

**The Body in Chinese Cosmology and Religion:
Health, Nation, and Transcendence**

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In the final scene of the 2006 film *Fearless*, the famous Chinese martial artist Huo Yuanjia, played by Jet Li, faces his Japanese challenger Anno Tanaka for a climactic kung fu combat. The place is Shanghai, the year is 1910. The imperial Qing dynasty is on the verge of collapse. The Western powers and Japan have defeated China in several wars and carved up the Middle Kingdom into concessions and zones of influence. And to add insult to injury, muscular foreign bullies and ruffians, such as the American Hercules O'Brien, have come to beat Chinese in wrestling matches, knocking them off as “the sick men of the East.” But Huo Yuanjia has stepped forth to meet the challenge and restore China’s dignity. Using the secrets of Chinese fighting, he has defeated O’Brien and others, earning their admiration for his grace and chivalry. Now comes the final combat, against Anno Tanaka. The first round is a draw. During the intermission, the Japanese consul switches Huo’s teacup with one laced with arsenic; within minutes Huo starts gasping and vomiting blood. Knowing that he will die anyway, he decides to continue the fight. Breathless and weakened, he is no match for Tanaka. He sees an opening to give a fatal blow to his Japanese adversary—but, in a show of mercy, delivers it without any force, and collapses to his own death. Tanaka, realizing Huo’s skill and nobility, lifts him from the floor and declares him the victor.¹

In this story, the body can be seen as a metaphor for the Chinese nation. Weak and sickly, the Chinese were humiliated and defeated by foreign aggressors. To defend the nation, the body needed to be restored and strengthened. How to do this was a subject of heated debate in China at the time of Huo Yuanjia. Many Chinese intellectuals and political leaders, exposed to Western ideas, ridiculed Huo’s martial arts as circus tricks

and superstitions: What China needed was rigorous Western-style military drills and sports. Physical education was taught in modern schools and Chinese athletes were trained to participate in international competitions. They joined the Olympic movement and, by the early 2000s, were among the top medal-winning nations of the world. The crowning achievement was when Beijing itself hosted the Olympic Games in 2008 (see box 4.1, chapter 4).

But others prefer traditional martial arts as the true path for nurturing and strengthening the Chinese body. In the scene described above, the secrets of Chinese martial arts are the key to Huo's victories, giving him the nimbleness, virtuosity, and power to defeat adversaries far taller and more muscular than himself. But it is his moral integrity, his mercy, and his benevolence—also essential dimensions of Chinese martial arts—which give him the ultimate victory, in which Tanaka voluntarily concedes defeat, giving a spiritual significance to the contest.

What *is* the secret of Chinese martial arts? A related question is: why are we talking about martial arts in a book about religion? So Huo Yuanjia had a better fighting technique. So he was a man of integrity. Is there anything religious about that? To be sure, in the film *Fearless*, as in many martial arts courses and academies today, there are no visible signs of religion. Indeed, Huo Yuanjia himself was a founder of the first modern martial arts association, the Chin Woo Athletic Association, that gave itself the mission of erasing any trace of religion or superstition from kung fu. But if we look at other kung fu films, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, we see plenty of scenes of fighters flying through forests, running on the surface of lakes, using all sorts of magic, and encountering old wise men, Daoist wizards and Buddhist masters, who hold the secrets of defying the laws of gravity. Indeed, the two most famous centers for martial arts training in China, Shaolin and Wudang, are respectively a Buddhist and a Daoist monastery. In these traditions, martial arts are a form of spiritual discipline. “Soft” methods like *taijiquan* (known in the West as Tai Chi) are now practiced by millions around the world, not really for fighting but for health benefits. It's hard to draw the line between exercises that are practiced for fighting, for health, and for spiritual training. *Taijiquan*, for instance, merges the three goals together.

If you go to a park at dawn in a Chinese city, you will see groups of people practicing *taijiquan*, and others practicing other types of exercises: Elderly men and women standing still, facing clumps of bushes, eyes closed, their hands in a circle below the abdomen. Others drawing arcs in the air with their stretched arms, following the

rhythm of taped traditional Chinese music. Others may be stretching and contracting their bodies. These exercises are called *qigong*, “breath training.” Here too, it is hard to imagine what connection that has to religion; it simply looks like a gentle type of physical fitness exercise. Some people prefer jogging, others weight training, and others, especially seniors, prefer the slow movements of *qigong* or *taijiquan*. But let’s look at another type of *qigong* event, which was popular in mainland China in the 1980s and ’90s. There are 5000 people assembled in a sports stadium, and a *qigong* master is giving a lecture while they sit in meditation. The master talks about how meditation can induce relaxation and good health—but he also talks about how, to really benefit from *qigong* exercises, you need to live a moral life, to be considerate to others and to be concerned for the salvation of all sentient beings. His speech is peppered with stories about Buddhist and Daoist masters who have reached such high goals of accomplishment in *qigong* practice that they could travel into the past and into the future, could walk through walls, and could miraculously heal other peoples’ illnesses. And while the master speaks, people in the audience start going into fits, some of them laughing and burping, others rolling on the ground. Some stand up and bob in the motions of Chinese dance or martial arts. They are in a trance. And when it’s over, they claim that their illnesses are cured: their back pains, their gall-bladders, their ulcers, their diabetes, even their cancers. Paraplegics, who had come in their wheelchairs, stand up and walk. Excitement spreads throughout the stadium—the *qigong* master himself, right up there on the stage, has the miraculous powers of the wizards of old legends!

