

The Body at the Junction of Religion and Scientism: Modernisation of Meditative Traditions in Contemporary China¹

David A. Palmer

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In the 1980s and 1990s, traditional breathing, gymnastics and meditation techniques went through a period of booming popularity in China, 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, meditation techniques were disseminated to a degree never before seen in Chinese history. While *qigong* claims to be a tradition more than 5,000 years old and to be the origin of Chinese culture and civilisation, it is in fact a recent creation, initially sponsored by Chinese state health institutions to extract useful body techniques from their traditional religious setting.

In this paper, I will present an overview of the *qigong* movement’s development in the twentieth century. I will show how, although rooted in ancient traditions, *qigong* is a decidedly modern phenomenon, and although purportedly a set of secular body techniques, it can be considered to be a form of *religious* practice centred on the body. Owing to the practical dimension of this type of technique, there has been a tendency, both in China and the West, to adapt them to a modern, secular, individualist lifestyle. The body becomes the locus for a new understanding of religious traditions, one which seeks to be compatible with a scientific worldview, and to reconcile the contradictions between tradition and modernity. And while meditative traditions have adapted well to secular culture, they have served to propagate religious concepts and practices under new guises, contributing to a post-secular resurgence of religion outside of traditional institutions.

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 techniques.² 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 twentieth century and earlier,³ 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, visualisation 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, the *Book of Changes* (*yijing*), etc.

The term *qigong* evokes a large number of images and concepts. *Qi* is often translated as “breath”, and *gong* as “effort”, 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 official acceptance, 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*), projected to the exterior of the body (*fuqi*), and extracted from other objects (*chaiqi*); it can involuntarily leak from the body (*xieqi*); and it can even be stolen from other persons (*touqi*). It can be set to create an energy field (*qichang*) 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” and “force”, *gong* is related to *gongfu*, 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 (*fagong*); 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 then talks of “force-filled audiotapes” (*daigong cidai*) or “force-filled lectures” (*daigong baogao*). The character *gong* is also found in the word *gongneng* which means “function”, a term which takes a specific meaning in *qigong*, often referring to the “exceptional functions of the human body” (*renti teyi gongneng*)—the magical or paranormal powers said to appear at a high level of *qigong* practice. In the same sense, the expression *shengong*, “divine force”, is sometimes used to designate the magical aspects of *qigong*. *Qigong* practice (*lian qigong*) 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*), a state of profound relaxation which can resemble hypnosis.⁴ Another term used to speak of this training, at a higher level, is *xiulian*: the spiritual discipline needed to forge the elixir of immortality, which evokes the Taoist traditions of inner alchemy (*neidan*).

This brief presentation of the semantic field of *qigong* shows how easily one can slide 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 standardise them, and put them to the service of the construction of a secular, modern state. As such, *qigong* is an invented tradition.⁵ 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 techniques are thus normally divided into “hard” forms (*ying qigong*) derived from martial arts, often with a dramatic component (swallowing a broken glass bottle, breaking bricks or stones with one’s hand, lifting a car with one’s tongue, etc.), and “soft” forms (*ruan qigong*).⁶ The latter are grouped into “still” forms (*jinggong*), which include meditation, concentration and visualisation techniques practised in a sitting, standing or lying state, and “active” forms (*donggong*), derived from the calisthenic movements of *daoyin*, or, in the case of “*qigong* spontaneous movements” (*zifa donggong*), practices comparable to trance and possession states.

In its secular, technical, rational expression, *qigong* is a modern expression of the Chinese body cultivation tradition. It is the product of a new social structure, which provokes a redistribution of technical, conceptual and social formations. This redistribution expresses itself through new combinations of techniques, new ideological constructions, and new models of transmission and collective practice.

The birth and evolution of *Qigong*

The modernisation of Chinese body cultivation had begun before its systematic organisation under the rubric of *qigong* after 1949. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, meditation master Jiang Weiqiao had revolutionised the practice and dissemination of body cultivation by couching the techniques in self-consciously modern, scientific terms and concepts. Born in Wujin district, Jiangsu province, in 1872, Jiang Weiqiao had been sickly and weak from 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, finding 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*). In these books, he criticised the abstruse and esoteric style of the old medical and Taoist 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 renamed the “elixir field” below the navel (*dantian*), considered as the root of the body’s *qi*, as the “centre of gravity” (*zhongxin*). Jiang Weiqiao’s reformulation of the techniques in modern terms paved the way for meditation practices to become accessible to anyone⁷.

