

Modernity and Millennialism in China: *Qigong* and the Birth of Falun Gong

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In the 1980's and 90's, China experienced the booming popularity of traditional breathing, gymnastic and meditation techniques, described by media chroniclers as “*qigong* fever”. At its height, the *qigong* movement attracted over one hundred million practitioners, making it the most widespread form of popular religiosity in post-Maoist urban China. During this period, breathing and meditation techniques were disseminated to a degree perhaps never before seen in Chinese history. Initially sponsored by Chinese state health institutions in the early days of the Peoples' Republic to extract useful body techniques from their traditional religious setting, *qigong* became a conduit for the transmission, modernization and legitimization of religious concepts and practices within the Communist regime. In this article, I suggest that this legitimization was made possible by the elaboration of a utopian discourse of *qigong* which dovetailed with the millennialist strands of the Party's official ideology. In a sense, the *qigong* movement was the fruit of a strange union between popular sectarianism and Chinese communist eschatology. The history of *qigong* is one of the gradual shift of a medicalized and secularized category towards practices and beliefs which marked an increasing return to the Chinese sectarian tradition, culminating in the emergence of Falun Gong.

This article will describe the development of the *qigong* category from the late 1940's to the end of the 1990's, tracing the shifting combinations of practices and concepts which came to be associated with *qigong* in an evolving ideological and political context, and ending with an analysis of Falun Gong's rupture with *qigong* groups. The case of *qigong* and Falun Gong illustrates the unresolved tensions between modernity, tradition, nationalism and politics in contemporary China.

Qigong, a new category

Body cultivation techniques were widely practiced in China prior to 1949. In addition to their transmission in religious and monastic communities, in medical lineages,

and in literati circles, they had been disseminated throughout the countryside by sectarian groups which taught martial arts, breathing, meditation, and spirit possession techniques². But there existed no self-conscious movement aiming to unite all practitioners of these practices. Although the term *qigong* had appeared in a handful of books in the first half of the 20th century and earlier³, the term was seldom used and it had not acquired its modern meaning. It was only after 1949 that *qigong* became a generally used term, commonly used in Chinese medical, scientific and popular discourse, including in a single category all Chinese gymnastic, meditation, visualization and breathing techniques, to which, over the years, were added martial, performance, trance, divination, charismatic healing, and talismanic techniques, as well as the study of paranormal phenomena, UFOs, and the *Book of Changes* (*yijing*).

The term *qigong* evokes a palette of images and concepts. *Qi* (气) is often translated as “breath”, and *gong* (功) as “work”, which explains the choice of the term *qigong* to designate breathing techniques. But let us examine the nuances of the characters as they are used in *qigong* circles. *Qi* is understood as the animating energy of the universe, a substance which circulates in and through the body. In its standard usage, the term derives from the theory of Chinese medicine; but it also leads to further associations with traditional Chinese cosmology. In practice, it is said that *qi* can be mentally directed (*xingqi* 行气), projected to the exterior of the body (*faqqi* 发气), and extracted from other objects (*chaiqi* 柴气); it can involuntarily leak from the body (*xieqi* 泄气); and it can even be stolen from other persons (*touqi* 偷气). It can be applied to create an energy field (*qichang* 气场) between practitioners united in the same space, which is said to increase the efficacy of *qigong*.

Gong is a term associated with the martial arts tradition: composed of the two characters “work” (工) and “force” (力), *gong* is related to *gongfu* (功夫), an untranslatable word which refers to the virtuosity of the martial artist: a perfect mastery of the body and mind which is the fruit of a rigorous training discipline culminating in the manifestation of magical powers. *Gong* is inseparable from the essential substance of a person, of his moral character; it manifests itself in the struggle against evil or against an enemy. *Gong* is sometimes understood as the magical force of a person with a high level of *gongfu*, which can be projected towards other people (*faqong* 发功); in this case, it is another way to refer to the emission of *qi*. *Gong* can also emanate from an object or an action: one can then speak of “force-filled audiotapes” (*daigong cidai* 带功磁带) or “force-filled lectures”

(*daigong baogao* 带功报告). The character *gong* is also found in the word *gongneng* (功能) which means “function”, a term which takes a specific meaning in *qigong*, often referring to the “Exceptional Functions of the human body” (*renti teyigongneng* 人体特异功能) – the magical or paranormal powers said to appear at a high level of *qigong* practice. In the same sense, the expression *shengong* (神功), “divine force”, is sometimes used to designate the magical aspects of *qigong*. *Qigong* practice (*lian qigong* 练气功) is often abbreviated as *liangong*, a formulation which can connote the training or exercise of the magical force of *gongfu*, in order to enter into a “*qigong* state” (*qigong tai* 气功态), a state of profound relaxation which can resemble hypnosis⁴. Another term used to speak of this training, at a higher level, is *xiulian*: (修炼), the spiritual discipline needed to forge the elixir of immortality, which evokes the Daoist traditions of inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹).

This brief presentation of the semantic field of *qigong* shows how easily one can be drawn from a purely technical conception to magical and religious images. And yet, the choice of the term *qigong* by Party cadres in 1949 reflected an ideological project: to extract Chinese body cultivation techniques from their “feudal” and religious setting, to standardize them, and put them to the service of the construction of a secular, modern state. As such, *qigong* is an invented tradition⁵. The object of its construction was to present *qigong* from a purely technical angle, to reconstitute the history of these techniques in isolation from their religious, political and social context, and to classify them according to a rational schema.

The birth of modern *qigong*

The modernization of Chinese body cultivation had begun before its systematic organization under the rubric of *qigong* after 1949. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, meditation master Jiang Weiqiao (蒋维乔) had revolutionized the practice and dissemination of body cultivation by couching the techniques in self-consciously modern, scientific terms and concepts. Born in Jiangsu Province in 1872, Jiang Weiqiao had been sickly and weak from his childhood, and tried all remedies to no avail, until an old traditional doctor showed him ancient books on health cultivation. From those books, he learned about *qi* circulation techniques and tried them, experiencing such good results that he left his wife and children at the age of 27 to devote himself exclusively to a strict regimen of meditation practice. He became a well-known scholar and author of three

popular books on “quiet sitting” (*jingzuo* 静坐). In these books, he criticized the abstruse and esoteric style of the old medical and Daoist texts, and described the meditation techniques using clear language rooted in common sense and his personal experience. He expounded a mechanistic view of the body, and changed the ancient terminologies. For example, claiming that the old terms encouraged mystical thinking rather than practical efficacy, he used the term “centre of gravity” (*zhongxin* 重心) as a substitute for the Daoist term of “elixir field”, in reference to a point below the navel (*dantian* 丹田), considered as the root of the body’s *qi*. Jiang Weiqiao’s reformulation of the techniques in modern terms paved the way for meditation practices to become accessible to anyone⁶.