In another type of group practice session, called “spontaneous movements *qigong*” in mainland China and “spiritual mediumship” in Taiwan, practitioners begin a set of gymnastic exercises or sitting meditation, get the cosmic energy (*qi*) flowing in their body, and then let themselves go. Their bodies might start rocking back and forth, they might begin tapping themselves as in a massage, bobbing up and down as if in a slow-motion dance, or doing rapid swings as if in kung fu combat, or even start running long distances. And then, some of them might find themselves possessed by a god—the Avalokitesvara Guanyin, or the Jade Emperor, or even Sun Wukong, the Monkey King.

In all of these examples, we see people practicing traditional disciplines for training the mind and body, with the hope of improving their health, increasing their mental and physical powers, and attaining to higher spiritual states and levels of wisdom. Unlike in the West, where individual body disciplines such as workouts, weight training, swimming or running are quite mechanical, and are not seen as organically connected to

other aspects of life, what we see with these Chinese traditions is that these technologies—which all involve, in some way or another, harnessing the cosmic powers of *qi*—are quite readily connected with mystical experiences, religious visions, moral discipline, practices of combat (in the martial arts), and, as we will discuss below, even political resistance. How can this be?

The Body, Immortality, and Divinity

All of these practices, from martial arts to *taijiquan* and *qigong*, and even acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapies, are based on a common set of ideas about the cosmos and about the human body. Chinese cosmology sees no clear dichotomy between the mind and the body. Indeed, Chinese traditions have not objectified a physical body separate from mental functions or even the individual's social persona. The body is understood in a non-dualistic sense that literally embodies all interconnected human functions, including thinking, feeling, moving, breathing, desiring, ingesting, digesting, and so on.

In contrast to the dualism common in the philosophical and religious traditions of India, ancient Greece, and Europe, which tend to sacralize the soul (or mind) while demeaning the body, in Chinese tradition the body itself (seen non-dualistically as including mental and spiritual functions) is typically considered to be sacred. This view permeates popular culture and customs as much as it does Confucian and Daoist philosophy: As a sacred gift from our parents, the body must be protected in its integrity (in the past, cutting open the body for anatomical inspection was seen as a violation of the body's sacredness (a view reflected today in reluctance to donate organs); as the object of love and attention, a healthy body is the sign of and the repository of life, and so the body must be well-fed and nurtured in order to attain good health and longevity. The care of the body is expressed through the great importance attached to food, to eating, and to the therapeutic qualities of different ingredients and dishes. It is also expressed through the rich and varied techniques of gymnastics, breath training, meditation, and other forms of "life cultivation," which aim to nurture and strengthen the vital energies and capacities of the body. Even the sexual act, or the "arts of the bedchamber," are seen as a form of life cultivation, which can be properly trained to minimize the loss of vital essence and to maximize the circulation and exchange of *yin* and *yang* energies (see next chapter).

While notions of nurturing, managing, and disciplining the powers of the human body are widespread in the popular culture, they are also the themes of specialized religious regimens. For a committed practitioner, the signs of accomplishment are typically considered to be vigorous health, longevity, and the ability to perform paranormal feats: so attuned are the powers of his body to those of the universe, that he can accomplish anything effortlessly.

Indeed, in Daoist lore, such an adept would be able to escape death—not through the soul’s liberation from his body, as in most religions, but through a process of meditational discipline, by refining his powers and bodily substance to such a degree that it becomes ethereal and immortal, no longer subject to the limitations of space and time. These visions of spiritual perfection draw heavily on alchemical metaphors: just as the alchemist attempts to forge the “philosopher’s stone”—known in Chinese as the elixir of immortality—by combining various mineral substances, refining them and inducing their transformation into a new substance, so the “inner alchemist” mentally collects the various energies and substances of the cosmos and of his body—notably breath, saliva, and semen—directs their circulation, and combines them in his body to produce the “golden elixir” of health and immortality. This process of spiritual refinement is said to go through three stages: the first stage involves techniques for ending seminal emissions (for men) and menstrual flows (for women), thereby preventing the dissipation of vital essence. Through meditation techniques, the essence is circulated and transformed into vital energy (*qi*). The next stage involves, through other procedures, turning *qi* into spirit, and from thence, from the realm of the spirit, to return to the void. The process is thus one of transmuting the essential substance of the body, turning it into something increasingly ethereal, until it can no longer be affected by processes of decay and death. Indeed, it is said to reverse the process of aging, returning to a state of infancy and even beyond, to a state of pure energy that has not yet condensed itself into the physical form of the human body. While in most cases, this immortal body is considered to exist in a rarefied and invisible form, in other cases, such as when a corpse does not decay after its death, this is also seen as evidence of the person’s immortal accomplishment.