It was under the Communist Party’s impulsion, 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 (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, who taught him traditional calisthenics; after 102 days of practice, 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 institutionalise traditional Chinese medicine, which had been suppressed since the 1920s by the previous Nationalist government. Chinese medicine was organised as a scientific-style medical institution, and a standardised theoretical system elaborated, compatible with Marxist philosophy. Traditional doctors, who had previously operated independently in secret lineages, were integrated into specialised medical work units.⁸ 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.

Benefiting from high-level government support, *qigong* quickly spread within medical institutions. The first wave of *qigong* peaked during the Great Leap Forward, when Chinese medicine was favoured in the campaign against Western medicine and its pretensions of scientific independence from the Party. Traditional popular masters were recruited by clinics as *qigong* therapists. Seventy *qigong* units were founded by the end of the 1950s, including clinics and sanatoria. A national conference on *qigong* was held in 1959 and a national *qigong* training course was organised a year later. Books were published on the subject and several research units began clinical and laboratory trials on the physiological effects of *qigong*. Over 300 articles on *qigong* had been published in medical journals by the early 1960s.

But the political tides turned against *qigong* in 1964-65. *Qigong* was criticised as a feudal superstition, Liu Guizhen was expelled from the Party, and all public *qigong* activities ceased during the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the 1970s, however, there was a new explosion of *qigong* activities. Already, artist and self-healed cancer victim Guo Lin 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 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 towards 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 Peking University, claiming that they had been able to train 60% of a sample of children to read without their eyes.⁹ 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.

Qigong came to be seen no longer as a mere branch of Chinese medicine, but as a scientific discipline in its own right, specialised in investigating the newly-discovered material substance of External *Qi*, which could be controlled and projected by the mind. 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.

A flourishing *qigong* subculture emerged, with its associations, its magazines, its conferences, its healing and cultural activities. A space was thus opened within which traditional masters could practise their healing arts and create organised groups under the guise of *qigong*. Millions of adepts congregated in parks and public spaces every morning to practice exercise routines disseminated by the groups. The most popular routines in the early 1980s involved entering the trance of "spontaneous movements", a phenomenon comparable to possession states.¹⁰ Throughout the 1980s, *qigong* became a legitimised outlet for the resurgence, reconfiguration and "modernisation" of religious beliefs and practices. The interplay and interpenetration of these popular networks and official institutions gave form to the new *qigong* circles.

In the meantime, the surging popularity of Hong Kong kung fu movies and pulp fiction was fuelling 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*). 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 immobilise 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.”¹¹

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”, 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*.”¹²

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!”¹³

The next year, a young and previously unknown *qigong* master, Yan Xin, 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 had become an instant celebrity in early 1987 when researchers at Qinghua University publicised results of experiments claiming that his External *Qi* had changed the molecular structure of water at a distance of 2,000 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!”¹⁴

In order to allow greater numbers of people to benefit from Yan Xin's powers, leaders of the China *Qigong* Science Association organised 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 two hundred 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 civilisation following centuries of decay. According to Yan, Exceptional Functions had been perfectly mastered by the ancient Chinese, who made use of them to establish civilisation. In ancient China, it was common for men to "see at an infinite distance and hear as far as the wind can blow".¹⁵ 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"¹⁶.

Yan Xin states that during the second period in the history of *qigong*, which lasted from 2,000 years ago until modern times, religions were founded by accomplished *qigong* masters. As religions became more formalised, 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.¹⁷ The science of *qigong* was corrupted by religion, feudalism and superstition. Yan Xin states:

"Under the influence of feudal consciousness, certain people mystified, impaired and transformed [*qigong*]. During this process, it was wrapped in 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."¹⁸

In Yan Xin's historical schema, the third, contemporary era is characterised 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.¹⁹ The history of *qigong*, identified with the essence of Chinese civilisation, 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 recognised 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 7,000 years ago, [...] [emphasised the phrase] 'be rooted in

virtue' (*zhongde weiben*). [...] 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 harmonise 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.”²⁰

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 aims to trigger, promises to transcend both current science and past religion.

