

**Remaking the self: spirituality, civilization  
and the Chinese quest for the good life in the reform era.**

Anna Iskra, Fabian Winiger and David A. Palmer

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## **Introduction**

Beginning in the 1980s, a variety of practices for “living well” have emerged in urban China, focusing on the health, moral integrity and autonomy of the individual. More and more people began to turn their gaze inwards, scrutinizing their bodies and psychic and emotional landscapes in search for solutions for their life problems and for what is widely perceived as a moral crisis in society (*jingshen weiji* 精神危机). A multitude of such “micro-revolutions-within” (Ong and Zhang 2008, 5) continues to occur as part of newly emerging practices of “self-worship” that focus on developing individual potential, self-regulation and moral betterment. While they typically claim to be based on ancient Chinese notions of self-cultivation (*xinxing* 修性 or 修行), some of these self-development practices are also inspired by Western pop-psychology, the self-help industry, and the Euro-American New Age movement, and even Indian new religious movements.

Many of these practices are visible in Chinese parks and public squares, which are important venues where retirees and working people pursue diverse forms of colorful, and sometimes loud, “life-nurturing” (*yangsheng* 养生) activities. Early in the morning and in the evening these shared spaces fill up with hobbyists and exercisers practicing *taijiquan*, cultivating breathing through *qigong* routines, painting Chinese characters with water on the pavement, doing group calisthenics accompanied by loud disco music, walking backwards, or simply having a stroll with their pet birds singing gracefully behind the bars of their cages. This widespread interest in nurturing life, which transforms urban locales into sensorial spaces of *renao* (热闹), or excitement, is part of a bigger “self-health” (*zìwǒ bǎojiàn* 自我保健) movement (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). The publishing industry, newly privatized but still largely controlled by the Party-state, could step in to promote wellness literature to cast the responsibility of improving the quality of the population (*renkou sùzhì* 人口素质) on the individual’s shoulders.

Outside of parks and squares, many book stores have developed whole sections solely devoted to self-health and self-cultivation literature with rich references to traditional Chinese medicine and peppered with quotes from works such as the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*huangdi neijing* 黄帝内经), or the *Treatise on Febrile Diseases* (*shanghan zhabing lun* 伤寒杂病论). They sit alongside motivational books and videos by management gurus, translated titles such as *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and glossy picture books of the Bodhisatva Guanyin (观音). Through the popularization of this literature, read in the privacy of people's own homes but also often shared in various reading clubs and classes, a plethora of self-care routines have emerged, reinforcing a new type of subjectivity – a “patient craftsman” (Farquhar and Zhang 2012, 216) who takes health and life into his own hands. The idea that one can avoid illness or solve one's problems by disciplining the body to follow a healthy routine can be associated to a bio-political discourse focused on the self-regulating health of the population, as illustrated by the Chinese character *zhi* (治) which can both mean “to care for” and “govern”, paralleling the physical existence of the individual and the state (Jullien 2007, 170, Winiger 2018)

The efflorescence of self-cultivation practices can be observed through a succession of waves, fads or “fevers” that reflect the dynamic interplay between macro-social and political transformations at specific periods of the reform era, and popular movements and desires within specific social locations. In this chapter, we briefly explore this phenomenon using four examples of such fevers: the “Qigong Fever” (*qigong re* 气功热), “Crazy English” (*fengkuang yingyu* 疯狂英语), “Success Studies” (*chenggong xue* 成功学) and the “Body-Heart-Soul” (*shenxinling* 身心灵) movement. Other popular movements that we do not discuss but which would be essential to a complete narrative would include the yoga, gym and fitness crazes, the proliferation of “everyday experts” in matters of cosmetics, food, and daily practices of self-care, and a spreading interest in vegetarianism. Such a list may seem excessively eclectic, combining the mundane and the religious, the frivolous and the sacred. And yet, all of these practices can be related to what Adam Chau has called the “personal-cultivational modality” of doing religion, involving technologies for the “care of the self” (Chau 2011, 72, Foucault 1990, 10-11).

The spread of these practices can be understood through three distinct and overlapping analytical angles. First, they are signs of the spread of modern forms of self-construction in the context of individualization in Chinese society (Yan 2009, Hansen and Svarverud 2010, Kleinman et al. 2011).

Following the market reforms, the life of urban Chinese is no longer deeply embedded in the intense reciprocal obligations and ascriptive ritual cycles of extended kinship networks and local community, or in the collective organization of the socialist work unit. The cultivation of the self, as an individual body, as an emotional being and as a reflexive subject planning his or her own life and constructing his or her own value system, becomes an increasingly felt need that is catered to by a wide range of providers. Some of these are commercial entrepreneurs, others are anti-commercial; some offer purely individual recipes for living well, while others offer voluntary forms of community; some focus on the health of the body while others focus on moral values; some promise material prosperity and success while others advocate spiritual transcendence and detachment. It is difficult to draw clear boundaries between these different modes of organization and value orientation. Slippages from one to the other are common within the broader milieu, within the same network, or even the same practice. But all of them have in common the fact that they offer pathways for structuring and orienting a voluntary process of reflecting on and cultivating the self through techniques of self-knowledge, self-improvement and self-transcendence.