Those who have attained to immortality are said to have become a “perfected one,” a “transcendent being.” Connected with Dao, such beings aid the common people by curing the sick and the unfortunate. They do this either as living healers in this world, or, having become transcendent beings, they are worshipped as gods in temples, responding to prayers for health and protection.

Explanatory Models for Illnesses

When people worship such gods and immortals in temples, they typically pray for divine blessings and protection, expressed through good health, longevity, having many sons, and material prosperity—the signs of a flourishing life. On the other hand, illness and disease traditionally call for a religious or cosmological explanation, which leads to specific types of religious/cosmological treatments. The disturbance in the body is seen as connected to a disturbance in the flow of cosmic forces, or it may be caused by a disturbance in the normal relationships between the sick person and invisible beings such as gods, ghosts, or ancestors.

When somebody falls ill—especially if it's a grave or unusual illness—and nowadays, if recourse to Western biomedicine seems to be of no avail—family members, friends and neighbours, when they worry about the victim or gossip about the case, will speculate about some of those possible causes. And they might recall and talk about some local healer and the people he or she has healed, or about a nearby temple at which the god is said to be especially efficacious. And then they might go and see one of these healers, or worship at that temple.

There are many types of healers, and many types of explanations for illnesses. A few examples are given below. From these examples, we can see that several types of explanatory models exist in Chinese religious culture to explain and cure illness and misfortune. A specific set of therapeutic techniques, which is often the specialty of a specific type of healer, corresponds to each explanatory model.

The illness was caused by a ghost

A woman repeatedly fell ill and remained barren after several years of marriage. The couple thought that the culprit was the ghost of the husband's brother, who had been beheaded by the Japanese during World War II. Those who die an unnatural death are said to have a huge unspent life-force, while their soul cannot be properly worshipped as an ancestor. His soul was troubled and continued to hover around his surviving family members, causing the death of his mother from physical and mental illness. Now he was jealous of his brother, who was alive and married, and tried to stop him from having children. The couple burned offerings to the ghost at their doorstep, on

the first and fifteenth day of each month, calling out “We are giving you money and offerings; take them and be satisfied! Don’t come back to bother our family!” The “money” they offered, on which the English words “hell bank notes” was often printed, are burned as an offering for the soul of the dead, to cover its expenses in the netherworld; mandarin oranges were also offered to feed the soul. The couple also hired a Daoist priest to conduct rituals of exorcism to drive the ghost away. Now they planned to buy a silver plaque with the brother’s name on it, place it in a funerary urn, and bury it in a permanent tomb for the soul to rest in peace. One night, the ghost spoke through a female spirit medium, saying: “It was not time for me to die. My head was severed by a Japanese sword. I am angry and lost because my bones are mixed with those of other people.” But the ghost thanked the couple for all the offerings and money, and said that it would not be necessary to build a permanent tomb for him: it would be sufficient to write his name on a piece of silver paper, and hang it beside their ancestral altar. “If you do this,” the ghost said, “I will try to help you, my brother, and your wife to have good luck and many children.”²

The illness was caused by a god

During the Mao years, many people, caught up in the frenzy of political campaigns, vandalized temples and smashed the god statues to the ground. Years later, when these individuals died or suffered from illnesses, especially strange or debilitating ones, people would gossip that the illness was the god’s revenge. In one case described by Adam Chau, during the Cultural Revolution, a young man used his hoe to smash the head off the statue of the Black Dragon King, the local god of a temple in Shaanxi province. Years later, his own head was blasted off by dynamite while he was working on building the runway at a military airport. His only son was a “half-witted village idiot.” The villagers gossiped that these calamities were divine retribution.³ In other cases, in order to “pay back” for his sins, the vandal would rebuild the temple and worship the god. Many temple cults were restored after the Cultural Revolution by such individuals.⁴

The illness was caused by bad karma

A boy was born with a severe mental handicap, such that he would never be able to communicate or do anything on his own. Taking care of the boy was a heavy burden

on his parents, who also had serious health problems of their own, and what appeared to be a string of bad luck. They wondered why so many misfortunes were falling on them. One explanation they heard was that it was the result of bad karma: according to popular understandings of Buddhist notions of causality and cosmic reciprocity (see chapter 1), each deed has its consequences, either in this life or a future one; good and evil deeds will eventually come back to you. At some point in their past lives, they had committed some evil deed, and they were now reaping the bitter reward. Or perhaps the evil deeds had been committed in this life, because the parents recalled their own feelings of guilt over acts they had committed at a younger age. Among the ways to redress the karmic burden was to do meritorious deeds: to recite Buddhist scriptures or hire Buddhist monks to do so; to donate funds to a Buddhist temple; or to devote themselves to Buddhism, perhaps by entering a monastic order, in order to generate a great amount of karmic merit.

