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Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese Qigong

JIAN XU

MANY ASIAN CULTURES HAVE RICH traditions of self-cultivation that exercise mind and body through physical and meditational training. Research and scholarship with respect to those traditions have focused fruitfully on how the body is cultivated to serve as an agent of resistance against various forms of social control. Of these many writings on this subject, I will here name only a suggestive few: Joseph Alter's study of Indian wrestling (1993), for example, tracks the wrestlers' self-conscious reappropriation of their bodies from the power of the state through a regimented discipline aimed at resisting docility. John Donohue's study of the Japanese martial art *karate* (1993) explores how, in the West, *karate*'s symbolic and ritual functions create a psychological dynamic that counters the prevalent fragmentation of urban life. Douglas Wile's research on Chinese *taiji quan* (1996) similarly reconstructs the cultural/historical context in which this martial art was created. He shows that what motivated nineteenth-century literati to create *taiji quan* was its representational function rather than its practical utility. That is, *Taiji quan* "may be seen as a psychological defense against Western cultural imperialism" (p. 26) insofar as it produced a secure sense of the national self that helped China adapt to a new international environment (p. 29). All of these studies place the body-in-cultivation in a specific historical context; they maintain that the individual, physical body both registers and reveals the national sociopolitical landscape.

Chinese *qigong* is yet another form of Asian bodily cultivation that invites critical analysis and cultural situating. Although there are as yet few such studies, at least two articles deserve citation. One is Thomas Ots's study (1994) of spontaneous-*qigong*.¹ Ots too posits the body as culturally inscribed and constructed, but in addition he explores how, being set free from cultural constraints by *qigong* practice, the body can express the emotional self repressed by the state. Likewise, Nancy Chen (1995)

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¹Ots first translates *zifa donggong* 自动功 to "*qigong* of spontaneous movements." Later, he calls it "spontaneous-*qigong*." Ots describes briefly how it occurs and what it is like (1994, 122). Generally, "spontaneous-*qigong*" refers to bodily movements that occur when *qigong* practitioners enter a trance-like state in which they still retain a clear consciousness but accede to their involuntary bodily impulses.

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examines *qigong* practice both as a new space of private experience and a new form of urban interaction that transcend the constraints of the state. Both of these studies point to a rather intense political struggle taking place around *qigong* practice. On one side of this struggle, the common practitioners of *qigong* embrace the spontaneous nature of its practice and use it as a strategy to dissociate their bodies from state control and power; on the other side of the struggle, the state bureaucracy attempts to lead *qigong* practitioners into “some realm of state-approved cultural values” (Ots 1994, 132) and to “harness the immense and unexplainable power of *qigong* by creating boundaries of legitimate scientific enterprise while appropriating its use for an officially mediated public sphere” (Chen 1995, 360). Those “state-approved cultural values” refer to such mental qualities as “control, quietness, relaxation, and harmony” (Ots 1994, 132–33), which are seen to oppose the involuntary arousal of spontaneous movements that might in their unpredictability threaten the state’s cultural hegemony. As the state sets up limits to normalize “scientific” and “authentic” practices and to stigmatize “false” and “superstitious” ones, *qigong* loses its emotional content as “a cultural metaphor” through which many can express their feelings (Ots 1994, 133).

The recent governmental suppression of Falun Gong fully bears out the political nature of the struggle discussed by Ots and Chen. The Falun Gong practitioners’ peaceful protest at the Zhongnanhai government complex, as well as the government’s reaction to it, tell much about how the “public sphere” is differently conceived by the practitioners on the one hand and the state on the other. What the practitioners want is the right to practice a form of *qigong* they believe in without state intervention. *Qigong* has claimed the body as a space of private experience and its practice a public space independent of the state’s control. On the other side, however, the government still views the embodied space of *qigong* to be subject to its regulation precisely due to its public nature. The practice of assigning different cultural values to various kinds of *qigong* practice is the government’s strategy to gain control over the new public space. The Falun Gong practitioners’ sit-in protest itself was an attempt to use the public space as a legitimate sphere in which to voice their discontent with governmental interference, whereas the government construed the public space as a sphere in which only state power is to be exercised. The subsequent governmental campaign to stigmatize Falun Gong, as countered by the sympathizers’ protest, almost uncannily gives proof to the pattern of the struggle described in these two early studies by Ots and Chen.

However, even at the time Ots and Chen were writing, the *qigong re* (*qigong* craze), which was originally defined by the attractions of spontaneous *qigong*, was in fact all but obsolete, since many schools of *qigong* practice had become institutionally regulated.² Yet, interestingly, even though the state bureaucracy seems to have penetrated the field of practice, the struggle over *qigong* nevertheless continued on a discursive level into the 1990s.³ Situated both in scientific researches on *qigong* and in the prevailing nationalistic revival of traditional beliefs and values, this discursive

²Chen writes: “By late 1990 the state regulatory bureau further enforced regulations concerning the strict licensing of masters and registration of practitioners” (1995, 356–57).