Secondly, these practices are, to varying degrees, products of transnational circulations and hybridizations, in which indigenous techniques and values are combined with practices and discourses imported from abroad and reconfigured into new forms and modalities of diffusion. The *qigong* movement, for example, incorporated traditional exercises into standardized methods for training and diffusion borrowed from sports- and physical education discourses, as well as discourses on paranormal science influenced by military research (Morris 2004, Brownell 1995, Palmer 2007). The body-heart-soul movement, which emerged in the early 2000s following the collapse of the *qigong* movement, introduced techniques and discourses directly imported from the western New Age movement through the mediation of Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as Hindu-derived movements spreading to China directly from India or via the United States. The disembedding of self-cultivation practices from their cultural matrix, and their embodiment into atomized and circulating bodies, facilitates China's incorporation into the flows and innovations of a globalizing spirituality.

Thirdly, these technologies of the self can be seen as expressions of a project to reconstruct Chinese civilization and national identity, and even to establish the moral foundations for the PRC's political program in the post-revolutionary era. In imperial China, the sacred hierarchy that ordered correct relationships between ruler and subject, heaven and earth, were not a mere matter

of metaphysical speculation, but an embodied, material reality that also governed the five organs, blood and the vital breath of *qi*, which in the medical tradition were understood in terms of reciprocal relationships of generating and controlling maintained by the ruler and his ministers. Indeed, health followed from the creation of harmony within the body through the control of *qi* and emotions, the regulation of food, sexual activity and waking hours, analogous to the way the accord between self, family, society and the cosmos followed from maintaining the correct roles and rhythms that governed their conduct. As states an idiom from the *Great Learning* (*daxue* 大學), one of the Four Classics of Confucianism: “Cultivate your body, rectify your mind, harmonise your home, rule the country, and all under heaven will be in peace” (*xiushen zhengxin qijia zhiguo ping tianxia* 修身正心齊家治國平天下). When this order was transgressed, ill health, conflict in the family, disarray in society, and even rebellions against the emperor would naturally arise. Indeed, the character for “governing” (*zhi* 治) was also used to describe the healing of illness. As the fifth chapter of *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* (*lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋) stated, “the arts of governing the self and the country are based on the same principles (*fu zhishe yu zhiguo, yuli zhi shu ye* 夫治身與治國，一理之術也). The gentleman (*junzi* 君子) thus cultivated himself by earnestly evaluating and correcting his thought and conduct (Winiger 2018, 18, 35, 55, 82).

Against the backdrop of this cosmological tradition, the waves of self-cultivation in the reform era are tied to discourses about the PRC's “moral crisis” under market reforms, a crisis experienced by many individuals as a collapse of reciprocity and trust, triggered by social problems such as corruption, food safety, unethical business practices, and selfishness and lack of civic virtues. In this context, self-cultivation regimens create spaces for self-reflection and practice to transcend the corrupted social atmosphere, and to construct a moral self that is directly engaged in the rebuilding of Chinese identity and civilization. From this angle, these practices resonate with the state's nation-building project and strategies, ranging from “enhancing the overall quality (*suzhi* 素質) of the population” to “promoting the excellent characteristics of Chinese traditional culture,” all of which are subsumed under the Communist Party's ideological framework of “constructing spiritual civilization.”

Indeed, in the reform-era, with the obsolescence of Mao-era mass mobilisation campaigns, the Party's leadership in the late 1970s was in urgent need of a new, overarching framework that explained the reasons of China's weakness, provided an overarching *telos* for the Chinese nation, and channelled individual subjectivity into a constructive relationship with an imagined collective

identity represented by a strong state. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a discourse on civilization dating from the Republican era and reminiscent of the “New Life Movement” of the 1930s, was resurrected and formulated into a nationwide campaign for the “construction of socialist spiritual civilization” (*shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming* 社会主义精神文明) (Dirlik 1981). Although the Party still maintained its Marxist ideology, the campaign for socialist spiritual civilisation no longer blamed China’s weakness on the cultural heritage of its millenia-old history. While market reforms were concerned with the nation’s “material civilisation”, the ideological superstructure of “spiritual civilisation” was conceived as the framework within, under a revitalised deployment of Marxist ideology, the civilized qualities of Chinese people and culture would be manifest and enhanced in a wide range of domains, from improved public manners, fitness and hygiene, to embodying traditional Chinese values and civic virtues (Winiger 2018, Winiger and Palmer forthcoming).

