilize, and manipulate, the powers of science.

Because *qi* experiences are palpably felt by the practitioners, they can be understood as quite real, physical, and true in a material sense, while at the same time the experiences are understood as being “out of the ordinary” and reinforce the masters’ charisma as supermen (*chaoren*) and align them with traditional images of extraordinary power, such as those of the *shenyi* (miracle doctor), the *shenxian* (Daoist immortal), the *huo pusa* (living Buddha), the *fashi* (master of religious and magical arts), and the *zongshi* (lineage patriarch). *Qi* experiences, then, can trigger, strengthen, and validate charismatic expectations already present in the culture.

The saliency of these experiences is amplified by the scientism and secularism of political and cultural orthodoxy: *because* there is no way to conceive of or explain such experiences in the dominant worldview, they become even more extraordinary than within a traditional cosmology which assumes the naturalness of such experiences and phenomena. At the same time, because the experiences are physical and can be felt by just about anyone, they appear to be universal material phenomena, expressions of a hitherto-undiscovered natural law compatible with scientism and secularism, and thus extraordinary because they seem to constitute the missing link between the mystical esotericism of tradition and the universalism of science. The context of scientism and secularism thus helps to amplify the charismatic effect of *qi* experiences.

Indeed, in *qigong* the body, as a locus of charismatic power, becomes a site for utopian experiences—in which, by entering states of heightened or altered consciousness, the practitioner may enter alternative inner worlds which can be correlated to utopian visions and critiques of the outer world of mundane life and society. Utopia can here be broadly defined as an imagined “other” world in which hopes and desires are realized, be it in the next life or in this world, in the past or in the future. Thus understood, utopian thought is the common basis of millennialism, apocalypticism, modernism, and communism, and provides a key to understanding, as appears in the story of *qigong*, how traditional body technologies could facilitate shifts from one type of utopia to another in socialist China.

The conflation of a magicalized fantasy of the past with the dreams of utopian scientism, in a context of the breakdown of tradition, thus

produced the burst of *qigong* fever in the late eighties. What defines *qigong* in the People's Republic of China as distinct from both other configurations of traditional body technologies, and from other social movements, then, is its alignment of traditional expectations of miraculous powers with the unfolding of the utopian project of modernity and scientism at every juncture of socialist China's history, producing the conditions, as defined above, for a nationwide charismatic fever.

Feuchtwang and Wang argue, "Charisma pure and simple is the splitting away from religious traditions of their utopian expectations of the extraordinary."¹⁶ It is at moments when more static forms of custom fail to meet expectations that charismatic traditions come to the fore. Modernity doubly enhances such potentialities, first by widening the gulf between present reality and traditional ideals, and second, by intersecting mythical or messianic time with the linear historicity of utopian progress. Thus "*modern charisma is the joining of traditional expectations of the extraordinary with a sense of time as homogenous, empty and secular, producing utopian expectations.*"¹⁷

OUTCOMES: COMMODIFICATION, RADICALIZATION OR TRADITIONALIZATION

Qi experiences thus triggered and reinforced the charismatic expectations embedded in both traditional culture and scientism. At the same time, however, the democratic nature of *qi* experiences—which could be attained and felt by anyone—undermined their own charismatic potential, turning them from something extraordinary into something quite ordinary, in theory accessible to anyone. The ambiguous nature of *qi* experiences ultimately made the *qigong* movement unsustainable for its main actors. Senior political leaders had been attracted by the universal and democratic dimension of the mass dissemination of *qigong* practices, which fit well with revolutionary visions of popular knowledge and mass health. On that basis, they actively promoted the rationalization of *qigong* and its dissemination. But they had not counted on how *qigong* experiences could stimulate and enhance the charisma of masters who ended up with a large following and significant organizations independent of the CCP. In spite of all the state's attempts at rationally managing the masters through bureaucratic procedures, it failed, and the state ultimately found the existence of this charisma intolerable, withdrew its support for the *qigong* movement, and ultimately attempted to crush what had become the largest group, Falun Gong.

For *qigong* groups, however, it was the universal and democratic nature of *qigong* experiences which ultimately became problematic. Although *qigong* masters fully exploited the rationalization of *qigong* experiences to rapidly gain a mass following, the very universality of *qi* experiences made it impossible to ensure loyalty in an increasingly

crowded market of masters providing the same types of experiences. Furthermore, rationalizing and commercializing the *qi* experiences undermined the extraordinary and other-worldly character of the *qigong* masters. It thus became difficult for the masters to sustain their followings, and their image was damaged by growing suspicions of quackery.