³The *qigong* craze ended when spontaneous-*qigong* was stigmatized and suppressed by the regulation of the state organizations. Ots writes: “Without spontaneous-*qigong*, the ‘*qigong* craze’ would not have come into existence” (1994, 131). Take Falun Gong for example: although after the protest the state declared Falun Gong illegal, controversy continues with respect to its moral/cultural values. Articles defending and denouncing state suppression continue to appear, only the battlefield has now become global, thanks to the World Wide Web.

struggle has articulated itself as an intellectual debate and enlisted on both sides a host of well-known writers and scientists—so much so that a veritable corpus of literature on *qigong* resulted. In it, two conflicting discourses became identifiable. Taking “discourse” in its contemporary sense as referring to forms of representation that generate specific cultural and historical fields of meaning, we can describe one such discourse as rational and scientific and the other as psychosomatic and metaphysical. Each strives to establish its own order of power and knowledge, its own “truth” about the “reality” of *qigong*. However, both these discourses confirm the extraordinary healing power of *qigong*, although they differ drastically in their explanations of many of its phenomena. The controversy centers on the question of whether and how *qigong* can induce “supranormal abilities” (特异功能 *teyi gongneng*). The psychosomatic discourse emphasizes the inexplicable power of *qigong* and relishes its occult workings, whereas the rational discourse strives to demystify many of its phenomena and to situate it strictly in the knowledges of modern science.

The material existence of each of these discourses can be ascertained at two sites of the social field. The first site is that of the institution, which connects *qigong* to economic and public processes.⁴ The second site is the individual body, which connects *qigong* to the realm of experience and desire.⁵ Let us deal first then with the institutionalization of *qigong*. The name “*qigong*,” referring to a discrete group of health exercises that cultivate *qi*, has a rather short history. According to Lin Housheng, a doctor who wrote *Qigong xue* (*Qigong studies*, 1988), who invented *qigong* anesthesia, and who himself was a *qigong* master, it was not until 1953, when Lui Guizhen’s *Qigong liaofa shijian* (*Practice of qigong therapy*) was published, that the word “*qigong*” was first used to designate a group of discrete *qi* exercises which had had no standard meaning before (1988, 2–3). The use of the word “*qigong*” was officially sanctioned and the new category of *qigong* formally inaugurated on July 15, 1979, when the State Council held a conference on the results of various *qi* exercises applied in medicine (Lin 1988, 3). Because the institutionalization of modern *qigong* goes hand in hand with the massive reorganization of traditional medicine in the 1950s, it cannot be studied separately from this social use. That *qigong* can claim a much longer history, however, is due to the fact that its meaning was fixed retrospectively. Its naming in the 1950s and its invocation in the 1980s reveal social relations of power and ideological subject formations in the People’s Republic. The social history of the various *qi* exercises being unified into *qigong* also tells a social history of the body, a history of embodiment precisely of different beliefs and ideologies as body becomes entangled with discourse. For *qigong* is empowered by discourse just as it empowers the body. Its bodily empowerment reflects the post-Maoist subject’s desire for a new body, one that is not subject to state power with its post-Maoist inauguration of economism. Yet this desire belongs to the order of a “political unconscious” that is not a formation of discourse or representation, but rather the very existential experience of the body. As Pierre Bourdieu tells us: “The body believes in what it

⁴Foucault posits that any statement, which he defines as the “elementary unit of discourse,” “must have a material existence” and that this material existence constructs the identity of a statement which “varies with a complex set of material institutions” (1972, 80, 100, 103). Foucault also recognizes “non-discursive” material institutions and “economic and social processes” which are “real or primary” (1972, 45). The study of *qigong* discourse is therefore necessarily connected with studies of economic and social processes.

⁵Both Ots and Chen, for example, reveal a phenomenological understanding of the body that sees the body not merely as an inscribed surface of history and society, but as a living body with perceptions, experience, emotions, and a psychical interior.

plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life. What is ‘learned by body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is” (1990, 73). In this sense, *qigong*, with its attendant beliefs, does actually produce material changes for people who believe in and practice it.

In this essay, I will attempt to reconstruct the cultural-ideological context in which *qigong* practice and discourse are historically formed. Focusing on the intersection of *qigong* discourse and the politicized body, I will examine both the discursive representations of *qigong* and their embodiment in practice. My conclusion will complicate the image of *qigong* emergent in the respective studies of Ots and Chen. Instead of construing the conflicts surrounding *qigong* only in terms of state control and personal resistance, I will delineate the ideological nature of those conflicts. That is, since both the scientific and the psychosomatic discourses represent a form of practical knowledge “lived” by the body, both articulate “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser 1971, 162). After all, the current governmental suppression of Falun Gong is not widely disapproved. That the government’s isolation of Falun Gong as a superstitious cult and its mobilization of mass criticism against it are effective at least indicates that there is some force of mediation between state control and popular resistance. That force that mediates between state and society is what we shall examine here: the cultural politics mobilized through the embodied discourses. This essay will conclude that the discourses of both sides—that of the psychosomatic and that of the scientific—respond to the particular crises of Chinese modernity. My point of departure is a newspaper report having to do with *qigong*’s discursive construction.