This civilizational narrative thus served the reform leadership’s attempt to regain the favour of a population disillusioned by decades of Maoist propaganda. Rather than mobilising revolutionary subjects, both traditional and modern practices of self-cultivation could be legitimised and encouraged, along with previously condemned capitalist values and market principles. Chinese medicine and other self-healing arts such as *qigong* were now found to hold untold secrets - for example, the post-Newtonian material substrate of *qi* - the discovery and “scientization” of which would usher in a distinctly Chinese modernity. The nation’s cultural heritage no longer conflicted with the Party’s modernising mission; indeed, because many traditional beliefs were now cast as primitive forerunners of present-day socialism, love for China’s millenia-old civilization could also be cast as love for the Communist Party and its civilizing mission. And much like during the Republican period and Imperial history before, the fate of the collective identity hinged on the self-cultivation of the individual. The civilizational narrative was amplified following the crushing of the Tiananmen student movement on June 4 1989, when the reform-leadership began to reign in the unprecedented freedoms that had marked Chinese society in the first decade after the death of Mao. The discourse of Chinese civilisation was increasingly institutionalized. The state-sponsored narrative of China’s millenia-old culture was gradually transformed into a comprehensive set of behavioral norms coded as an outward expression (*biaoxian* 表现) of the inner state of moral cultivation attained by the Chinese civilizational subject (Bakken 2000).

While during the Mao-era nationwide campaigns had exhorted the “masses” to participate in the Party’s enactment of its historical mission, the fate of the nation now ceased to rest on the mobilization of the revolutionary subject, and instead required the earnest, ongoing self-evaluation

and improvement of the civilized citizen. Throughout the 1990s, the focus of the Communist Party's propaganda machine shifted from the class-status of the proletarian "masses" to the "quality" of the population (*renkou suzhi* 人口素质) - an enormous, but unruly and poorly disciplined workforce that required not so much liberation from capitalist exploitation, but to be domesticated and adapted into a modern, cosmopolitan body politic fit for an innovative service-economy on-par with that of the West. Under president Jiang Zemin, awards for "civilized" individuals, households and neighbourhoods were widely introduced; newspapers, television and big-character posters extolled the virtues of the "five manners" (*wu ge limao* 五个礼貌) - "hello", "please", "I'm sorry", "thank you" and "goodbye", and former working class heroes such as Lei Feng were resurrected in a new light of courtesy and self-improvement. From fire-prevention to family planning, queueing in line, interacting with "window-services", the promotion of physical education, and how to behave when travelling abroad, the civilizational narrative transformed every conceivable aspect of post-Mao life into an opportunity to cultivate and express the virtues of Chinese civility (Winiger and Palmer forthcoming).

Popular self-cultivation "fevers" (*re* 热) were distinct from this top-down civilizational campaign, but resonated with it and occupied the spaces of legitimacy that it opened up. Indeed, as commented by Palmer,

The 'fever' can be situated somewhere between the political campaigns or 'movements' (*yundong*) of the Mao era, and the fully commoditised consumer fads of capitalist societies: a 'fever' is a form of collective effervescence in China's post-totalitarian phase which occurs when official policies and informal signals sent from above correspond with, open the space for, and amplify popular desire, which appropriates these spaces in unexpected ways, simultaneously complying with, appropriating, disrupting and mirroring the projects of state hegemony" (Palmer 2007, 21-22).

## ***Qigong***

The "*qigong* fever" (*qigong re* 气功热) that emerged in the 1980s and peaked in the 1990s was the largest of these crazes. It involved some 300 million participants who became involved at least occasionally in the practice of the traditional breathing, gymnastic and meditation exercises that in the early 1950s had been given the collective name of *qigong* by the PRC's medical authorities, and grew into the largest mass cultural movement to sweep across the People's Republic in the post-Mao era. Every morning and evening, public parks were filled with *qigong* practitioners, some exercising in neatly ordered rows to the instructions of a single leader, others quietly practicing on their own, while others yet gathered in small, loosely structured groups moving in bizarre,

unstructured movements, hugging trees, bellowing loudly, at other times falling into deep meditative trance. Charismatic *qigong* masters were followed by millions of followers, and filled entire sports stadia with spiritual seekers, ill people, university students and college professors, retirees and martial arts-enthusiasts (Ots 1991, Heise 1999, Palmer 2007).

The *qigong* movement fused the transformation of the self, here by means of various meditative exercises, to an overarching historical telos that located the self in a larger collective identity that arose from the mythical beginnings of Chinese civilisation and flows, uninterrupted, into a bright, preordained future. It was supported by the highest echelons of the Chinese military, scientific, medical and political establishments. Backed by high-ranking Party officials, a nationwide network of “*qigong* research associations”, a “Leaders’ Working Group on Somatic Science” that reported directly to the State Council, and an array of unofficial and semi-official *qigong* magazines were published. An official “*qigong* sector” crystallised, appropriating the feverish post-Mao enthusiasm for traditional culture, and integrating it into the Party-state’s discourse on the construction of socialist spiritual civilisation (Palmer 2007).

At the same time, charismatic masters created mass organizations of practitioners. As illustrated by the following examples, the expression of the post-Mao cultural revival varied greatly between different *qigong* groups, and, like other popular crazes that rapidly spread in the PRC during the early post-Mao era, ranged from enthusiastic embrace or “mirroring” of the state-sponsored civilizational discourse, to calculated appropriation, and particularly during the mid- to late 1990s, culminated in rampant commercialisation and occasional attempts to disrupt the hegemonic grip of the Party-state.