It was under the Communist Party’s initiative, however, that the dispersed traditions of Chinese body cultivation began to be merged into a single movement. Indeed, the history of modern *qigong* can be said to begin with the story of Party cadre Liu Guizhen (刘贵珍, 1920-1983), at the end of the 1940s. Since 1940, Liu had been suffering from a gastric ulcer, insomnia and “neurasthenia”. Sick and weakened, he was sent back to his native village in 1947. While recuperating there, he sought treatment from an old master, Liu Duzhou (刘渡舟), who taught him traditional calisthenics; after 102 days of practise, Liu was cured of his ailments. Following his recovery, his superiors in the Party, seeking economical solutions to the lack of modern medical facilities in the Liberated Zone of southern Hebei, appointed Liu to head a clinical team charged with researching breath techniques. Based on Liu Duzhou’s teachings and on classical texts, the team devised two methods which they named “*qigong*”, defined as the art of mastering one’s breath. Liu Guizhen and his group began to teach *qigong* in sanatoria for cadres as early as 1949.

In the early 1950s, the new Communist state was faced with a health policy dilemma: on the one hand, Western-style medical institutions were politically tainted by their association with imperialist bourgeois culture; on the other hand, the country, whose medical system was in a shambles after decades of civil war, was desperately in need of qualified medical personnel. The answer was to institutionalize traditional Chinese medicine, which had been suppressed since the 1920’s by the previous Nationalist government. Chinese medicine was organized as a scientific-style medical institution, and a standardized theoretical system elaborated, compatible with Marxist philosophy. Traditional doctors, who had previously operated independently in secret lineages, were integrated into specialized medical work units⁷. Under the Party’s direction, New China would save valuable Chinese traditions from feudal decadence,

spur them to new heights of development, and contribute them to the health and welfare of the people.

Liu Guizhen was able to establish a niche for *qigong* within these new institutions, as a technical specialty alongside acupuncture, herbalism, moxibustion and massage. In 1953, with the support of municipal and provincial leaders, he founded the world's first *qigong* clinic in Tangshan, Hebei province. Two years later, he founded another *qigong* sanatorium at Beidaihe, an exclusive seaside resort for high ranking cadres. He met with Vice-President Liu Shaoqi and was honoured as an "All-China advanced worker", and his team was given a financial reward for its efforts.

The method elaborated by Liu Guizhen became the model of *qigong* organization and practice, and was reproduced in medical institutions throughout China. This model differs in many ways from the traditional practice of Chinese body cultivation. The method of transmission was entirely changed. Secret transmission from master to disciple in a religious context was replaced by the public training of patients by modern-style clinicians, in the framework of medical institutions. If the term "*qigong* master" appeared, it was not common; the traditional image of the "master" with its charismatic connotations was replaced by the notion of the modern doctor, the *qigong* "medical worker" engaged in a scientific enterprise. The old sectarian organizations and medical lineages were replaced by a community of *qigong* specialists who were trained in state health institutions, worked in official settings, met at conferences to exchange their experiences, conducted clinical research, published the results of their work, and held public training classes.

Conceptual references were reformulated. Traditional concepts and symbols were eliminated, with the exception of the standardized concepts of institutionalized Chinese medicine (yin-yang, *qi*, meridians, etc.), and replaced by a psychological and scientific lexicon to categorize illnesses and to describe the effects of *qigong*. These were explained as physiological and material reactions rather than as invisible forces or intentionalities.

The *qigong* of the 1950's was thus a resolutely modern enterprise, a conscious rupture with the forms of the past. It was thanks to this "revolutionary" approach that *qigong* could find legitimacy until the mid sixties. The specialized sanatoria and prestigious urban hospitals in which *qigong* was practiced during this period, were places reserved for the Party elite. And with its roots in Chinese popular culture, without any link with the capitalist West and its specialist approach to science, requiring no expensive technology, and easy and cheap to teach and learn, *qigong* fit well with the spirit of the Great Leap

Forward, which saw a rapid expansion of *qigong* activity and research. Indeed, there was a profound affinity between *qigong*, which aims to heal through pure mental effort, and the Great Leap Forward, which promised to propel China to utopia through the simple effect of collective willpower. But the political tides turned against *qigong* in 1964-65. *Qigong* was criticized as a feudal superstition, Liu Guizhen was expelled from the Party, and all public *qigong* activities ceased during the Cultural Revolution.

Magical practices and political support for paranormal research

By the end of the 1970s, however, there was a new explosion of *qigong*. Already, artist and self-healed cancer victim Guo Lin (郭林) had been teaching *qigong* in Beijing parks since the early 1970s, turning the institutional *qigong* of the 1950s into a mass activity practised in public spaces. Guo Lin's "New *Qigong* Therapy", hailed as a cure for cancer, and other methods quickly spread to all parts of China. In 1978, Gu Hansen (顾函森) of the Shanghai Nuclear Research Institute announced that he had discovered the material basis of "External *Qi*", a form of energy which is said to be sent by *qigong* masters toward their patients. Gu's experiments were considered by many to be a scientific discovery of historical significance.

While *qigong* spread in China's parks and laboratories, the mass media became gripped by the strange phenomenon of children reading with their ears. Following the first report of such a child in Dazu county, Sichuan, similar phenomena were reported all over China. *Ziran*, an influential Chinese science magazine, published an article by researchers from Beijing University, claiming that they had been able to train 60% of a sample of children to read without their eyes (Chen Shouliang *et al* 1980, Wang Chu *et al* 1980, He Muyan *et al* 1980). Readers and researchers in other cities proceeded to duplicate the experiment. *Ziran* magazine published a series of articles on these and other unusual phenomena, leading to widespread debate on "Extraordinary Functions of the human body". Most fascinating was the possibility of a link between *qigong* and Extraordinary Functions: that *qigong* exercises could lead to the practitioner acquiring paranormal powers.

This speculation caught the attention of the Party leadership. Several members of the State Council, including Vice-Premier Fang Yi, attended a meeting called by the State Administration for Chinese Medicine, at which reports were given on *qigong*, External *Qi*, and Extraordinary Functions. This meeting, which brought together, under high political

patronage, most of the main figures involved in *qigong* training, therapy and research, gave birth to the “*qigong* community” (*qigong jie*) – a national network which included not only masters and practitioners, but also scientists. *Qigong* was no longer seen as a mere branch of Chinese medicine, but as a scientific discipline in its own right, specialized in investigating the newly-discovered material substance of External *Qi*, which could be controlled and projected by the mind. The political leaders present praised and encouraged “*qigong* science”, giving a green light to its development.

Researchers from several universities gathered in Shanghai in January 1981 to share their findings on Extraordinary Functions. Research groups were formed in a number of scientific institutions. In 1982, a group of key universities, after conducting tests on a few individuals who had become media celebrities due to their Extraordinary Functions, announced that they had “proven” that their powers were real. Debate raged in the press, until the Propaganda Department of the Party Central Committee intervened in April 1982 to ban both promotion and criticism of Extraordinary Functions. Famous scientist Qian Xuesen (钱学森), a key designer of China’s nuclear weapons program, then petitioned to Premier Hu Yaobang on behalf of Extraordinary Functions research, leading the Propaganda Department to change its line and authorize publication of data for scientific purposes. Extraordinary Functions research was officially legitimized.