Indeed, “*qigong* science” claims to shake the very foundations of modern science. Best-selling novelist Ke Yunlu states that the question of Exceptional Functions is of “world importance”, for their scientific proof should be considered as the “third most important scientific discovery” in human history, after relativity theory and quantum mechanics.²¹ Another author, Liu Zhidong, compares the impact of *qigong* theory with Darwin’s evolutionary theory, a discovery which will “shake the world.”²²

But while the scientific revolutions of the past were due to the West, this time, it is China which has a great advance over the rest of the world: the new scientific revolution will be the work of Chinese people, and will propel China to the top. Qian Xuesen wrote that once *qigong* becomes 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.”²³

Zhang Yaoting, director of the Leaders’ Work Group on Somatic Science, once stated that *qigong* would allow China to become an international superpower.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ And General Zhang Zhenhuan raised a tantalising possibility: “Imagine more than a billion people using *qigong* to increase their intelligence: What would be the magnitude of such power when combined?”²⁶

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”, towards which we were irresistibly drawn.”²⁷

In this future world, thanks to *qigong*, no material obstacle will 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.”²⁸

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*].”²⁹

By 1988, over one hundred 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 prospecting 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.

***Qigong* utopianism**

An “archaeology” 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 meditational practices allow the adept to act on these forces through the exercise of mental power. The use of charms, “information objects”³⁰ 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 civilisation 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* sees as its object. *Qigong* sought not only to “scientise” itself (*kexuehua*), 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 well-being 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 Maoism.³¹ 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 twentieth century: modernist scientism and ambivalence toward the West, the pride of an ancient civilisation 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 twentieth 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 a popular one, a movement from the top down 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* circles,³² which attempted to replace “superstitious” beliefs with rational explanations -- they co-existed 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 twentieth 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.

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 “pseudo-science” under the guise of *qigong*, and the loss of support in scientific and political circles, made it increasingly obvious that the eagerly-anticipated scientific revolution and Chinese renaissance would not occur in a breath. *Qigong*, though still practised by tens of millions of adepts, was becoming increasingly marginal. The government began a campaign to “purify” *qigong* circles and tighten their management. While most large groups endeavoured to follow the stricter official guidelines, one group responded with a militant rejection of both the other *qigong* organisations and of state attempts to regulate *qigong* practices. This led to protests of rising intensity, culminating in the Zhongnanhai demonstration of April 1999 and the state’s repression campaign launched three months later -- a story which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

***Qigong* as an expression of modern religiosity**

I began this paper by considering *qigong* as a religious phenomenon. Such an affirmation would be strongly disputed by most *qigong* groups. Indeed, although *qigong* freely draws from the symbolic trove of Chinese religion, *qigong* discourse asserts its scientific and moral superiority over religion. Generally speaking, official Chinese religious institutions (Buddhist and Taoist) do not recognise *qigong* as religion. *Qigong* is a Chinese expression of the worldwide emergence of new forms of religiosity in the wake of the weakening of traditional institutionalised religion. This modern phenomenon forces us to question conventional definitions of religion.

French sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger has noted that religion has typically been defined in two ways: on the one hand, substantive definitions based on the content of beliefs, notably the belief in supernatural forces; on the other, functional definitions based on the ability of religions to

give meaning to life and elaborate total systems of signification.³³ Both types of definition can be applied to *qigong*. In terms of the content of beliefs, both *qi* and *gong* are magic or immaterial forces or substances, and the belief in paranormal phenomena characterises a good deal of *qigong* discourse. While the more intellectual members of *qigong* circles made great efforts to make these phenomena fit with materialism, this resulted in totalising theories which integrated the ordinary and supra-ordinary realms into a single system of meaning, all the while maintaining the fascination for the miraculous effects of paranormal powers.

But it would be futile to limit ourselves to identifying elements of *qigong* which fit into one or another definition of religion.³⁴ To define religion in terms of the content of beliefs would force us to make an artificial distinction between the “religious” aspects of *qigong* and its “non-religious” (i.e. medical, scientific, etc.) elements. And if we follow the functional definition of religion, we end up “drowning” the religious dimension of *qigong* “in the elusive nebula of ‘signifying systems’.”³⁵

Hervieu-Léger’s attempts to break out of this impasse open new avenues for the study of modern phenomena such as *qigong*. She considers religion as based on “lines of faith” (“lignée croyante”) which combine three elements: (1) the expression of faith, “faith” (“le croire”) here taken to include both “beliefs” (“croyances”) and the *practices* through which beliefs are consciously or unconsciously embodied; (2) the memory of a continuity with the past; and (3) a legitimising reference to a tradition, i.e. to an authorised version of this memory.³⁶ A “religion” is thus an “ideological, practical and symbolic device by which the (individual and collective) consciousness of belonging to a specific line of belief is constituted, maintained, developed and controlled.”³⁷ Joining C.K. Yang’s analysis of religion in Chinese society,³⁸ Hervieu-Léger stresses that religious belief is diffused in all areas of individual and social life. This leads her to pose the question of “the factors which produce, in concrete historical circumstances, the emergence of these religious traits, their cristallisation, and ultimately their organisation in the form of a ‘religion’”.³⁹