### *Zhineng Qigong*

Zhineng Qigong (智能气功, “intelligent *qigong*”) was founded in the early 1980s by Pang Heming (庞鹤鸣, 1940-), a Chinese medical doctor and Party cadre. At its peak, it was estimated to have reached 3.47-10 million followers, making it one of the largest *qigong* groups active in China during the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1989 and 1999, the group operated a rehabilitation, training and research centre located in Shijiazhuang, Qinhuangdao, Tangshan and on the outskirts of Beijing, where at its peak it provided a residential environment for over 7,000 practitioners. The centre used *qigong* to treat terminally ill patients failed by, or too poor to afford, biomedical care, while the training centre produced a highly-disciplined corps of practitioner-activists fit to promote

the group in the PRC and abroad. Its research centre created a nationwide network of *qigong* scientists who worked to prove the material existence of *qi*, and published its results in numerous publications on topics ranging from agriculture to material science, education, medicine and poverty relief work.

Zhineng Qigong serves as an ideal-typical example of an attempt to “mirror” the reform-leadership’s ideological framework, standing out among rival groups for its apparently sincere ideological faith in Chinese socialism and the highly theoretical, “*qigong*-scientific” orientation of many followers. While it was not unusual for *qigong* groups to enjoy significant support in the Party-state, Zhineng Qigong did not merely instrumentalise political connections to serve its own goals, but understood itself as a sophisticated theoretical and practical extension of communism. It dedicated much of its energies to serve as a poster-child for ideological orthodoxy in the *qigong* milieu, and at times was referred to by followers as a “communist *qigong*”. Committed followers of Zhineng Qigong did not understand themselves as practicing a mere health-maintenance method, but hoped to “scientize” traditional Chinese culture through the application of dialectical materialism so as to make it congruent with Sino-Marxist ideological orthodoxy. Many practitioners sincerely hoped to bring about a “*qigong* revolution” based on the scientific validation of *qi* and the discovery of the latent extraordinary abilities of the human consciousness. With the assistance of Zhineng Qigong, the great “historical mission” of the Communist Party, many followers believed, would culminate in a spiritual-political utopia of the “Great Harmony” (*datong* 大同), which resembled Communist society. Reaching deep into the millennia-old soil of Chinese traditional culture, Zhineng Qigong would provide spiritual sustenance for the flowering of socialism in the PRC, and indeed one day, among the Peoples of the entire world (Winiger 2018).

### *Zhonggong*

While Zhineng Qigong did not operate according to a commercial model, other groups created vast marketing conglomerates that spanned hundreds of enterprises, sold books, tapes and practice paraphernalia to an eager audience, and held large mass events where practitioners gathered to listen to the lecturers of their charismatic leaders. Zhonggong (中功) may have been one of the most egregious, and certainly most highly visible, group of this kind. Its founder, Zhang Hongbao (张宏堡, 1954-2006), was one of the most famous *qigong* masters active in the PRC during the 1980s and 1990s and became notorious for being worshipped by his followers as a god-like figure who had descended from China’s mythical mountains (*chushan le* 出山了) to spread the



spiritual secrets of the nation's ancient civilisation among the population. Although this was a common theme among highly charismatic qigong masters, Zhang Hongbao also embodied the successful entrepreneur; his image, sitting cross-legged in a business suit, with his hair slicked back and surrounded by a halo of light, could be found worshipped by his followers, much like images of the Buddha or other more conventional saints. Zhang successfully combined his self-proclaimed divinity with cutting-edge management principles introduced in the PRC during the early 1990s. He trained his followers with Harvard MBA course materials and advocated a “science of life”, entitled “*qilin* culture” (*qilin wenhua* 麒麟文化), understood as “resting on the soil of the Divine Realm” and offering a “remarkable contribution of the Chinese nation to the universe and to the human race”.

Zhonggong excelled at synthesising traditional Chinese culture and reform-era entrepreneurialism into a comprehensive self-cultivation system that dovetailed with the Party-state's ideological orthodoxy. One component of *qilin* culture, for instance, entailed a modern management theory expressed through the principles of *yin* and *yang* (阴阳) and the five phases (*wuxing* 五行), and as in previous eras of Chinese spiritual civilisation, was equally appropriate to order family, business and government affairs. Whereas Zhiheng Qigong sought to excavate and modernise communist thought from traditional culture, Zhonggong selectively appropriated aspects expedient to the group's present-day needs: the Marxist progression of history was retained, including the collectivism (*gong* 公) of primitive and communist society, and paradoxically, the notion of private property (*si* 私) and the hierarchy between the ruler and the subject. Capitalist management systems were enhanced with paternalistic authority borrowed from the clan system and the performance of Confucian ritual.

The end goal of *qilin* culture was nothing less than the comprehensive, spiritual and material salvation of both the individual and the collective. The redemptive project championed by Zhang Hongbao culminated in nothing less than “saving and enlightening mankind, healing illness and increasing the body's powers” - and indeed its name, homophonous with the short form of the name of the “Chinese Communist Party” (中共), stoked rumours that Zhonggong vied to one day replace the Party-state (Palmer 2011).