Indeed, *qigong* benefited from influential networks of political supporters, the most significant of which were linked to the National Defense Commission for Science, Technology and Industry, and which acted to stifle criticisms of *qigong* and Exceptional Functions. A flourishing subculture grew under this protection, with its associations, its magazines, its conferences, its healing and cultural activities. Thousands of traditional masters emerged from obscurity to teach *qigong* methods which they had acquired in traditional lineages or which they had created themselves. These methods, in addition to the “triple discipline” of the body, breath and mind of 1950’s *qigong*, often included an assortment of magical practices: healing by “external *Qi*”, “spontaneous movements”⁸, “information objects”⁹, “cosmic language”¹⁰, etc. *Qigong* masters were federated in semi-official associations affiliated to state medical, scientific and sports authorities. A space was thus opened within which traditional masters could practice their healing arts and create organized sects¹¹ under the guise of *qigong*. Millions of adepts congregated in parks and public spaces every morning to practice exercise routines disseminated by the sects. Throughout the 1980s, *qigong* became a legitimized outlet for the resurgence,

reconfiguration and “modernization” of sectarian beliefs and practices. The interplay and interpenetration of these popular networks and official institutions gave form to the *qigong* subculture.

Qigong became a legitimizing and federating concept, bringing into its fold masters of different traditions who could, using the materialist and scientific *qigong* label, openly teach and find a large clientele of patients and followers. At the same time, as early as 1980, with Yang Meijun (杨梅君) and her “Great Crane *Qigong*”, the use of mystical and religious symbols, as well as the image of a charismatic master with secret knowledge and magical powers, appeared in association with *qigong*. If Liu Guizhen and Guo Lin had placed their *qigong* methods firmly within the conceptual framework of institutionalized Chinese medicine, and did not identify themselves as “*qigong* masters”, Yang Meijun inscribes her method in an explicitly Daoist frame of reference; later, others would use concepts derived from Buddhism, the *Book of Changes*, etc.

Qigong techniques began to diversify; and certain shamanistic practices were durably attached to the *qigong* concept. Liu Guizhen’s and Guo Lin’s methods insisted on self-control and on the active aspect of *qigong* exercises, in which the practitioner is the “commander” in his struggle against illness, contrary to other forms of treatment which turn the patient into a passive recipient of the doctor’s cures. But since Gu Hansen’s experiments, External *Qi* had become central to the concept of *qigong*. By disseminating on a large scale the technique of healing others with External *Qi*, Yang Meijun propagated a new type of therapeutic relationship in which the patient doesn’t need to practice *qigong* but directly receives the healing force of the master, without the mediation of instruments, medicines, or physical contact. From then on, learning to emit *qi* would become a component of most *qigong* methods – one practiced *qigong* not only to heal oneself, but also to heal others.

Shortly thereafter, Zhao Jinxiang (赵金香) and Liang Shifeng (梁士丰), whose methods of the “Crane’s Flight” and of the “Spontaneous Play of the Five Animals” aimed to trigger the trance of “spontaneous movements”, led *qigong* towards a form of collective emotional release, far from the individual self-control of Liu Guizhen’s methods. After twenty years of political campaigns in the 1960’s and 70’s, such forms of release could meet a widespread need for catharsis.

The phenomenon of masters who “came out of the mountains” (*chushan* 出山) to publicly teach techniques derived from folk, Daoist, Buddhist, martial and medical traditions was unprecedented in China’s history. In terms of numbers, traditions which

had previously been limited by primitive forms of communication to small networks of disciples, were spread to millions of practitioners in the space of a few years. Qualitatively, masters from a diversity of backgrounds could recognize each other for the first time under the common banner of *qigong*, form a community recognized by the state, and share information through *qigong* conferences, meetings and magazines, an unthinkable phenomenon in the traditional world of secret and isolated personal lines of transmission.

***Qigong* fever and the new scientific revolution**

In the meantime, the surging popularity of Hong Kong Kungfu movies and pulp novels was fueling the growth of a burgeoning Chinese martial arts pop culture. Martial arts academies sprang up across the country, and itinerant kung fu troupes performed extraordinary feats of “hard *qigong*” (*ying qigong* 硬气功). What had begun as isolated currents a few years earlier -- *qigong*, Extraordinary Functions research, martial arts -- began to merge in the popular imagination. *Qigong* was said to develop the Extraordinary Functions latent in everyone’s body. Real-life observation and scientific research seemed to have proven the existence of the supernatural feats of ancient Chinese popular legends, literature and culture. Chinese *qigong* became the scientifically tested key to breaking the laws of classical physics. The old legends were true, *qigong* would turn them into science, and China would be at the forefront of a new global scientific revolution.

In his book *Swirls of Qi in the Celestial Empire*, *qigong* master and popular chronicler Zheng Guanglu describes the impact on the popular imagination of the fusion of Exceptional Functions and *qigong*:

“From the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1980s, *qigong* was still mainly an effective method of physical culture, prevention and therapy. Later, this conception of *qigong* came to be called “traditional *qigong*”.

Around the middle of the 1980s, ever since Exceptional Functions were considered as the superior level of *qigong*, [...] the meaning of *qigong* has been greatly enriched and enlarged. The health and therapeutic efficacy of *qigong* is now seen merely as an elementary, even accessory, function of *qigong*. Restricting *qigong* to the field of therapy is seen as a serious obstacle to its development.

Thus, a new *qigong* was born.

This new *qigong* is considered as an art of physical training, of illness prevention, of therapy, of performance, of combat, of police investigation, of geological prospecting, of intelligence development, of stimulation of functions, of increasing one’s powers.

Its advanced level is shown by Exceptional Functions: penetrating vision, distant vision, distant sensation, the ability to immobilize one’s body, to fly miraculously,

to cross walls, to soar spiritually, to call the wind and bring the rain, to know the past and the future.

Qigong has become an “art of the Immortals” for which nothing is impossible.” (Zheng Guanglu 1991: 58)

In early 1986, under the patronage of the China Association for Science and Technology, chaired by famous rocket scientist and *qigong* enthusiast Qian Xuesen, the semi-official China *Qigong* Science Association was founded on a triumphant note, as Qian proclaimed the new scientific revolution. The new discipline of “Somatic Science” (*renti kexue* 人体科学), by integrating *qigong*, traditional medicine and Exceptional Functions with modern science and technology, was going to become a true Marxist science.

“[...] during this process of integration, it will transform modern science, making science advance one step further. This is the great mission that we must accomplish. As soon as this mission is accomplished, it will inevitably provoke the explosion of a new scientific revolution [...] We can all consider that it will be the scientific revolution of the Orient. During this process, Marxist philosophy will deepen and develop itself. [...] At present, in foreign countries, they all say that technology must be developed. I consider that the highest of high technologies is the scientific technology of *qigong*.” (Qian Xuesen, quoted in Zheng Guanglu 1991: 118)

The creation of the China *Qigong* Science Association was heralded as a turning point in the history of *qigong* and even of science, as *qigong* advocates cried: “*qigong* has left religion and folklore to enter the temple of Science!” (Zheng Guanglu 1991: 52) The National Science Commission officially recognized *qigong* as a scientific discipline. An interministerial “Leaders’ Working Group on Somatic Science”, made up of representatives from the ministry of National Security, the Central Party Committee Propaganda Department, the National Defense Commission for Science, Technology and Industry, and the All-China Association for Science and Technology, was formed to promote, coordinate and supervise *qigong* and Extraordinary Functions activities.