As much as *qi* could serve as an oil to stimulate and lubricate charismatic bonds, it was not sufficient to maintain them over the long term, to create something permanent. What Weber called the problem of “routinization” posed itself acutely in the *qigong* movement. Since the *qigong* movement was suddenly aborted in 1999 by the Falun Gong repression, it is impossible to know what would have been the natural evolution of the various *qigong* organizations. But by comparing *qigong* groups and other related Chinese traditions, it appears that three outcomes are possible: commodification, moral fundamentalism, or traditionalization.

By the mid 1990s, many *qigong* groups had followed the route of commodification, making a profitable business of selling courses, books, videotapes, and *qi*-imbued products. By far the most large-scale attempt in this direction was Zhang Hongbao’s Zhonggong, which created several business conglomerates, trained its leading followers in MBA courses, and attempted to synthesize Confucian, socialist and corporate styles of management.¹⁸ For commercialization to work, it was necessary to focus on the production and sale of *qi* experiences as described above; however, beyond a certain point, commodification appears incompatible with the charisma expected of a master: the mundane expectations of commercial exchange corrode the image of the master’s extraordinary self-sacrifice and responsiveness to his followers. None of the masters was able to resolve this tension in China. In the West, however, where many of the masters have set up shop, a model of pure commodification prevails in the market for alternative therapies and spiritualities. In my research on the most successful *qigong* training product in the West, initially marketed by Mantak Chia and continued in the U.S. by Michael Winn, I have found hardly any charismatic expectations or pretensions: the leading promoters of this product can be called *qi* technicians and salesmen, and make no claims, nor are they seen by their clients, to embody extraordinary powers. It would appear, then, that the logical outcome of commodification is the elimination of charisma on the one hand and a focus on marketable *qi* experiences on the other.¹⁹

Another trajectory, followed by Falun Gong, was to condemn commercialization and move in the direction of moral fundamentalism. Starting in 1994, two years after he had gone public as a *qigong* master, Li Hongzhi introduced several new elements which transformed the nature of charismatic power in his movement. First, he dismissed *qi* experiences as something of a lower order, replacing *qi* with *gong*, understood as moral superiority, as the power to be pursued in Falun Gong practice. Significantly, *gong* is described as something which cannot be

accumulated or circulated at will, but which increases only as a function of personal moral cultivation and with the help of the master. By emphasizing *gong*, Falun Gong thus put itself apart from the competition of myriads of groups all working with the same *qi*, and shifted the source of charisma from extraordinary *qi* experiences to extraordinary moral purity. Secondly, by ceasing to hold training seminars and emphasizing instead the study of his book *Zhuan Falun* as the core element of Falun Gong practice, he introduced a sacred scripture which, to a degree, replaced the master's body as the principal vehicle of his power: reading and re-reading the Book became one of the chief means for attaining personal transformation and illumination. The result of this and other changes is that, instead of *qi* experiences circulating between the master and followers, the result of Falun Gong cultivation becomes defined by moral behavior grounded on the authority of the master's book, in which his living presence becomes less important. However, by shifting the focus to the moral field, charisma was preserved and even amplified: the practices, and the master, became the focus of discourses on deliverance from the moral corruption of society. Paradoxically, the Chinese state's repression of Falun Gong practitioners served as double confirmations of charisma: by enhancing the image of moral innocence and purity of the practitioners, the master and his teachings; and, through narratives of resistance to torture, providing confirmations of the extraordinary power of Falun Gong.

The third type of outcome—traditionalization—does not seem to have appeared in mainland Chinese *qigong* groups. For the sake of comparison, however, we can note how this has occurred in earlier Chinese movements in which *qi* experiences have played an important role. In Quanzhen Daoism, for instance, the body cultivation techniques of Inner Alchemy were fundamental in the early years of the movement, and continue to have an important place in its ideology.²⁰ But today, Quanzhen identity is structured by traditional authority based on genealogies of masters; body cultivation is optional and *qi* experiences are secondary.²¹ A more recent movement founded in the 1920s, the Tiandejiao (Heavenly Virtues Teaching), can be seen as the prototype of charismatic *qigong*. Its founding master, Xiao Changming (1895–1943), taught a meditation and healing technique, called “spiritual healing” (*jingshen zhiliao*) which involved the emission of *qi* to patients.²² The huge crowds drawn by Xiao and his disciples when they healed for free in city parks were one of the factors in his movement being banned by the Guomindang regime in 1937. Although it was one of Xiao's disciples, Bao Guiwen, who re-introduced “external *qi*” therapy in mainland China in the late 1970s, contributing to triggering the *qigong* boom, *qi* experiences are no longer central to the life of Tiandejiao communities in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Instead, Xiao Changming is enshrined as a god in Tiandejiao temples. It is his iconized body, the memory of his

miracles, and his moral teachings which are most central to Tiandejiao identity.²³ Tiandejiao increasingly resembles a traditional Chinese temple cult, in which charisma is transferred to the deity statue.