## *Falun Gong*

Indeed, the civilisational narrative could also become a “hidden transcript” that could be taken up by social groups to stake a claim for authority and recognition, providing a platform for political dissent and disrupting the discursive and ritual stronghold of a totalitarian regime. Some *qigong* groups began as gatherings of loosely associated practitioners interested in shedding light on the secrets of Chinese antiquity, but, headed by a charismatic leader, grew into a veritable social movement bent on taking control of its own narrative (Palmer 2008).

Falun Gong (法轮功), a group that had millions of practitioners by the late 1990s, remains the most well-known example (Palmer 2007, Ownby 2008, Penny 2012). Founded in the early 1990s by Li Hongzhi (李洪志, 1951-), it initially appeared like so many other *qigong* groups: a highly charismatic founder, revered by his followers as a god-like figure, who claimed to have penetrated China’s esoteric heritage of spiritual practices and, now that the time of China’s great revival had come, decided to share its secrets with the public. Li combined elements of Buddhism, Daoism and popular folklore to create a comprehensive self-cultivation practice, which, unlike the two groups discussed above, made little attempt to conform to the official civilizational discourse, whether in depth or superficially. On the contrary, Falun Gong’s concern with moral decadence was an explicit critique of the moral corruption of post-reform Chinese society, and the answer was an exclusive practice culminating in salvation from an imminent apocalypse.

By the mid-1990s, as the rapidly growing number of followers rose to the attention of the authorities, initial attempts were made to reign in the group’s rampant spread, and the eschatological turn of Li’s teachings began to centre on the need to “defend the Dharma” of Falun Gong against criticisms voiced in the state media. Falun Gong practitioners responded by staging public sit-ins to “rectify the truth” in the face of criticism. In 1999, following protest of over 10,000 practitioners around Zhongnanhai, the headquarters of the Communist Party leadership, the Party-state launched a brutal crackdown on Falun Gong, purging the Party-state of the group’s numerous high-ranking supporters, prohibiting the publication of Li’s works, and banning all other popular *qigong* organizations - effectively putting an end to the *qigong* fever.

## **Crazy English and Success Studies**

Another craze that rose throughout the 1990s and early 2000s was the “English Fever” (*yingyu re* 英语热) (Iskra, forthcoming a). This nation-wide rush to master the language of what was perceived as the relatively more “advanced” (*xianjin* 先进) and “open” (*kaijiang* 开放) culture of the West was epitomized in the “Crazy English” (*fengkuang yingyu* 疯狂英语) phenomenon. Crazy English was an eccentric language teaching method popularized by its charismatic creator, Li Yang (李阳, 1969-). Up until the mid-2000s, it was common to see young people screaming English phrases such as “I enjoy losing face!” in public parks and squares, right next to practitioners of traditional exercises and middle-aged ladies practicing ethnic dances. Rather than just a language studying method, Crazy English can be seen as an assemblage of self-cultivation techniques aiming to motivate the individual to cultivate a “crazy spirit” of constant self-improvement and resilience in the face of difficulties. Crazy English aficionados were encouraged to memorize long passages in English and shout them out every day for hours, preferably in public spaces to overcome shyness and express themselves.

These English-obsessed “entrepreneurs of the self” were striving to craft their lives in line with Li’s words: “I don’t want what others want. I happily receive what others reject. I am indifferent towards the things others pursue so strongly” (Li 2010, 70). However, subjects were also expected to stay in tune with the desires of the Nation: self-strengthening here also translated into strengthening the nation, as Li claimed that “speaking fluent English is the best form of patriotism” (2010, 21). He was fond of speaking of China’s cultural supremacy, quoting the Ming scholar Gu Yanwu’s (顾炎武, 1613-82) famous sentence that “everyone is responsible for the successes and failures of the nation” (*tianxia xingwang, pifu youze* 天下兴亡匹夫有责). In the Crazy English milieu, language study was presented as a form of expressing one’s gratitude to the country: young Chinese should master this language, go abroad and later come back with all the know-how they had managed to accumulate thanks to their linguistic competence. This know-how should later be used to build the PRC’s dominance in the world.

On the cover of one of the later editions of the Crazy English textbook and recording series, entitled *Blurt Out* (Li 2003), a serious-looking man dressed in a fancy suit gazes at the reader with confidence - Li Yang, the model entrepreneur. He represented self-reliance, initiative and control over his life’s choices, embodying the idea of an entrepreneurial self that became salient in mid-1990s. Deng Xiaoping had opened the door to economic reforms and prosperity for the Chinese society with his famous dictum “to get rich is glorious” (*zhifujingrong* 致富光荣) and conceding

that some had to “get rich first” (*rang yi bufen ren xian fuqilai* 让一部分人先富起来). These and other similar statements of that time shifted the popular view of development from a goal that the abstract masses of “the people” were marching towards, to a purpose that could be achieved by entrepreneurial individuals.