The next year, a young and previously unknown *qigong* master, Yan Xin (严新), raised “*qigong* fever” to a frenzy. Claiming to have been initiated since his early childhood by over thirty traditional masters of medicine, martial arts, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, Yan Xin became an instant celebrity in early 1987 when researchers at Tsinghua University publicized results of experiments claiming that his External *Qi* had changed the molecular structure of water at a distance of 2000 km. Qian Xuesen, in his review of the experiment, wrote: “This must be published immediately, to announce the success of the Chinese to the whole world!” (Qian Xuesen 1987)

In order to allow greater numbers of people to benefit from Yan Xin's powers, leaders of the semi-official China *Qigong* Science Association organized a series of public Yan Xin lectures in large auditoriums and sports stadiums across the country. Entitled "Force-filled experimental lectures", they drew audiences of up to 20,000, lasted up to ten hours without interruption, and became the scene of trance reactions and miraculous healings. Yan Xin gave over 200 mass lectures between 1987 and 1989. Before long, other *qigong* masters began giving Force-filled lectures, and an industry was spawned selling "force-filled" audio and video tapes of Yan Xin's lectures.

Yan Xin presented *qigong* as a renaissance of Chinese civilization following centuries of decay. According to Yan, Exceptional Functions had been perfectly mastered by the ancient Chinese, who made use of them to establish civilization. In ancient China, it was common for men to "see at an infinite distance and hear as far as the wind can blow" (Yan Xin 1998: 60). Great figures such as Laozi were accomplished *qigong* masters.

"During [its first historical] period, *qigong* was largely used by society in all aspects of human life. It served to preserve health, to prevent and to treat diseases. It was also used for the development of certain Exceptional Functions such as predicting events (the *Book of Changes* is one example), for social control (politics), war, and communication with nature. It was the basis for the development of culture, including the creation of written language, the discovery of herbal medicine and the emergence of various forms of art. And, most importantly, it laid the foundations on which religions were created" (IYXQA 1995: 3-4).

Yan Xin states that during the second period in the history of *qigong*, which lasted from 2000 years ago until modern times, religions were founded by accomplished *qigong* masters. As religions became more formalized, they gradually replaced the essence of *qigong* with religious dogma, and discouraged the teaching of *qigong*. As a result, true *qigong* masters hid in the mountains, and only a very small number of disciples could gain access to their secret teachings (IYXQA 1995:4-5). The science of *qigong* was corrupted by religion, feudalism and superstitions. Yan Xin states:

"Under the influence of feudal consciousness, certain people mystified, impaired and transformed [*qigong*]. During this process, it was wrapped in a false garb, and erroneous contents were added. In order to reinforce their domination, feudal lords added terrible things to *qigong*; and purely religious people, in order to conform to the requirements of feudalism, also added horrible things. Consciously or not, *qigong* was transformed by people, and lost its [original] content from late antiquity." (Yan Xin 1998:60)

In Yan Xin's historical schema, the third, contemporary era is characterized by the reappearance of *qigong* and Exceptional Functions and their widespread recognition. They

attain a scientific basis, and are taught at a scale never seen in over a thousand years (IYXQA 1995:5). The history of *qigong*, identified with the essence of Chinese civilization, thus passes through stages of original purity, decadence, and resurrection.

With Yan Xin, *qigong* begins to acquire an increasingly moral dimension. In one of his “Force-Filled Lectures”, he describes *qigong* 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” (*zhongde weiben* 重德为本). [...] 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.” (Yan Xin 1996: Side B)

As an all-encompassing discourse which touches on everything in the universe, *qigong* unites the cosmological tendencies of both science and religion. As a principle of moral conduct, *qigong* unites technical – and thus scientific -- practice with the moral teachings of traditional religion. *Qigong* aims to achieve a perfect synthesis between Chinese tradition and the modern cult of scientism. This synthesis, however, through the scientific revolution it aimed to trigger, promised to transcend both current science and past religion.

Indeed, “*qigong* science” claimed to shake the very foundations of modern science. Best-selling novelist Ke Yunlu stated that the question of Exceptional Functions was of “world importance”, for their scientific proof could be considered as the “third most important scientific discovery” in human history, after relativity theory and quantum mechanics (Ke Yunlu 1996: 28). Another author, Liu Zhidong, compares the impact of *qigong* theory with Darwin’s evolutionary theory, a discovery which could “shake the world” (Liu Zhidong (ed.) 1993: 159) .

But while the scientific revolutions of the past began in the West, this time, it was China which had a great advance over the rest of the world: the new scientific revolution

would be the work of Chinese people, and would propel China to the top. Qian Xuesen wrote that once *qigong* became a true science, “we descendants of the Yellow Emperor will no longer be ashamed of our ancestors, and our reputation will spread to the whole world” (Qian Xuesen 1998a: 7-8). Zhang Yaoting (张耀庭), director of the Leaders’ Work Group on Somatic Science, is reported to have stated that *qigong* would allow China to become an international superpower (Quoted in Li & Zheng 1996: 98). Best-selling author Ji Yi wrote that “scientists predict that the first country to break the secret of Exceptional Functions will be the first and most powerful state in the new century” (Ji Yi 1991: 37). And General Zhang Zhenhuan raised a tantalizing possibility: “Imagine more than a billion people using *qigong* to increase their intelligence: what would be the magnitude of such power when combined ?” (Zhang Zhenhuan 1988: 19)

Such ideas stimulated much enthusiasm. Journalist Sima Nan, a former *qigong* adept who later became a leading anti-*qigong* critic in the 1990s, recalls his first feelings when learning of Exceptional Functions:

“At the beginning of the 1980s, when I was a student, I had a powerful experience one day. One Sunday morning [...], having learned in a newspaper article of this “Somatic Science” which was going to force the rewriting of all of humanity’s scientific knowledge, I wanted to charge ahead with a boundless enthusiasm. Like many people, I dreamed of a wonderful and mysterious “futuristic world”, toward which we were irresistibly drawn.” (Quoted in Li Liyan 1998: 7-8)

In this future world, thanks to *qigong*, no material obstacle would be able to block the satisfaction of human desires. *Qigong* apologists Li Jianxin and Zheng Qin wrote that

“we can come to the following conclusion: the External *Qi* of *qigong*, or, to be more precise, the external effect of the human body in a state of *qigong*, can produce any kind of result, be it physical, chemical or biological. [...] To go a little further, we should have the following intuition: the *qi* of *qigong* is omnipotent [...] it can produce any effect sought by the observer” (Li & Zheng 1996:221-22).