Qigong is a case in point: what began as a simple gymnastic method in the early 1950s became the locus of a mass religious explosion in the 1980s and 1990s. From the existence of beliefs and practices unevenly diffused in Chinese society, *qigong* became a point of condensation of specific practices and concepts related to the body and health, stories of divination and of miraculous healing, apocalyptic expectations, Buddhist and Taoist symbols, etc. Adepts sought to embody and continue the memory of a line of belief extended ever further into the distant past. Masters, intellectuals and semi-official and official institutions set about to elaborate authoritative traditions and established mechanisms to create, manage and propagate specific lines of *qigong*, establish norms of legitimacy, and struggle against other rival, “fake” or “evil” forms of *qigong*.

Qigong lines express a form of religiosity characterised by voluntary adhesion, the primacy of the individual’s subjective experience, the centrality of the body, and the indeterminacy of the boundary between the religious and the secular. Their place within the overall Chinese religious system is distinct from that of the institutionalised religions with their state-controlled organisation, and of local and family cults whose membership is inherited or associated with specific social status. Similar to religious sects in Taiwan,⁴⁰ *qigong* provides practitioners with a means to consciously participate in the Chinese “great tradition”, which was traditionally inaccessible to those who were not monks or mandarins. *Qigong* popularised tradition by providing easy access to its symbols, in a secular setting.

The immediate health benefits of the body techniques can attract a public uninterested in religious teachings, and secure the recognition and support of health authorities. *Qigong* is indeed an indeterminate object through which one can move between highly heterogeneous elements: from gymnastics to reading, from UFOs to medicine, from physics to trance, from shamanism to morality, from spiritual salvation to bodily health, from asceticism to sports. Socially, it is a node through which different types of organisation intersect: *qigong* becomes a health exercise in the secular institution, and a chain of transmission in the line of belief. The practitioner can simultaneously enter a multitude of

worlds, or spontaneously pass from one to another: experiential world of the body, symbolic world of tradition, theoretical world of science, relational world of community, utopian world of the future, etc. *Qigong's* indeterminacy, which allows one to pass in a breath from the religious to the medical and vice-versa, from science to belief and vice-versa, is perfectly adapted to a secular culture in which formal adherence to a "religion" is not perceived positively by most individuals and by the state.

The transmission of these techniques creates master-practitioner relationships which become the links in the line of belief. Collective practice gives birth to a sub-culture of adepts who share common masters and experiences. The simplicity of the techniques, their easy transmission and the absence of heavy, burdensome structures such as temples, allows their easy and rapid propagation in a context where the expansion of organised religion is restricted. The practitioner's body becomes his own "temple", which he carries around with him in his movements.

Qigong is a product of the "institutional deregulation of belief"⁴¹ which is a global characteristic of modernity, a phenomenon which has affected the Chinese religious landscape as much as in the West, albeit as a result of a different historical process. Since the Song dynasty (960-1279), by attempting to control and limit the expansion of the institutionalised religions (Buddhism and Taoism), the state has helped to gradually weaken the "orthodox" religions, creating the conditions for the flourishing of popular religion and sectarianism.⁴² Since the early twentieth century, the destruction of family and local cults, through which Chinese peoples' religious identity was expressed,⁴³ has created atomised bodies, "modern" individuals cut off from their ancestral filiations. The weakening and destruction of traditional religious institutions has accelerated the emergence of a modern religiosity characterised by individual, voluntary engagement. If the waves of modernising revolutions which shook twentieth-century Chinese society have largely eliminated the religious life centred around neighbourhood temples and festivals⁴⁴ as concrete and visible forms of religion, body cultivation, owing to the simplicity of its transmission and its indeterminate status, was one of the few forms of religious transmission and practice to survive in the cities. After the Cultural Revolution, while the spread of other forms of religious practice and community was still difficult, *qigong* could rapidly propagate and integrate itself into the urban fabric of society.

Since the late 1990s, the militancy of one organisation with its roots in the *qigong* movement, and the repression it has provoked, have led to most *qigong* groups dissolving or going underground. *Qigong's* development in China has been frozen. And yet, the process of the modernisation of religiosity will continue, and body cultivation will doubtlessly continue to have a place in China's emerging new religious landscape. 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 his body in a secular setting. Following China's increasing integration into the 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 begin to trace the globalisation of meditation and body cultivation traditions, as they evolve from local or national traditions into products of a world modernity.