State policies of that period gave rise to a class of “new rich” - those who managed to “get rich first” and served as a vanguard group leading the rest of the society towards a better future (Davies 2010, 193). What Deng Xiaoping did not do was to explain how exactly financial success could be achieved by commoners who, in order to succeed in the marketplace, had to adopt an entrepreneurial model of the self. This gap was quickly spotted as a potential market niche for the rising generation of self-help entrepreneurs. Starting from the mid-1990s China has witnessed the popularization of the so-called “Success Studies” (*chenggongxue* 成功学), its first incarnation being the prosperity teachings publication boom. The shelves of urban bookstores filled with translations of publications written by American classical self-help gurus such as Dale Carnegie (1888-1955) or Napoleon Hill (1883-1970). However, very quickly, Western self-improvement books were outnumbered by Chinese publications written by local celebrities associated with the Success Studies phenomenon. According to a survey conducted in 2010 by *China Youth Daily* among 12076 people nationwide, 81,3% of the respondents claimed to have read at least one Success Studies publication and 86,5% were familiar with the biography of at least one successful person (Wang and Wang 2010). No wonder that the most successful Chinese authors representing the success literature genre began to fill up gigantic halls and stadiums with a public hungry for self-improvement.

Chen Anzhi (陈安之, 1967-), the “father of success studies” (*chenggongxue zhi fu* 成功学之父), with whom Li Yang sometimes collaborated, spent the early 1990s in the US where he met Anthony Robbins, one of the most influential motivational speakers in the US. As in the case of many *qigong* masters, the rise and fall of different success studies gurus is based on charismatic authority legitimised with a personal tale of a ‘zero-to-hero’ transformation. The notion of the replicability of other people’s success based on sheer effort promoted “a neoliberal fable of self-making” that linked personal development with economic development” (Kuan 2015). Nowadays, there are hundreds of influential entrepreneurs selling their “DIY success stories” all over the country. They “recycle the traditional Chinese genre of 'tales of famous men’” (Anagnost 2004), encouraging people to build the Chinese market economy and, by extension, create a strong nation.

### ***The shenxinling* movement: self-governing through emotions**

The idea that screaming “I love myself” in front of the mirror for ten minutes a day can significantly help one to become rich, or that Alibaba founder Ma Yun’s success can be replicated by the average Mr. Wang, has not been received uncritically. Fuelled by anxiety over the popularity of multi-level marketing business cults that ravaged the wallets of many entrepreneurial Chinese in the 1990s and early 2000s, many people have quickly become disillusioned with the pre-packaged success that *chenggongxue* books and seminars promise. Furthermore, the success they embody is largely masculine<sup>1</sup> which makes it difficult and frustrating to be performed by women (Osburg 2013). Even rich and successful entrepreneurs often express a sense of purposelessness and anomie (Kleinman et al. 2011, 8).

While Success Studies seemed to lose momentum in the early 2000s, a new, more feminine, self-cultivation craze emerged in the urban PRC, based on practices similar to the collapsed *qigong* movement, but primarily imported from the West and India, rather than from China’s own traditions: the Body-Heart-Soul (*shenxinling*, the Chinese translation for “Mind-Body-Spirit”) fever (Iskra, forthcoming b). *Shenxinling* refers to a variety of seminars and courses that combine principles of the Euro-American self-help movement, Buddhism, Traditional Chinese Medicine and New Age teachings about energy, chakras and transcending the ego (*xiaowo* 小我). Body-Heart-Soul courses started penetrating Mainland China from the US via Taiwan and Hong Kong, with the Taiwanese self-help guru Zhang Defen (张德芬, 1962-) playing a prominent role. This movement emerged in China as part of the broader phenomenon of the Psycho-Boom (*xinli re* 心里热), an increased interest in “all things psychological” in urban China, coupled with the popularity of training programs for “psychological counsellors” (*xinli zixun shi* 心里咨询师) among the newly-emerging psycho-hobbyists, many of whom who were aiming to improve themselves, explore their psyche, or solve some daily life problems, rather than establish themselves as professionals in that field (Huang 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> On 17<sup>th</sup> November 2015, after entering the phrase “Chinese motivational speakers” (*lizhi yanshuojia* 励志演说家) in the popular on-line Chinese encyclopaedia Baidu Baike (<https://baike.baidu.com/>) a long list of names appeared. What is quite striking is that a clear majority of popular motivational speakers in China seem to be middle-aged men with a strong business background, many of them CEOs of large companies - the first thirty names included only one woman。

Just like its Western New Age counterpart, the Body-Heart-Soul fever can be described as a “religion of no religion” (Kripal 2007), a spiritual movement that borrows teachings about energy, karma, or meditation from different religious sources to preach a universalistic religion of “selfism” that worships individual potential and psychological depth through different collective practices such as emotional release sessions, breathing exercises or personal transformation sharing activities. Self-cultivation in this context means uncovering one’s true self (*zhenwo* 真我) by adopting a new narrative to talk about one’s life. This “life as a narrative” (Liu 2002) revolves around the individual’s childhood wounds and the process of healing them as a means to return to the authentic self.