The illness was caused by demons

Another explanation they considered was that the boy was possessed by a demon, based on the idea that the world is full of wild, unruly, hungry, or malicious ghosts and demons, who attack or attach themselves to human victims. In this case, the remedy would be an exorcism to exterminate the demons, or to scare them away with an even stronger spiritual power. This involves both defensive and offensive measures, for example, to have the boy wear a talisman or an amulet on his body; or to protect the entrances to his home by pasting images of protective gods on the door (because the demons are afraid of the fierce expressions of the guards); or affixing a mirror over the door (because the demons would be frightened by their own hideous reflection in the mirror). Exorcistic rituals are often conducted by Daoist priests, or by spirit mediums (shamans), who enter into a trance and are said to enter the invisible world to personally do battle against the demons. Offensive acts often involve the healer (the priest or spirit medium) acting as the military commander of an army of spirits and gods—through ritual acts, he names the gods being summoned, blows a horn to array them in battle formation, and dispatches them against the demons. Or, acting as a celestial official, he issues written edicts that command the demons to disperse. These edicts take the form of talismans written in an esoteric script, which are pasted on the walls of the client's home. The talismans can also be burned, the ashes mixed with water, and then ingested

by the sick person.

The illness was caused by bad fengshui

A boy suddenly went mad without reason. His parents called on a fengshui master to see if the problem had anything to do with the house or its environment. The role of the fengshui master is to identify where the problem lies in the geomantic positioning of the client's home or ancestral grave. Using a special geomantic compass, and after making numerological calculations, the master would make suggestions for modifying the layout of the house, adding or removing a structure, in order to unblock the flow of *qi* or, on the contrary, to block the flow of negative energies toward the victim's home. At first, the master could find nothing wrong. Then he went to the family gravesite on a nearby hill. He noticed that the gate of the house and the front of the grave were directly facing each other. The master called this the "killing position," which has a morbid influence on the household. He instructed the family to reorient the grave. Then he went back with red paper and a brush. He cut out two pieces of paper and painted some Chinese characters on them. He placed one of them on the boy's forehead and rolled the other into a ball, which he asked the son to eat.⁵

The illness was caused by a disruption in the balance of yin and yang energies in the body

A 32-year-old woman went to see her doctor of Chinese traditional medicine, complaining of fatigue, hypochondrial pain, a feeling of oppression of the chest, migraines, and blurred vision. Her menstrual periods were always late and painful, and the discharge was dark with clots. She was restless in sleep, felt hot in the evenings, and had disturbing dreams. She felt aimless; her career and her relationship with her boyfriend were at a crossroads, but she felt that she "did not see the point of it all." The doctor examined her tongue, noting that it was red and without coating. Using the highly elaborate Chinese method, he checked her pulse, which he said was "floating," "empty," and "fine," but also "slightly wiry on the left side."

The doctor diagnosed her problem as a deficiency of the *yin* of her liver, in which the flow of *qi* and blood were stagnant, leading to the rootlessness of her soul, which caused the feeling of aimlessness and the disturbing dreams. The treatment he prescribed

was a combination of herbs and acupuncture which would stimulate the circulation of *qi* and blood in the liver, nourish the *yin* in the liver, and root the soul.⁶

Cosmology and the Body

In the examples cited above, several explanatory models have been evoked; these can be boiled down to two basic types: (1) illnesses or misfortunes caused by invisible personal agents; that is, gods, ghosts, or ancestors; and (2) those caused by impersonal cosmic forces. In the former case, health, long life and prosperity can be assured through keeping ghosts and demons at bay, and by properly worshipping gods and ancestors. In the case of cosmic forces, health, long life, and prosperity derive from the circulation of such forces, both by properly positioning one's body or one's home in relation to flows of cosmic energy, and by manipulating such flows to one's advantage. These cosmological methods are used in the many healing systems and body cultivation systems that are based on cosmic forces, such as fengshui, Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, martial arts, and qigong. In this section, we will briefly consider the common cosmology that is shared by all of these systems.

Central to any culture is its cosmology, that is to say, its view of the structure of the universe, of the different basic elements of the universe, how these elements are connected with each other, and the place of humanity in this universe. Associated with cosmology are systems of classification, which divide everything in the universe into separate categories.

In the basic cosmology of the Western scientific worldview, everything in the world is made of fundamental particles of matter. Higher-level organisms are made of complex combinations of such particles. The questions most commonly asked are related to substance: "Does it exist?"; "What are its constituent parts?" And the most fundamental type of relationship is a binary one: yes/no, is/isn't, 1/0.