In the same vein, grandmaster Zhang Hongbao described the future paradise which would be brought about by *qigong*:

“The world is currently pregnant with the fourth technological revolution (also called the fourth wave). This revolution differs from the three previous ones, in that its central focus will be biological engineering. [...] It is not difficult to imagine that in several years, when *qigong* will be practiced by the entire population, and when Somatic Science will have made important breakthroughs, mankind will not only enjoy full health and physical and mental vigour, as well as a superior intelligence, but there will also be innumerable *qigong* grandmasters and persons whose Exceptional Functions will be triggered by *qigong* [...]. Such a world may very well become a fairyland [*shenxian leyuan* 神仙乐园].” (Quoted in Ji Yi 1990: 141)

By 1988, over 100 million Chinese were practising *qigong* daily. *Qigong* was taught in primary schools to increase pupils' intelligence, was used in professional sports and military training, and *qigong* masters with Exceptional Functions were employed by the geological prospection bureau to detect underground mineral deposits. The *qigong* master became a charismatic idol, combining in a single figure the legendary figure of the immortal superman and the modern image of the scientific technician, integrating into his own person traditional religion and the faith in modern science. All of the contradictions of modern China seemed to resolve themselves in the powers of the master's own body. With the moral teachings of Yan Xin and the charismatic grandmasters, *qigong* became an "omni-science" connecting all aspects of human knowledge and culture, and acquired an ethical dimension which transcended body practice.

By the second half of the 1980's, religious practices and concepts had thus become integral to the originally secular concept of *qigong*, expressing a faith in the efficacy of a reconstituted tradition as well as in the promise of a utopian future, which practitioners could feel intimately, in the depth of their bodies and consciousness. Through *qigong* practice, they could mentally and physiologically enter the world of ancient legends, of hermits, Immortals and Sages, of mythical animals and supermen, seen as the sources of Chinese civilization and which, through *qigong*, were resuscitated. The deep meditation which can be triggered by the effects of practice, and the phenomena perceived by the practitioner, may give him the sensation of participating in avant-garde scientific research and in the transformation of himself and of the world.

The sets of body and breathing exercises such as those introduced by Liu Guizhen remained as the foundation of *qigong* practice, but were relegated to a secondary position in charismatic *qigong* which consisted in the sick person or the audience member receiving the Force of the Grandmaster. Such transmission of Force no longer required the adoption of specific body postures, nor the circulation of perceptible *qi* between master and patient: the master's Force acted instantaneously, from any distance. Its only container, if it had one, was his utterance: Yan Xin's healing method consisted of "casual chat" with the patient. His lectures were an endless flow of words. Body techniques were almost forgotten, as adepts plunged into the master's field of Force.

Qigong utopianism

An “archeology” of *qigong* discourse would reveal that *qigong* is composed of four distinct layers of meaning, allowing the easy passage between seemingly contradictory forms of expression and practice.

The first layer, the most profound and archaic, is an animist substratum. The universe is perceived as imbued with invisible forces, which it is possible to manipulate through the mastery of specific techniques. *Qigong* gymnastics is a kind of dance between the practitioner and invisible force flows. Its meditation techniques allow the adept to act on these forces through the exercise of mental power. The use of charms, “information objects” and incantations expresses the idea that certain objects and sounds can be infused with magical powers.

The second layer is an implicit form of messianism. At this level appear the grandmasters, whose power over invisible forces is such that they have the ability to save all of humanity. The grandmasters do more than teach methods for attaining health and healing, promising a return to the original virtue and greatness of Chinese culture. Their ultimate goal is for all of mankind to join their practice, triggering a process of collective renewal and ushering in a new area of universal health and bliss.

The third layer is formed by modernist scientism. In China, scientific ideology rests on a millenarian eschatology: the old, decadent culture will be destroyed and replaced by a new scientific civilization which will save humanity. Science can do miracles, it is the key to controlling the invisible forces of the universe. Science will save China; *qigong* is Chinese science.

Finally, a layer of nationalism, a reaction to the western domination of scientific modernity. Here, the superiority of China is asserted, arguing that *qigong* is a superior form of science. Thus, a return to the traditional wisdom of China will allow China to surpass the science of the West: the science which will save the world will be Chinese science.

It is Science itself, in its entirety and down to its foundations, that *qigong* saw as its object. *Qigong* sought not only to “scientise” itself, adopting the superficial forms of science – research societies, schools, journals, materialist concepts – but, reaching much further, it sought to conquer the fortress of knowledge, to save Science itself. With boundless confidence, *qigong*, marrying messianic strains with utopian scientism, saw itself as the very future of science and the key to the wellbeing of mankind.

“*Qigong* fever” has been explained as a post-Cultural Revolution phenomenon which filled a bodily, emotional, social, cultural, moral or spiritual void left by the end of

Maoism¹². Here, I would like to stress the path of *reconciliation* proposed by *qigong*, which promised to resolve the contradictions which have been tormenting China's identity since the beginning of the 20th century: modernist scientism and ambivalence toward the West, the pride of an ancient civilization and shame at its current weakness. *Qigong* was an attempt to reconcile opposing visions of tradition and modernity which have confronted each other throughout the 20th century, holding out the hope of China regaining its traditions and dignity while becoming a leader of world scientific development.

It is this promise which attracted so many Chinese intellectuals, scientists and political leaders, inciting them to promote practices often disdained by the literati in Chinese history. For *qigong* was an intellectual and official movement as much as popular one, a movement from the top downwards as much as from the bottom up. Though different sensibilities were expressed in different contexts -- the trances of "spontaneous movements" and visions of gods during meditation were downplayed in the more educated *qigong* circles¹³, which attempted to replace "superstitious" beliefs with rational explanations -- they coexisted within *qigong* circles without any real conflict until the very end of the 1980s. Famous *qigong* masters such as Yan Xin and Zhang Hongbao, who had a university education, were able to reach a broad audience from educated as well as popular backgrounds. Socially as well as ideologically, *qigong* helped to heal wounds from decades of political and ideological struggle which had lasted throughout the 20th century and culminated with Maoism. It also offered a new vision of the future, one that was distinctly Chinese, empowering millions of individuals who could put it into practice through their daily exercises.

Qigong's nationalist scientism made possible its legitimization by the Chinese communist state. The active encouragement of certain state institutions is a unique feature of *qigong* compared with the traditional forms of sectarianism which continue to exist in Taiwan, in overseas Chinese communities and in the Chinese countryside¹⁴. Never in its history had Chinese sectarianism been federated into a single constituency under the auspices of state institutions, and never had it benefited from such strong political support. It is in an intermediate space, between state institutions and sectarian groups, that the *qigong* subculture was truly constituted. In this space, opened by semi-official *qigong* associations and magazines, propagated by the state-owned media, deployed in scientific, educational and medical institutions, and made visible in the parks, gardens and public spaces of urban China, masters, adepts and researchers

communicated with each other, elaborating *qigong* as a path for the regeneration of the individual, of China and of the world. Different masters and sects contributed to the “*qigong* cause” (*qigong shiye* 气功事业) through their methods, their healings, their laboratory experiments, their conceptual elaborations, their practical innovations, and their systems of propagation. State agencies and political leaders contributed by elaborating an ideological framework, by conferring encouragements and permissions, by removing bureaucratic obstacles, by contributing state assets, and by protecting against criticism. *Qigong* prospered by combining the institutional support of the state and the popular dynamism of the sects.