David Palmer is Eileen Barker Fellow in Religion and Contemporary Society at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He obtained his Ph. D. at the Sorbonne (Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes) in 2002, and is currently finishing a book on the history and sociology of Qigong in China between 1949 to 1999. His other research interests include religion and society in contemporary China; religious movements, modernity and globalization; and Oriental alliances between science and religion.

¹ This article was presented at the international symposium "Religion and Culture", organized by the Macau Ricci Institute, Nov. 2002. A revised version of this paper has been published in *Asian Anthropology* 2 (2003), pp. 79-110.

² On breath circulation techniques in "White Lotus" groups, see Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion. Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976, pp. 188-191. On "meditational sects" and the role of body and breath cultivation techniques in their propagation, see Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China. The Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1976, pp. 26-32 and Susan Naquin, "The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China," in David Johnson *et al* eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 255-291. On body training techniques in the Boxer movement, see Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, pp. 50-53; and Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 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 Elizabeth Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845-1945*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1980, pp. 152-203; and Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 96-109.

³ On the etymology of the term *qigong*, see Catherine Despeux, "Le *qigong*, une expression de la modernité chinoise," in Jacques Gernet & Marc Kalinowski eds., *En suivant la Voie Royale. Mélanges en hommage à Léon Vandermeersch*, Paris, Ecole française d'extrême orient, 1997, pp. 267-281, here p. 267.

⁴ Despeux, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 275.

⁵ On the notion of "invented tradition", see Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁶ Despeux, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 268.

⁷ On Jiang Weiqiao's contribution to the birth of modern *qigong*, see Livia Kohn, "Quiet sitting with Master Yinshi. The Beginnings of Qigong in Modern China," in *Living with the Dao: Conceptual Issues in Daoist Practice*, Cambridge, Mass., Three Pines Press, E-Dao series, 2002. Originally published as: "Quiet Sitting with Master Yinshi: Medicine and Religion in Modern China," *Zen Buddhism Today*, No. 10, 1993, pp. 79-95.

⁸ On the institutionalisation of Chinese medicine, see Ralph Croizier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China. Science, Nationalism, and the Tensions of Cultural Change*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1968.

⁹ Chen Shouliang *et al*, "Teshu ganying jineng de pupianxing wenti—Guanyu renti yizhong teshu ganying de diaocha baogao (er)," *Ziran zazhi*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 1980, pp. 334-335; Wang Chu *et al*, "Tuxiang xianshi guocheng—Guanyu renti teshu ganying jineng de diaocha baogao (san)," *Ziran Zazhi*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 1980, pp. 438-39; and He Muyan *et al*, "Zai lun renti teshu ganying jineng de pubianxing wenti," *Ziran zazhi*, Vol. 3, No. 9, 1980, p. 683.

¹⁰ On spontaneous movements, see Thomas Ots, "The silenced body—The expressive *leib*: On the dialectic of mind and life in Chinese cathartic healing", in Thomas Csordas, *Embodiment and Experience. The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 116-136.

¹¹ Zheng Guanglu, *Qi jian shenzhou*, Chengdu, Chengdu Chubanshe, 1991, p. 58.

¹² Qian Xuesen, quoted in Zheng Guanglu, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 118.

¹³ Zheng Guanglu, *op. cit.*, 1991, p. 52.

¹⁴ Handwritten note by Qian Xuesen (1987), reproduced on www.interlog.com/~yuan/yanqian.html, accessed in Dec. 1998.

¹⁵ Yan Xin, *Yan Xin fangtan lu*, Beijing, Zhongguo youyi chuban gongsi, 1998, p. 60.

¹⁶ International Yan Xin Qigong Association (IYXQA), *Introduction au qigong traditionnel chinois et au qigong de Yan Xin*, Section à l'Université de Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada (photocopied brochure), 1995, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ IYXQA, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ Yan Xin, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 60.