CONCLUSION

Charisma appears when immediate experience is connected with more distant utopian expectations, bringing about the sense of their imminent realization. In the *qigong* movement, the most charismatic masters were those who were able both to trigger embodied experience and, through the adroit combination of strands of mythical and utopian imagination, to make that connection for masses of people. While utopian expectations may well exist in every culture, their expression is historically contingent. Charismatic relationships thus emerge when a leader is able to connect unique personal experiences with the hopes arising from a particular moment in the history of a singular society. What the case of the *qigong* movement shows, however, is that such relationships need not emerge in a vacuum: a charismatic field can be created through the mass production of extraordinary experiences (by the dissemination of *qigong* techniques) and through the amplification of popular utopian hopes (by the circulation of tales of *qigong* masters and miracles, themselves embedded in popular discourses on magic, tradition and science). Such a field became the soil out of which charismatic leaders could emerge and build followings, but at the same time, the majority of practitioners did not become committed followers of a single master. The charismatic field was thus the collective space of a broader social movement—a fever which could generate its thousands of masters and its millions of participants, and which would rise and fall with shifts in the historical juncture.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This article is an attempt to develop and revise my discussion of the charismatic dimension of the *qigong* movement which was briefly considered in David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 20–21.

² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (New York: Norton, 1967). See the conclusion to Ji Zhe's contribution in this issue.

³ See Vincent Goossaert's article in this issue.

⁴ From 1993 to 1995, I lived in China as an English teacher in the Division. It was during this stay that, exploring themes for future doctoral research, I began fieldwork on the *qigong* movement.

⁵ Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: the Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Erika E. S. Evasdottir, *Obedient Autonomy: Chinese Intellectuals and the Achievement of Orderly Life* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

⁶ Tsao Hsueh-Chin, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, trans. and abridged Chi-Chen Wang (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958). Written in the eighteenth century, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* is considered in China as one of the "four great classical novels" in Chinese literature. Centered on the sentimental life of an adolescent boy in a declining aristocratic clan, the novel evokes many themes from Buddhism, Daoism and Chinese mythology.

⁷ *The Journey to the West*, trans. Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977–1983). Another one of China's "four great classical novels," it was composed in the late sixteenth century, probably by the scholar Wu Cheng'en. The novel, also known as *Monkey*, relates the legends surrounding accounts of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India during the Tang dynasty to collect Buddhist sutras, accompanied by Sun Wukong, the "monkey king."

⁸ For a phenomenological study of *qi* experiences, see Haruhiko Murakawa, "Phenomenology of the Experience of Qigong: A Preliminary Research Design for the Intentional Body Practices," Ph.D. diss., California Institute of Integral Studies, 2002.

⁹ On somatization, see Arthur Kleinman, *Social Origins of Distress and Disease: Depression, Neurasthenia, and Pain in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ For statistical details on the background of the masters, see Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 92–97.

¹¹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, Chapter 4.

¹² Palmer, *Qigong Fever*.

¹³ Ellen Hertz, *The Trading Crowd: an Ethnography of the Shanghai Stock Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82. See 71–93 for a discussion of the notion of fever in relation to the stock trading craze of the early 1990s.

¹⁴ Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun*, published online at <www.falundafa.org/book/chigb.htm> (Chinese version); <<http://falundafa.org/eng/books.html>> (English version), accessed 1 April 2008.

¹⁵ Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma. Four Local Leaders in China* (London: Routledge, 2001), 172.

¹⁶ Feuchtwang and Wang, *Grassroots Charisma*, 21. Italics in original.

¹⁷ Feuchtwang and Wang, *Grassroots Charisma*, 21. Italics in original.

¹⁸ See David A. Palmer, "Chinese Religious Innovation in the *Qigong* Movement: The Case of Zhonggong," in *Religious Revitalisation and Innovation in China*, ed. Adam Chau (London: Routledge, in press).

¹⁹ The research was conducted with Elijah Siegler, see “Taoism Beyond Modernity: The ‘Healing Tao’ as Post-Modern Movement,” in *Taoism in the Twentieth Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*, ed. David A. Palmer and Liu Xun (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

²⁰ Vincent Goossaert, *La naissance du taoïsme moderne. L'ordre Quanzhen*, Ph.D. diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1997.

²¹ Interviews with Quanzhen monastics at Huashan, July and August, 2004.

²² On Tiandejiao, see Holmes Welch and Chün-fang Yu, “The Tradition of Innovation: A Chinese New Religion,” *Numen* 27, no. 2 (1980): 222–46; David A. Palmer, “Tao and Nation: Li Yujie and his Appropriation of Huashan Taoism,” in Palmer and Liu, *Taoism in the Twentieth Century*.

²³ Field visits to Tiandejiao temples in Hong Kong and Taiwan, May 2006.