Qigong in crisis

Following the enthusiasm of the 1980s, however, *qigong*'s prospects darkened by the mid 1990s. Psychotic deviations, quackery, internal divisions, the personality cult of some masters, a rising polemic against the propagation of “superstitions” and “pseudoscience” under the guise of *qigong*, and the loss of support in scientific and political circles, made it obvious that the eagerly-anticipated scientific revolution and Chinese renaissance would not occur in a breath. *Qigong*, though still practiced by tens of millions of adepts, was increasingly marginalized in terms of its influence as a cultural movement.

While the 1980's had seen *qigong* participate in a post-Cultural Revolution movement of collective emotional release, in which many excesses were tolerated, the post-Tiananmen period of the 1990's was marked by a desire for controlled development. The state began to regulate *qigong*, with the goal of “rectifying” its errors. Though ineffective, government efforts at intervention intensified following a sustained anti-*qigong* press polemic in 1995.

In 1988, *qigong* masters had failed to demonstrate their Exceptional Functions to high-level skeptical investigators including scientists from the Chinese Academy of Sciences¹⁵ and an American delegation of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)¹⁶. Shortly thereafter, *qigong* researcher Zhang Honglin (张洪林) denied the existence of External *Qi*, a phenomenon he attributed to psychological suggestion, and criticized the experiments of Gu Hansen and Yan Xin as lacking in rigour and failing the test of replicability (Zheng Guanglu 1991: 243-253). A network of scientists and journalists began to campaign against the “pseudo-*qigong*” (*wei qigong*) linked to Exceptional Functions, which strayed from the classical self-discipline of

body, breath and mind of Liu Guizhen's original *qigong*. It was only in 1995, however, that they found an audience for their polemic, after former *qigong* adept Sima Nan exposed several skills of Exceptional Functions as mere conjuring tricks, in a demonstration on national television. This was followed by a series of anti-*qigong* articles in the press, which attacked many *qigong* masters as quacks, compared *qigong* to "cults" in other parts of the world, such as the Aum Shimrikyo sect of Japan, and warned of the potential political menace of organized *qigong* groups (He Zuoxiu *et al* 1995, Sima Nan 1995, Li & Zheng 1996).

During the 1990's, *qigong* sects became more sophisticated and better organized. Expansion and control became the new trend. Certain state agencies, the semi-official *qigong* associations, and the *qigong* masters' organizations sought to exploit the vast profits which could be generated by *qigong*-related activities and products. A new generation of *qigong* groups emerged which, basing themselves on the transmission networks in parks and public spaces, put into place strategies for systematic, large-scale expansion. Zhong Gong, founded by grandmaster Zhang Hongbao (张洪宝), for instance, elaborated a strategy for the planned penetration of political, scientific, media and judiciary institutions. The sect built a vast organization which used its own administrative system to propagate a new philosophical and cultural system, "Qilin culture", among its thirty million practitioners. By the mid 1990's, Zhong Gong (中功)¹⁷ had become the largest *qigong* sect and the biggest mass organization in China outside the Communist Party.

Such rapid expansion worried state authorities. As early as 1994, the municipal government of Beijing issued an arrest warrant against Zhang Hongbao for economic crimes. The master disappeared and continued to lead his organization while in hiding¹⁸. Zhong Gong was soon eclipsed by Falun Gong as the largest *qigong* organization in China. During this period – from 1996 to 1999 – while Zhong Gong rapidly declined, Falun Gong, although it had been founded only a few years earlier, experienced stunning growth. Like Zhong Gong, Falun Gong was not recognized by the semi-official *qigong* associations after 1996, and was under police pressure. Falun Gong's success in a context of official hostility can be attributed to two factors: (1) Zhong Gong had created a heavy bureaucratic-style administration, with its cadres, its buildings and its business dealings, which could easily attract official attention and were difficult to maintain in an unfavorable environment, while Falun Gong had perfected the light and flexible model of *qigong* transmission networks through free practice groups in parks and public spaces; (2) Zhong Gong, as a commercial organization, was based on the profit motive, using

bonuses and commissions to encourage its cadres – a method which was difficult to sustain at a period when the *qigong* boom was clearly in decline – while Falun Gong crystallized, reinforced and radicalized notions of selfless discipline and sacrifice, triggering a strong force for individual and collective mobilization.

Indeed, “*qigong* science”, unable to produce replicable experimental proof of its claims, had sunken into ridicule, and had failed to achieve the eagerly-desired union with science. The first years of Falun Gong coincide with a period of confusion and exhaustion in *qigong* circles as they bore the brunt of a media campaign against pseudo-science. In this context, Li Hongzhi, founder of Falun Gong or “Dharma-Wheel *Qigong*”, redefined his method as having entirely different objectives from *qigong*: the purpose of practice should be neither physical health nor the development of Exceptional Functions, but to purify one’s heart and attain spiritual salvation.

The expansion of Falun Gong

During Falun Gong’s first two years of existence, from 1992 to 1994, Li Hongzhi was active in *qigong* circles and was propelled to fame with their support. Semi-official *qigong* associations were happy to organize his highly profitable lecture tours. He cured sick people and acquired the aura of a master with Exceptional Functions. In 1993, he spent 40,000 yuan to publish a book on his method (Li Hongzhi 1993). He created a transmission network which followed the typical structure of other *qigong* organizations. He cultivated contacts in government institutions, especially in the ministry of Public Security. In short, Li Hongzhi followed the typical career of a successful *qigong* master.

His lectures were dominated by moral, esoteric, demonological, apocalyptic, messianic and sectarian themes. In itself, this was not atypical for a *qigong* master: others, including Yang Meijun, Yan Xin, Zhang Xiangyu, Zhang Xiaoping, etc. had also touched on such themes with varying degrees of emphasis. But, around the end of 1994 and beginning of 1995, Li Hongzhi introduced new elements which would subtly but profoundly change the nature of Falun Gong, until ideology replaced body training as its chief object.

In the fall of 1994, he began to stress that Falun Gong was not a form of *qigong* but a higher universal Dharma. He compared the leaders of practice sites to temple abbots, whose role was to guide adepts to salvation. He forbade practitioners from healing others. He changed his birthday registration to May 13, which coincided with the

birthday of Sakyamuni Buddha by the Chinese calendar (the 8th day of the 3rd lunar month).