- ¹⁹ IYXQA, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 5.
- ²⁰ Yan Xin, *Yan Xin qigong Tongzhi changshou jiubu gong—Di yi bu.* (audiocassette), Canada, Editions Lotus, 1996, side B.
- ²¹ Ke Yunlu, “Renti teyigongneng zhenwei zhibian,” *Zhongguo Qigong*, No. 71, 1996, pp. 28-32, here p. 28.
- ²² Liu Zhidong, *Zhang Hongbao Qilin zhexue daodu*, Xi’an, Zhonghua chuantong wenhua jinxiu daxue, 1993 (?), p. 159.
- ²³ Qian Xuesen, “Jianli weixiang qigongxue”, preface to Yan Xin, *Yan Xin fangtan lu*, Beijing, Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 1998, pp. 7-8
- ²⁴ Quoted in Li Jianxin & Zheng Qin, 1995 – *Qigong da lunzhang*, Chengdu, Sichuan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1996, p. 98.
- ²⁵ Ji Yi, *Chao shengming xianxiang*, Beijing, Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1991, p. 37.
- ²⁶ Zhang Zhenhuan, “Address given by Zhang Zhenhuan at a Meeting Held to Celebrate the Formation of the Chinese *Qigong* Scientific Research Association,” (pp. 13-20) in Zhu Xiaoyang & Benjamin Penny eds., *The Qigong Boom. Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1994, pp. 1-94, here p. 19 ; translated from *Zhongguo Qigong*, No. 3, 1988.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Li Liyan, *Sima Nan hai huozhe*, Beijing, Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1998, pp. 7-8.
- ²⁸ Li & Zheng, *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 221-22.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Ji Yi, *Da qigongshi chubanshe—Zhang Hongbao he tade gongfa mizong*, Beijing, Beijing hualing chubanshe, 1990, p. 141.
- ³⁰ *Xinxi wu* objects onto which a master has emitted *qi*, leaving an imprint of invisible “information” endowed with magical efficacy.
- ³¹ For interpretations of the *qigong* boom, see Benjamin Penny, “*Qigong*, Daoism, and Science: Some Contexts for the *Qigong* Boom,” in Mabel Lee & A.D. Syrokomla-Stefanowska eds., *Modernization of the Chinese Past*, Sydney, Wild Peony, 1993, pp. 166-179, here p. 179; Ots, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 126; Evelyne Micollier, “Contrôle ou libération des émotions dans le contexte des pratiques de santé *qigong*,” *Perspectives Chinoises*, No. 53, 1999, pp. 22-30; Nancy Chen, “Urban spaces and experiences of *qigong*,” in Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton & Elizabeth Perry, *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, Washington & Cambridge, Woodrow Wilson Center Press & Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 347-361, here p. 361; Zhu & Penny, *op. cit.*, 1994, p. 7; Zhu Xiaoyang, “Spirit and Flesh, Sturm und Drang”, translated from *Shidai* (October 1989), in Zhu & Penny eds., *op. cit.*, 1994, pp. 35-47; Elizabeth Hsu, *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 24; Thomas Heise, *Qigong in der VR China: Entwicklung, Theorie und Praxis*, Berlin, Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1999, p. 110; and Xu Jian, “Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese *Qigong*,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4, November 1999, pp. 961-991.
- ³² See Ots, *op. cit.*, 1994, pp. 124, 131; Zhang Guoli, “Zouhuo yu rumo,” *Dongfang Qigong*, No. 39, 1993, pp. 12-14.
- ³³ Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour mémoire*. Paris, Le Cerf, 1993, p. 49.
- ³⁴ Hervieu-Léger, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 162.
- ³⁵ Hervieu-Léger, *op. cit.*, 1993, back cover.
- ³⁶ Hervieu-Léger, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 142.
- ³⁷ Hervieu-Léger, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 119.
- ³⁸ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society. A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of their Historical Factors*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961, p. 295.
- ³⁹ Hervieu-Léger, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 163.
- ⁴⁰ David K. Jordan & Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix. Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986.
- ⁴¹ Hervieu-Léger, *La religion en miettes, ou la question des sectes*. Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2001, p. 126.
- ⁴² David Ownby, “A History for Falun Gong: Popular Religion and the Chinese State Since the Ming Dynasty,” *Nova Religio*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2003, pp. 223-243.
- ⁴³ See Kristofer Schipper, “Rediscovering Religion in China”, communication at the symposium “Modern Society and the Science of Religion”, 1997; Duara, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 85-110. Many of these

cults have been reconstituted in the countryside after the end of the Cultural Revolution (see Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), but this phenomenon has not occurred in the cities, where the *qigong* boom was concentrated.

⁴⁴ On the fundamental role of temples in Chinese religious life and on their destruction throughout the twentieth century, see Vincent Goossaert, *Dans les temples de la Chine. Histoire des cultes. Vie des communautés*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2000.