Most *shenxinling* teachers and their followers are women, but more and more men are joining in. The common practices of verbalizing psychological suffering coupled with emotional release sessions (*qingxu shifang* 情绪释放) where people scream, cry and laugh show that communication is becoming an emotional skill, a tool used to manage a social environment full of uncertainties and risks, which is coupled with an increased “emotional androgynization of men and women” (Illouz 2007, 37). What we may be witnessing is the rise of a new type of subjectivity in China - *Homo Sentimentalis* (Illouz 2007, 1-39) - who is encouraged to craft his or her life in the broader social sphere through managing his or her private emotional flows. Here, the psychologization and emotionalization of people’s private spaces encouraged by *shenxinling* practices can be interpreted as a form of “therapeutic governing” that casts problems such as unemployment, low income, or difficult access to healthcare into the realm of individual subjectivity while ignoring the structural forces that have contributed to their emergence (Yang 2015). And while the CCP doesn’t officially endorse *shenxinling* practices, their popularity can be juxtaposed with the recent “psychologization” of the Party’s language with slogans such as “psychological guidance” (*xinli shudao* 心里疏导), or “psychological harmony” (*xinli hexie* 心里和谐) making its way into the official discourse (Huang 2014). Moreover, by promoting responsible “spiritual entrepreneurialism”, the message of *shenxinling* workshops attunes with the State’s attempts to tackle food quality scandals, problems with counterfeit goods and deceitful “pyramid schemes.” The current State’s emphasis on self-reliance is best expressed in a popular slogan circulating in the *shenxinling* milieu, that discourages any resentment towards the establishment: “I am the source of all problems” (*wo shi yiqie wenti de lai yuan* 我是一切问题的来源). If you cannot keep up with the accelerating socio-economic changes, it’s probably due to your lack of emotional competence rather than a flawed political system.

In contrast to the mass public free *qigong* exercise sessions that were familiar sights in the 1980s and 90s, the *shenxinling* movement operates on an entirely commercial model, with entrepreneurial therapists and coaches, each of whom has crafted his or her unique palette of self-development techniques, offering courses and seminars for often high fees. These gatherings are usually held in rented spaces in hotels, clubhouses and gated communities with information about the time, place and content of these classes circulating on closed groups on the popular mobile app WeChat. Even so, courses and seminars can gather up to more than a thousand people at one time, and gurus travel from one city to another to cater to their followers. Adepts often include wealthy business people and Party members. As in the *qigong* movement two decades earlier, *shenxinling* teachers are extending into political networks. Even as the movement spreads and gains in influence, its existence is highly precarious. The semi-clandestine nature of the activities, the “superstitious” nature of many of the teachings and practices, the inevitable “cultic” masters and organizations that appear within its networks, make it likely that the state will attempt to manage, restrict or crack down on the movement.

### **Concluding remarks**

None of the movements we have described above are defined as “religion” by their adherents, by the state, or by orthodox religious institutions, even though, especially in *qigong* and *shenxinling*, one rapidly encounters symbols, concepts and techniques directly or indirectly derived from Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism or Confucianism. Many of these practices could be defined as forms of “spirituality,” while bearing in mind that there is no universally understood equivalent to the term in Chinese. And yet, there is no doubt that, whether the objective is worldly success, better health, deeper meaning or higher transcendence, most of these practices involve knowing, connecting to and cultivating what the practice defines as one’s inner essence or spirit, beyond the immediate and untrained experience of bodily sensation and social existence, leading to a better control of the body and of the social self (Palmer and Siegler 2017, 6-7).

The waves and fevers we have described here can be seen as expressions of new cultures of self-cultivation that are the inevitable product of the individualization of Chinese society and culture under processes of marketization, which cover the range of possibilities from the adoption of foreign methods, ideas and languages, to the revitalization and reinvention of elements of Chinese tradition, and all manner of combinations thereof. At the same time, however, there is nothing new about the flourishing of self-cultivation regimens in Chinese culture. Methods for the care of

the self – through training the body and the mind, through applying recipes to live the “good life” and act morality, for the pursuit of health, material prosperity, social status and spiritual salvation – have been promoted by Chinese masters and “gurus” through personal teaching, publications, charismatic propagation, and religious networks for centuries (Goossaert 2007, 2012). But in dynastic times, both the overarching structure of state and society, and the practices of individual cultivation, shared the same basic Chinese cosmology, albeit with sometimes very different points of perspective and emphasis. This didn't mean that there were no tensions. The state, through its Confucian ideology, promoted a certain vision of self-cultivation as essential to the civilizing process that it upheld. Popular self-cultivation movements had their own visions and practices, that overlapped and diverged with the state's to different degrees. The state was never fully at ease with the heterodoxy of popular self-cultivation networks. But these tensions played themselves out – by mutual appropriation, accommodation or, more rarely, rebellion and repression -- through the medium of a shared cosmological language (Sangren 1987, Feuchtwang 2001). Thus, even heterodox movements ultimately reinforced the cosmo-political order.