In his book *Turning the Dharma Wheel (Zhuan Falun)* (Li Hongzhi 1998), first published in 1995, as well as in his later writings, Li Hongzhi clearly spells out his rejection of key points of *qigong* ideology, which he replaces with a more clearly millenarian structure. Exceptional Functions are relegated to lower forms of *qigong*, the object of Falun Gong practice being one's "spiritual nature" (*xinxing* 心性) and salvation from the demonic world of "ordinary people" (*changren* 常人). The vision of a radiant future of *qigong* supermen is replaced by a dark vision of apocalypse. The ideal of a transcendent renewal of science and tradition remains, but associated with a paranoid fundamentalism: the religions and traditions of the past are, in the present "period of the end of the Dharma", possessed by demons, and modern science is an extra-terrestrial plot: both should be avoided and the practitioner should devote himself exclusively to the much higher Dharma of Falun Gong¹⁹. All other spiritual, philosophical, religious or health practices or books are forbidden. In Falun Gong, body and meditation exercises are vehicles for the transmission of doctrine: "learning the Great Dharma and reading the Book must be taken as an obligatory daily training" (Li Hongzhi 1996: 31). *Zhuan Falun* is not a technical or theoretical work like most of the popular *qigong* literature: it is sacred scripture; as one adept told me, the "Bible" of Falun Gong.

Centred on the study of scripture, Falun Gong brings a radical change to the structure of *qigong* practice. Many Falun Gong adepts began learning Falun Gong like any other *qigong* method, seeking health and healing. But, in his writings, Li Hongzhi insists that the goal of Falun Gong is not therapy but spiritual accomplishment (*yuanman* 圆满), to detach oneself from the world of ordinary people and rise in the mystical hierarchy of the arhats, bodhisattvas, buddhas and gods. Illness, as a way to pay back karmic debts accumulated in past lives, should be allowed to go its course. Only illumination by the discipline of Falun Gong can completely erase karmic debts. Li Hongzhi shows strong contempt for those who remain attached to the desire to heal. To please the master and rise in the spiritual hierarchy, one must follow the Great Dharma of Falun Gong and forget one's personal problems. Thus, Falun Gong moves from a discourse of illness and healing to a broader one of suffering and salvation. Li Hongzhi can then motivate adepts to commit themselves to a path which goes far from simple concerns of health and therapy: to attain salvation, one has the duty to "propagate the Dharma" (*hongfa* 弘法) and "defend the Dharma" (*hufa* 护法).

Li Hongzhi's doctrine breaks with *qigong*'s ideal of reconciliation. If *qigong* could be described in terms of optimism and fusion, Falun Gong's outlook is one of pessimism and separation²⁰. Here, let us briefly compare the ideological elements of *qigong* and Falun Gong.

Both have a millenarian structure and an ideal of universal bliss or salvation. But while *qigong* foresaw a blissful future for humanity in this world, Li Hongzhi predicted the apocalyptic end of the universe²¹ and situated salvation in another dimension.

Both are rooted in body cultivation techniques. But where, for *qigong*, a blissful future is based on paranormal powers, in Falun Gong, the way to salvation is opened by moral and spiritual discipline.

Both recognize the limits of traditional culture and of modern science. *Qigong* sought to trigger a revolution and a renaissance by fusing the two, and saw itself as the key to such a union. Falun Gong, on the other hand, uses terms from both traditional religion and modern science, but warns against the “demons” and extra-terrestrials which lurk behind decadent religions and amoral science. It presents itself as a higher Law which needs neither the former nor the latter. Where *qigong* is an eclectic brew into which anything can be thrown, Falun Gong stresses its transcendence and purity from all other forms of knowledge and tradition.

A few simple mutations – replacing Exceptional Functions with “spiritual nature”, this-worldly utopia with otherworldly paradise, fusion with transcendence – produced an entirely different doctrine. We can thus begin to understand why so many *qigong* practitioners switched from *qigong* to Falun Gong after 1995. Indeed, at a time when the promise of *qigong* was increasingly put into doubt, Li Hongzhi's doctrine not only provided an explanatory framework, but could lead practitioners to a new level which transcended the scientific and ethical problems of *qigong*: that of moral struggle and millennial religion.

In Falun Gong, *qigong* exercises are but adjuncts to a clearly elaborated doctrine of salvation. Practitioners are reminded of their spiritual essence and led to a path to transcendence, in which one abandons selfish desires and attachments in order to “return to one's original nature”. Stressing the moral corruption of contemporary society, Falun Gong advocates the rejection of common social norms based on money and competition, which should be substituted by a transcendent ideal of conformity to the universal attributes of “Truth, Benevolence and Forbearance”. Its doctrine gives meaning to suffering, which it explains both as a karmic consequence of one's own sins, and as a necessary test on the path of spiritual progress. It places the current state of humanity

within the cyclical phases of the origin, development and decadence of humanity during each cosmic era. And it offers a clear and simple path of liberation from the sufferings of this world: a single master, a single book, and a single practice.

Zhong Gong had built its organization on a system of distribution of healings, profits, and social recognition (through titles and positions in the organization). In contrast, Falun Gong practice is based on the abnegation of self: one should not expect healing; one should not have the slightest ambition or seek influence or reputation, but humbly serve the Great Dharma. This radically religious dimension of Falun Gong is the source of its strength in the face of repression.

As soon as its master had disappeared and “*qigong* fever” had subsided, Zhong Gong’s ability to provide material or social benefits to its adepts greatly diminished, and it withered in the second half of the 1990’s. Falun Gong, on the other hand, strives to make its disciples immune to such factors: sick, one pays off karmic debts, ostracized by society, one moves closer to spiritual accomplishment. What the world of “ordinary people” sees as physical or social failure is recast by Falun Gong as victory, and becomes a source of Force against demonic power.

In the name of “protecting the Dharma”, Falun Gong began a pattern of systematic activism against all criticism. Beginning in 1996, any newspaper or media outlet which published or broadcast a report critical of Falun Gong would find itself the target of sit-ins, protests and letter-writing campaigns, demanding apologies and retraction of the offending comments. Several newspapers acceded to such demands, the Beijing TV station going so far as to fire a journalist who had interviewed a Falun Gong critic. As the number of Falun Gong practitioners grew to reach the tens of millions, Li Hongzhi did not hesitate to challenge his adversaries, projecting an image of social power which could rival with that of the Communist Party, until the protest of over 10,000 practitioners around Zhongnanhai, seat of China’s supreme leadership, provoked a ruthless response from the state²².

In the wake of Falun Gong’s suppression, the entire *qigong* community was dismantled. The state tried to impose its own, uniform system of *qigong* teaching and administration – a type of *qigong* strongly reminiscent of that of the 1950’s: ideologically correct and transmitted only within state structures. Thus, we seem to have gone full circle: the government tries to eliminate popular groups practicing body cultivation techniques, while purifying *qigong* of its superstitions and turning it into a “scientific”

practice which will bring health benefits to the people. Falun Gong has become a secret dissident society, while other *qigong* networks survive underground.