Chinese cosmology is more concerned with processes and patterns than with substances. The world as we experience it is the ephemeral expression of the ever-evolving unfolding of processes and the interrelation of forces and energy flows. The types of question this worldview gives rise to are of the type: "What is the tendency? What type of process are we in? How are different processes interacting and how does this affect the overall pattern?"

This worldview is expressed through the symbols of *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* represents processes of inward contraction, tending toward receptivity, interiority, darkness, and rest, while *yang* represents processes of outward expansion, tending toward assertiveness, exteriority, brightness, and movement.

The notions of *yin* and *yang* appeared over 3000 years ago, when Chinese people observed the regularities of cycles of time and their association with aspects of geography and human life. These cycles were associated respectively with light and dark, hot and cold, south and north, going out and coming in, outside and inside, motion and stillness. These sets of opposites were symbolized by the characters *yang*, meaning “the sunny side of a hill,” and *yin*, meaning “the shady side of a hill.” *Yin* and *yang* were seen to be in a dynamic, complementary, copulative, and generative relationship: the alternation and union of *yin* and *yang* gives birth to all beings.

Yin-yang categories have been used in China to classify everything in the universe. For example, looking at social relations, the men went out into the fields in the day, and came into the home to their wives at night: masculinity was associated with *yang*; femininity, with *yin*. Looking at the body, certain conditions, such as cold and deficiency, are *yin* while others, such as heat and excess, are *yang*. Looking at the landscape, certain features, such as mountains, are *yang* while others, such as pools of water or graves, are *yin*. South is *yang* and north is *yin*. Morning is *yang* and evening is *yin*. Summer is *yang* and winter is *yin*. The relative state of *yin* and *yang* can be compared to undulating waves: like the cycle of the seasons, at times *yang* is ascendant, at other times *yin* is. Life is generated by this dynamic and harmonious interplay of *yin* and *yang*. But if the harmony is broken, if the processes are thrown out of balance, illness and possibly death will occur. In a case of *yang* deficiency, *yang* needs to be strengthened through appropriate exercises or herbs; and the converse is true for *yin* deficiency.

A more complex scheme of interrelated processes is called the Five Phases (also translated as Five Elements or Five Agents). Each component is symbolized by a natural element: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. In the words of Ted Kaptchuk,

“each Phase is an emblem that denotes a category of related functions and qualities. The Phase called Wood is associated with active functions that are in a growing phase. Fire designates functions that have reached a maximal state of activity and are about to begin a decline or a resting period. Metal represents functions in a declining state. Water represents functions that have reached a maximal state of rest

and are about to change the direction of their activity. Finally, Earth designates a balance or neutrality; in a sense, Earth is a buffer between the other Phases.”⁷

Each of these processes is found in the human body, associated with one of the organs; each Phase leads to the next Phase according to what is called the “generative” cycle, while it overcomes another Phase according to what is called the “restrictive” cycle. Excessive strength or weakness in one of the Phases in the body thus affects the balance of all the phases and leads to illness. Diagnosis consists in determining the overall pattern of the body’s processes, and identifying where the imbalance is occurring. Treatment consists in taking herbal combinations, acupuncture sessions or exercise regimens that are designed to reset the balance in the body’s processes.

In Chinese cosmology, all phenomena in the universe are classified as either *yin* or *yang*, and as expressing one of the five cyclic Phases symbolized as wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. The human body is conceived as a microcosm of the whole universe. *Yin-yang* and the Five Phases can be used to map movement in both space and time. Everything is seen as interconnected. Cosmic order is characterized by the cyclical alteration of *yin* and *yang* and the orderly succession of the Five Phases.

Underlying all of these ideas is the flow of *qi*, which literally means “breath,” “gas,” or “vapor” and, in discussions of cosmology, is often translated as “vital energy” or “cosmic energy.” Sometimes understood as the essential matter of the universe, its nature is to flow and circulate; its expression is life. Blocked or disrupted *qi* circulation is a sure cause of illness or misfortune; the flow of *qi* needs to be restored through exercises, through herbs, through acupuncture, or through modifications to one’s house or environment.

Secularizing the Chinese Body

The cosmology I have just described, made up of impersonal energies and processes that follow an unchanging logic, sounds less “religious” than the often fickle gods, ghosts, and ancestors of the other explanatory models. In addition, body cultivation techniques based on Chinese cosmology, when practiced appropriately, are generally recognized as having beneficial health effects—whether they be exercise regimens such as martial arts, taijiquan or meditation, or therapeutic techniques such as acupuncture or herbal remedies. Many people therefore claim that these practices have

nothing to do with “religion” and that they are actually quite scientific.