In the current context, however, there is a widespread consensus, within society and in the Party, that a purely instrumental, materialistic pursuit of wealth at all costs, is insufficient for the construction of a modern Chinese identity – some form of self-cultivation, of the nurturing of a sense of moral meaning, is essential for the well-being of individuals, even as it is essential for China if it is to consider itself as a “civilisation”. But the Communist self-cultivation of revolutionary self-sacrifice, while still ubiquitous as an official discourse and alive as a nostalgic memory, no longer exists as an active popular practice (Ning and Palmer, forthcoming). All the popular self-cultivation movements are based on different cosmologies from that of the Party; a chasm always exists between popular self-cultivation movements and the ontological foundations of the Party's ideology. As in the past, these tensions play themselves out through mutual appropriation, accommodation, resistance or repression – but no longer in the context of a shared or overlapping vision of cosmo-political order. Through its framework of “socialist spiritual civilization,” the Party aims to guide, to integrate and to shape these movements under its own transcendent ideological authority. As we have argued elsewhere, the spiritual civilization framework, and the infrastructures that underlie its implementation, should not be underestimated in terms of its role in shaping individual subjectivities and popular movements (Palmer and Winiger forthcoming). But the question is still open as to the ultimate outcome of the dynamic tensions between popular self-cultivation movements and the civilizing mission of China's neo-socialist regime.





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## Glossary

Chen Anzhi (陈安之, 1967-) founder of Success Studies

*chenggong xue* (成功学) Success Studies

*chushan* (出山) to “come out of the mountains”, referring to a spiritual master who comes out of obscurity to teach in public

*datong* (大同) Great Harmony

*daxue* (大學) *Great Learning*

Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904-1997) paramount leader of the People's Republic of China between 1978 and 1989

Falun Gong (法轮功), the *qigong* of the Wheel of the Dharma

*fengkuang yingyu* (疯狂英语) Crazy English

*fu zhi shen yu zhi guo, yu li zhi shu ye* (夫治身与治国,一理之术也) the arts of governing the self and the country are based on the same principles

*gong* (公) public

Gu Yanwu (顾炎武, 1613-82) Ming dynasty scholar

*guanyin* (观音) Bodhisatva Guanyin

*huangdi neijing* (黄帝内经) *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*

*jingshen weiji* (精神危机) moral crisis

*junzi* (君子) gentleman, person of noble character

*kaiifang* (开放) open, unrestrained by convention

Li Hongzhi (李洪志, 1951-) founder of Falungong

Li Yang (李阳, 1969-) founder of Crazy English

*lizhi yanshuojia* (励志演说家) motivational speaker

*lüshi chunqiu* (吕氏春秋) *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*

Ma Yun (马云, 1964-) Jack Ma, IT business magnate, founder of Alibaba

Pang Heming (庞鹤鸣, 1940-) founder of Zhineng Qigong

*qi* (气) vital energy

*qigong* (气功) a system of deep breathing exercises and gentle gymnastics

*qigong re* (气功热) *qigong* fever

*qilin wenhua* (麒麟文化) *Qilin Culture*  
*qingxu shifang* (情绪释放) emotional release  
*rang yi bufen ren xian fuqilai* (让一部分人先富起来) let some people get rich first  
*re* (热) fever, craze  
*renao* (热闹) bustling with noise and excitement  
*renkou sushu* (人口素质) quality of the population  
*shanghan zhabing lun* (伤寒杂病论) *Treatise on Febrile Diseases*  
*shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming* (社会主义精神文明) socialist spiritual civilization  
*shenxinling* (身心灵) Body-Heart-Soul  
*si* (私) private  
*suzhi* (素质) inner quality  
*taiji quan* (太极拳) shadowboxing or tai chi  
*tianxia xingwang, pifu youze* (天下兴亡匹夫有责) everyone is responsible for the successes and failures of the nation  
*wo shi yiqie wenti de lai yuan* (我是一切问题的来源) I am the source of all problems  
*wu ge limao* (五个礼貌) five polite manners  
*wuxing* (五行) five phases/ five elements in Chinese cosmology  
*xianjin* (先进) advanced, progressive  
*xiaowo* (小我) ego  
*xinli hexie* 心里和谐 psychological harmony  
*xinli re* (心里热) Psycho-Boom  
*xinli shudao* (心里疏导) psychological guidance  
*xinli zixun shi* (心里咨询师) psychological counsellor  
*xiushen zhengxin qijia zhiguo ping tianxia* (修身正心齐家治国平天下) cultivate your body, rectify your mind, harmonise your home, rule the country, and all under heaven will be in peace  
*xiuxing* (修性 or 修行) self-cultivation  
*yangsheng* (养生) nurturing life  
*yin yang* (阴阳) principles of *yin* and *yang*  
*yingyu re* (英语热) English Fever  
*yundong* (运动) movement, campaign

Zhang Defen (张德芬, 1962-) popular Body-Heart Soul author

Zhang Hongbao (张宏堡, 1954-2006) founder of Zhonggong

*zhenwo* (真我) true self

*zhi* (治) to care for, to govern

*zhibu guangrong* 致富光荣 to get rich is glorious

Zhineng Qigong (智能气功) lit. “intelligent *qigong*”, a *qigong* group

*zhonggong* (中共) abbreviation for the Chinese Communist Party

Zhonggong (中功) a *qigong* group, short form of *Zhonghua yangsheng yizhi gong* (中华养生益智功),  
Chinese Qigong for Nurturing Health and Increasing Intelligence

*zìwǒ bǎojiàn* (自我保健) self-health