Conclusion

Marcel Mauss wrote in 1902 that religions are aggregates of representations, practices and organizations, which exist in specific historical contexts within specific societies (Mauss 1968). In this article, I have tried to outline the evolution of the aggregate of representations, practices and organizations which coagulated around the term *qigong* between 1949 and 1999. In terms of *practices*, we have seen how the *qigong* category was originally intended to be a purely technical one, built around Chinese psychophysiological practices centred on breath training separated from their social and religious context, and how a variety of other practices were later attached to *qigong*. In terms of *representations*, I have shown how a purely technical vision of *qigong* served political, ideological and institutional objectives, and how the fusion of *qigong* with the concept of a paranormal science opened the door to a relegitimation of previously discredited traditions as a new science which could accomplish millenarian expectations of a utopian future – a vision which, after its failure, was replaced in Falun Gong by a paranoid apocalyptic eschatology. The first *organizations* devoted to the teaching and practice of modern *qigong* were clinical institutions; these were followed by mass transmission networks operating in public spaces; and some of them evolved into large-scale organizations built on bureaucratic, commercial or religious foundations. I have briefly sketched the formation, the organization and the strategies of these groups, arguing that *qigong* as a social movement was the product of an ambiguous marriage between the state and popular groups, and that the Falun Gong crisis resulted from the breaking of this alliance.

Qigong representations, practices and organizations are “nomadic” objects (Stengers 1996) which have their own individual histories and circulate and evolve in space and time, an unstable composite whose elements are constantly being reshuffled and recomposed, in resonance with dominant threads of contemporary Chinese cultural history. Thus, in the 1950’s, Chinese body cultivation techniques were integrated into the institution-building of a new modern state and enlisted in the campaign for Chinese medicine against “bourgeois” and “imperialist” Western medicine. In the 1970’s, *Qigong* became a mass public exercise activity which promised to deliver low-cost health to the

millions. Shortly afterwards, it combined the dream of a resurrection of national culture with the Deng-era emphasis on science and technology as the core ideology of development. By the 1990's, concern with social disorder led to an emphasis on organizational consolidation by *qigong* popular groups as well as by the official and semi-official agencies in charge of their supervision. Disillusionment with the failed promises of a Marxist ideology worn out by widespread corruption and growing social disparities, found expression in the moral fundamentalism of Falun Gong.

We can only speculate as to the future forms of the *qigong* aggregate. Body cultivation will doubtlessly continue to have a place in China's modernizing culture. Falun Gong has become a highly sophisticated international organization, with methods and concerns increasingly distant from those of other *qigong* groups. Many *qigong* masters have settled overseas and found a niche in New Age and alternative medicine circles, tapping into the growing interest in the West for oriental religion and meditational practices which focus on the experience of the individual subject and her body in a secular setting.. Following China's increasing integration into world economy and culture, it will be interesting to see how the New Age conglomeration of Western and Oriental traditions radiates back into China. We will thus be able to follow the globalization of meditation and body cultivation traditions, as they evolve from local or national traditions into products of a world modernity.

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² On breath circulation techniques in “White Lotus” groups, see Overmyer 1976: 188-191. On “meditational sects” and the role of body and breath cultivation techniques in their propagation, see Naquin 1976: 26-32 and 1985. On body training techniques in the Boxer movement, see Esherick 1987: 50-53, Cohen 1997: 16-30, 99-118. On the proliferation of sects at the end of the Qing and during the Republican period (1911-1949) in the context of the destruction of traditional social and religious structures, see Perry 1980: 152-203, Duara 1995: 96-109.

³ On the etymology of the term *qigong*, see Despeux 1997: 267.

⁴ Cf. Despeux 1997: 275. On the physiological relaxation response provoked by practices similar to *qigong*, see Benson 1975.

⁵ On the notion of “invented tradition”, see Hobsbaum & Ranger (eds.) 1983.

⁶ On Jiang Weiqiao’s contribution to the birth of modern *qigong*, see Kohn 2002.

⁷ On the institutionalization of Chinese medicine, see Croizier 1968.

⁸ *Zifa donggong* (自发动功) – a trance-like state in which the practitioner makes automatic or spontaneous movements which sometimes resemble the movements of animals, martial arts postures, etc. On spontaneous movements, see Ots 1994.

⁹ *Xinxi wu* (信息物) – objects onto which a master has emitted *qi*, leaving an imprint of invisible “information” endowed with magical efficacy.

¹⁰ *Yuzhou yu* (宇宙语) – a state similar to “speaking in tongues”, in which the practitioner utters incomprehensible words said to be imbued with cosmic power.

¹¹ On *qigong* and the Chinese sectarian tradition, see Ownby 2002 and Palmer 2003. The term “sect” is here used in the Chinese context in reference to popular groups with charismatic leaders which are independent of the institutionalized and state-recognized religions (Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism under the Ming and Qing; Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam in the Peoples’ Republic), and, participation being voluntary and open to all regardless of sex, social background, kinship or place, distinct from traditional cults based on lineage, clan, village, native place, guild membership, etc. On the political usage of labels such as “White Lotus” to designate such groups, see ter Haar 1992.

¹² For interpretations of the *qigong* boom, see Penny 1993: 179; Ots 1994: 126; Micollier 1999; Chen 1995: 361; Zhu & Penny 1994: 7; Zhu Xiaoyang 1994 [1989]; Hsu 1999: 24; Heise 1999: 110, Xu Jian 1999.

¹³ See Ots 1994: 124, 131; Zhang Guoli 1993.

¹⁴ On sectarianism in Taiwan, see Jordan & Overmyer 1986. On the resurgence of sects in rural China, see Munro (ed.) 1989.

¹⁵ The most notable of whom was physicist He Zuoxiu, a Marxist propagandist whose criticism of Falun Gong, published in an obscure Tianjin college youth magazine in 1999 (He Zuoxiu 1999), triggered the Zhongnanhai demonstration of Falun Gong adepts, leading to the state's repression of the group.

¹⁶ The membership of CSICOP, publisher of the journal *SkepticalInquirer*, is made up of scientists, philosophers, and magicians committed to debunking paranormal claims. On the CSICOP delegation to China, see Kurtz 1988.

¹⁷ The name Zhong Gong, which reads as "*Qigong* of the Middle / of China", is homophonous with the acronym for the Chinese Communist Party (中共). Zhong Gong's full name, *Zhonghua yangsheng yizhi gong* (中华养生益智功), means "Chinese *Qigong* for Nourishing Health and Increasing Intelligence".

¹⁸ He appeared on the American island of Guam in 2000 and, after spending six months there in detention, obtained asylum in the US.

¹⁹ For a study of Li Hongzhi's doctrine, see Palmer 2001. For an in-depth study of Falun Gong, see Palmer 2004.

²⁰ The tone of Li Hongzhi's writings becomes more optimistic around 2002. At the time of writing, I am in the process of analyzing the evolution of Falun Gong after 1999.

²¹ Starting in 1997, however, Li Hongzhi claimed that he had used his powers to avert the apocalypse. See Li Hongzhi 1999: 94.

²² For a sociological interpretation of Falun Gong, see Madsen 2000. On Falun Gong as a popular protest movement, see Perry 2001. On the communication styles of Falun Gong and Chinese government propaganda, see Powers & Lee 2002.