This viewpoint has been widespread since the early twentieth century: as China came into intense contact with the West, and was defeated and humiliated in a series of wars against modern imperial powers, many Chinese intellectuals blamed China’s weakness on its traditions and superstitions. Traditional medicine and religious therapies were, they claimed, responsible for the poor health of the Chinese people who could not defend themselves against the aggressors. Chinese armies were no match for Western soldiers and artillery, and Western medicine—which was being introduced by Christian missionaries who established China’s first medical schools, in which many of the new intellectuals were trained— was seen as holding true and scientific remedies for illness. For these critics, the solution lay in modernizing China, and replacing traditional martial arts, body cultivation, and herbal healing with biomedical science and modern military drills, sports and physical education. One of the leading intellectuals of the time, Chen Duxiu (who was a founder of the Chinese Communist Party), wrote in his “Appeal to the Youth” in 1919:

“Our men of learning do not understand science; thus they make use of *yin-yang* signs and beliefs in the five elements to confuse the world. . . Our doctors do not understand science: they not only know nothing of human anatomy, but also know nothing of the analysis of medicines; as for bacterial poisoning and infections, they have not even heard of them. . . The height of their wondrous illusions is the theory of *qi* which really applies to the professional acrobats and Daoist priests. We will never comprehend this *qi* even if we were to search everywhere in the universe. All of these fanciful notions and irrational beliefs can be corrected at their roots by science, because to explain truth by science we must prove everything with fact.”⁸

Others, however, came to the defense of Chinese body cultivation and healing traditions. They claimed that these were actually scientific systems of knowledge; and as such, they should be preserved, further developed, and even promoted internationally. But they acknowledged that the way these traditions were practiced was usually mired in superstition: it was not uncommon for an acupuncturist to also compose talismans for his clients, for martial artists to perform invincibility rites that involved trances and ingesting magic potions, or for meditators to worship Daoist immortals and gods. This was simply because traditional culture made no distinction between what modern people

call “religious” and “secular” or non-religious. The modern defenders of Chinese body traditions, however, were acutely conscious of such a distinction, and did everything they could to modernize the traditions, to expurgate all their religious and “superstitious” elements, and make them “scientific.”

Through these projects, a new discourse emerged in defense of what became the new categories of “national medicine” and “national [martial] arts”: both of these traditions were reformulated as part of China’s “national essence,” priceless gems which, along with calligraphy and art, should be proudly preserved by any self-respecting Chinese. This discourse fit squarely within the new nationalism; it vaunted Chinese medicine and martial arts as much for their Chineseness as for their intrinsic therapeutic or combat value. These projects of a Chinese medicine and martial arts, which could exist alongside with, and complementary to, Western medicine and sports, upheld the theoretical principles of the traditional cosmology while condemning most actual traditional doctors and fighters, who were blamed for the disrepute of the Chinese tradition. National medicine and martial arts were thus to be “scientized,” with the goal of eliminating mystical and superstitious accretions, reformulating or reinterpreting classical theory in a manner compatible with science. In this system, occultism, mysticism, and magic were to be replaced by science—a science that would restore the original purity of the national essence, exemplifying the profound knowledge of physiology, mechanics, physics, and biology to be found in China’s native wisdom.

The government of the People’s Republic of China strongly supported these secularizing projects beginning in the early 1950s, which it applied both to Chinese medicine and martial arts, and to the therapeutic traditions of minority nationalities, such as Tibetan medicine. It established large and prestigious hospitals and training academies for Chinese medicine, which could claim equal status with Western medicine. A nationwide system of training and tournaments was set up for martial arts. And meditation, breathing, and gymnastic traditions were promoted under the label of *qigong*. As a result of these secularizing projects, Chinese body traditions, including traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), *taijiquan*, and *qigong*, are usually seen as having nothing to do with religion, and are widely practiced both in socialist China and the West, by millions of people for whom the idea of a religious connection to these practices would never cross their mind.

It might appear, then, that these traditions have been successfully secularized. And yet, the religious connection can never be entirely cut out. These body practices

often, and unexpectedly so, become gateways into worlds of mysticism and religiosity. In the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, qigong was actively promoted by the Chinese ministries of health and sports, and even by some of the country's top scientists and military leaders, as a cheap and efficient way to improve the health of the masses. But this led to a craze of trances and faith healing phenomena, as described at the beginning of this chapter. The passage to religiosity is facilitated by the dense Daoist and Buddhist symbolism associated with traditional body technologies. Attempts to secularize the techniques cannot obliterate a millennia-long history of their being embedded in religion. The lineages of which many masters are the inheritors, the religious symbolism of the classical texts describing the techniques, and the magical content of the kung fu films and novels that permeate Chinese pop culture, all conspire to make the religious roots of Chinese body traditions resurface. Many of the most popular qigong masters and meditation methods openly draw on religious symbols. Falun Gong, for example, claims to be a "Buddhist dharma," indeed to be the superior path of Buddhist discipline.

Furthermore, people who practice Chinese body techniques often have experiences that don't fit well with completely secularized worldviews. Indeed, it is not uncommon for *qigong* practice, for example, to trigger mental states and experiences that are difficult or even impossible to satisfactorily explain with materialist theories. These experiences include the sensation of flows of *qi* in the body, the sensation of receiving or emitting *qi* between persons, and visions and insights that can only be labelled "hallucinations" in biomedical terminology. The meaning of such experiences must thus be sought after elsewhere: either through concepts derived from religious traditions, or through new theories that attempt to transcend the limitations of mechanical materialism. Either way, such practices draw the practitioner away from conventional secular worldviews. Through exploring the inner universe of the body and directing the circulation of its energies, entering mystical realms through trances and visions, and connecting themselves, through a master, to ancient esoteric traditions, practitioners may enter an alternate world. Here, the body becomes a receptacle and a conduit of traditional wisdom and mystical symbols. Hitherto unknown forms of energy inside and outside the body can be experienced, monitored, directed, and emitted, leading to a feeling of better health and, often literally, of heightened power. Chinese body cultivation traditions offer ways of personally appropriating and embodying this new world of knowledge, power, and experience.

Even in Chinese medicine, debates constantly rage over where to draw the line

between the “scientific,” the “superstitious,” and the “religious.” At one extreme, there are those who want to look only at what can be observed and proven in the laboratory, and discard any trace of Chinese cosmology: study the chemical properties of Chinese herbs, for example, and isolate the active ingredients, extract those chemical elements, and manufacture them into pills that can be taken to treat diseases identified through biomedical diagnostic procedures. Others, however, claim that such an approach misses the entire point and efficacy of Chinese medicine: that it is the combination of different herbs according to carefully calibrated *yin* and *yang* properties as well as the Five Phases of water, wood, fire, earth, and metal; and that these calibrations are based on Chinese diagnostics, which look at how these properties are unbalanced in the patient. And still others go further, insisting that divination practices, exorcism, and deity worship continue to be important elements of Chinese medicine.

Part of the problem here is that although Chinese cosmology has a rational basis and need not include personified deities, it remains incompatible with the philosophical and ontological foundations of the Western scientific tradition, which cannot admit the existence of *yin* and *yang* or of the Five Phases, because they are neither observable physical substances, nor measurable physical forces. From such a perspective, they can only be considered to be metaphysical ideas or poetic metaphors. As a result, in spite of all the attempts to modernize and secularize Chinese body traditions, they have never been fully recognized or integrated into mainstream scientific thinking and practice.

A common response to their “rejection” by scientific institutions is a nationalist one: to claim that these practices are scientific, but that they are part of a Chinese science, one which is essentially different from, and even superior to, Western science. Advocates claim that this science has its roots in 5000 years of Chinese history and civilization, and that its advantage over Western science lies in its holistic worldview: while Western science looks only at the external appearances of things, these Chinese sciences look at the inner roots of phenomena. Another response to the rejection by Western science is for practitioners to reject materialism and to return to the spiritual dimensions of Chinese body practices.

Christians face a similar issue in relation to practices such as *qigong*: some consider it to be a secular form of physical exercise, or a form of spiritual cultivation which, either way, is compatible with Christian faith. Others, however, pointing to the powers felt by many practitioners, condemn them as demonic and warn Christians to stay away from them.

Holism and Virtue

The two responses—to advocate a Chinese (or Oriental) science, or to explore the spiritual dimensions of the tradition, are not incompatible: there are also attempts to create a new system of knowledge, one that would integrate both the scientific and the spiritual aspects of Chinese tradition into an all-encompassing, holistic wisdom. For example, one famous *qigong* master, Yan Xin, called for *qigong* to be seen as

“an ideal, all-encompassing form of erudition which includes multiple forms of knowledge, allows mankind to know himself and the universe, has an epistemology and a methodology, and contains a philosophy of life, of the world and of the cosmos [. . .] It is a complete scientific discipline. [. . .] [As a science of the mind, *qigong* requires one] to stay in an enlightened, virtuous and moral state of mind, nourished by a high ideal. The ancient *qigong* masters of high antiquity had already recognized that man, if he wants true happiness, must have a luminous and infinite inner heart, and be benevolent to men and things. [. . .] The Ancients, in high antiquity, according to primary sources on *qigong* from 7000 years ago, [. . .] [emphasized the importance of] “being rooted in virtue” [. . .] Thus, the simultaneous training of both spirit and body is the most important characteristic of *qigong*. It is not merely mechanical gestures, nor the arduous but superficial training of ordinary martial arts, but a training of the inner spirit. It involves linking our thoughts to the great common aspiration of the whole world [. . .], to use our wisdom to harmonize all things in need of harmony. The greater our contribution, the greater our merit, and the higher our benefit; the bodily and spiritual benefit then becomes obvious. Thus, the concrete training of the body is of secondary importance.”⁹

As this passage shows, Chinese body traditions reinforce the tendency, already strong in Chinese culture, to experience the corporal, the emotional, the social, and the spiritual as a single undifferentiated whole. The practitioner is thus led to seek a globalizing explanatory model, incompatible with the reductionist and analytical categories of medical science. From health technique, then, these practices lead relatively easily to mystical experience and religious belief. One passes easily from physical training to moral

discipline and questioning on the meaning of life or the nature of the universe.

“Being rooted in virtue,” more than any set of techniques, is always considered to be essential to any serious nurturing of the body. On the one hand, vital energy is strongly connected with the sexual urge and its sublimation into spiritual power; to avoid the dissipation of vital energy thus involves disciplining the basic instincts, harmonizing the emotions, and living a moral life. On the other hand, transcending the ego through conforming to Dao or Heaven leads to increased spiritual power, which is expressed through virtue and health. Moral behavior and Confucian propriety are thus integrated into Chinese cosmology. Man is seen as occupying a central position in the universe—between Heaven (*yang*) and Earth (*yin*), at the junction of *yin* and *yang*, containing within his body all the elements and powers of the cosmos. He must respect the *yin* and *yang* positions of authority and submission within the social hierarchy: the ruler is *yang* to the minister’s *yin*, the father is *yang* to the son’s *yin*, the husband is *yang* to the wife’s *yin*. If man’s behavior does not conform to the moral principles of the cosmic order, the disruptions can reverberate throughout the cosmos and come back to him in the form of illnesses or bad luck. This was all the more the case for the Emperor in traditional China who, as the Supreme Man, was the fundamental pivot between Heaven and Earth. When the ruler’s body was not disciplined, corruption would spread in government, cosmic harmony would be disrupted, and calamities, wars, epidemics, and natural disasters would be the result.

In Chinese cosmology, then, embodied virtue is power. It is key to obtaining, legitimizing, and maintaining political authority and social stability. In situations of chaos, however, or where political authority is weak or subverted, it is also the refuge of justice and righteousness. Thus, in the popular lore surrounding the martial arts tradition, wandering warriors hide in the marshlands, fight off gangs of bandits, and, when the ruling dynasty has become too corrupt and oppressive, they arise in rebellion. They owe their victories to the virtuosity of their bodies—a virtuosity that itself is rooted in virtue. Virtue is the source of their power and legitimizes their cause. Many of the martial arts forms popular today emerged during the Qing dynasty, among rebels and secret brotherhoods that hoped to overthrow the Manchu rulers. When the common folk of north China revolted against the Western powers and their churches in 1900, they were convinced, as “Fellows United in Righteousness” (known in the West as the “Boxers” or the “Righteous and Harmonious Fists”), that with their virtue, and the magic spells and martial arts techniques of “spirit fighting,” their bodies could repel the evil foreigners’

guns and bullets. And today, the most determined challenge to the rule of the Chinese Communist Party comes from the body cultivators of Falun Gong, who combine qigong exercises with the pursuit of a high level of moral virtue—which is said to purify the body of the “black matter” of accumulated karmic debts. As discussed in chapter 12, practitioners contrast the moral dimension of Falun Gong with the corruption of the Chinese regime, both to justify their campaign against the Communist Party and to strengthen the resolve of practitioners in the face of repression.

Conclusion

In the Chinese tradition, the body is a site for the battle against ghosts and demons, whose attacks are made manifest through illnesses; it is also a site for physical fights against “bad guys,” national enemies or oppressive rulers, such as in the martial arts tradition. The priests, exorcists, immortals, emperors, and errant warriors mentioned in this chapter all have one thing in common: it is through their bodies, steeled through the discipline of virtue, that the battles against the forces of chaos and corruption are waged. At the same time, their bodies are sites for refinement towards ever-higher levels of spirituality, nurturing health through harmony with cosmic forces and processes, and even tending to transcendence. There are no clear lines in Chinese tradition between these functions of the body, which are combined in many of the body cultivation and medical practices that have evolved over the centuries in China. In modern times, attempts to secularize these practices have been promoted by the Chinese state and have facilitated their wide dissemination. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely eliminate their religious dimension; and they can become unexpected gateways for the emergence of popular religiosity.

1. Huo Yuanjia was a real historical figure, but many details in the film are fictionalized.
2. Case described in Jack M. Potter, "Cantonese Shamanism," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed., Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 208-209.
3. Adam Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 70-71.
4. Stephen Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China* (London: Routledge, 2001), 63.
5. Case described in Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion* (Oslo: NIAS Press, 2003), 216.
6. Case abridged from Giovanni Maciocia, *The Practice of Chinese Medicine: The Treatment of Diseases with Acupuncture and Chinese Herbs* (Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1994), 275.
7. Ted J. Kaptchuk, *Chinese Medicine: The Web that has no Weaver* (London: Rider, 1983), 343-344.
8. Quoted in D. W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought: 1900-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 65.
9. Quoted in David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press), 112.