Qigong’s Difficult Romance with Science

Two years before his death in 1986, Master Haideng, a Shaolin Temple monk famous in China for his martial arts skills, said to *Chongqing ribao*’s (Chongqing daily) news reporter Ao Dalun: “You should give coverage to Yan Xin. Average people do not understand his methods, but you can emphasize his curative effects. The rest had better be left to the future” (Ao Dalun 1986, 1).⁶

Yan Xin, then thirty-five years old, was Master Haideng’s student and a doctor of Chinese traditional medicine. He was also a famous figure; stories of his miraculous curative powers were spread in Sichuan Province by word of mouth until the media started to give him wider publicity. Ao Dalun’s article, “Xianshi he women shenbiande shenhua” (Reality and the myth beside us), published in 1986, is an early account, based on detailed interviews with Doctor Yan’s patients, which records what Yan Xin can do with his *qigong*. One of his best-known cases was that of a car accident victim whose resultant compound multiple fractures of the shoulder blades had been pronounced irreversibly disabling. When first seen by Yan Xin, the patient had already been in a cast for a month, unable to move a finger. Upon examining the x-rays, Yan Xin immediately untied the patient’s bandages. He massaged the patient’s back for several minutes, then left him lying on the bed for half an hour. When Yan Xin returned, he told the patient to get up and do push-ups and chin-ups. The young

⁶All citations from Chinese sources in this essay are my translations unless indicated otherwise.

man, despite his astonishment, did as he was told, nevertheless feeling that he was throwing his life away. However, he found himself cured and able to return to his factory and to do heavy work as before. The x-rays later taken in an army hospital showed that the fracture lines had almost completely disappeared (Ao Dalun 1986, 2–3).

Despite their degree of detail, reports like this still sounded false to many who had not seen Yan Xin work with their own eyes. Medical doctors issued the firmest refutations. Wen Cong, a reporter from the magazine *Qigong and Science*, reported this reaction in “After the Publication of ‘Reality and the Myth Beside Us’” (1987, 6–8), but, as if to counteract the refutations, his article also carries two letters: one is from a retired party cadre who, on the basis of his own investigation of Yan Xin’s patient, argues that everything Ao Dalun says was true; the other is from an elementary school teacher in Beijing who tells how she was cured by Yan of her obstinate back trouble in one visit. Her story is uncanny inasmuch as she reports that the doctor cured her by first talking to her and then releasing *qi* to her from the next room after she had been induced to sleep. The article concludes with Master Haideng’s words: “The rest had better be left to the future.”

Yan Xin himself, however, seems not entirely willing to leave the rest to the future, for a year after Ao Dalun’s report, he offered to join in the lab experiments of scientists in Qinghua University in Beijing. These experiments were intended to find out whether *qi* can be released by the human body and what effect it could have on material objects outside the body. The results of these experiments appeared in six papers, which were highly praised by several well-known Chinese scientists. In the book *Yan Xin qigong xianxiang* (Yan Xin qigong phenomena, Li Lun 1989), Qian Xuesen, one such esteemed scientist, writes:

In terms of content these experiments are the first of their kind in the world. They have irrefutably proved that the human body can exert influence on matter without touching it, and can change the structure and properties of molecules. There has never been work like this before. They should be published immediately so as to let the world know our achievement. They are new scientific discoveries; they are the forerunner of a scientific revolution.

(quoted in Li Lun 1989, 209–10)

Nor is Yan Xin’s case unique, but rather it typifies the practice of all those *qigong* masters who in the 1980s came out to display their incredible feats. Being those of a medical doctor, Yan’s cures are more spectacular and convincing. However, there were many others who, performing equally unimaginable feats, attracted masses of people to study *qigong* under them, even though they had much less publicity than Yan.

About *qigong*’s growing popularity, however, not everybody is happy. Certain reports of *qigong* feats reveal that there has been some deception of the public. Two well-known *qigong* masters were arrested in 1995 for swindling.⁷ Since the spring of 1995, there have been frequent newspaper articles that criticize *qigong* research as

⁷Sima Nan, “Weiqigong zhongheng tan” (The long and short of pseudo *qigong*), published in four parts in four issues of *Beijing qingnian bao* (Beijing Youth) from May 12 to June 2, 1995, mentions the arrest of Zhang Xiangyu, a woman who claimed to be possessed of a so-called “universe language” shared by all living creatures and who attracted thousands of followers. There was also another report in *Beijing qingnian zhoumo* (Beijing youth weekend), June 9, 1995, of the arrest of one Zhang Xiaoping, a man who claimed to be the “son of Buddha” (*fozi*).

“pseudo science.” (The present media attack on Falun Gong after it was officially declared illegal conveniently uses the same vocabulary.) Many of these critics are themselves scientists. For example, the well-known physicist He Zuoma is cited by *Gongren ribao* (Workers’ daily) July 26, 1995, for criticizing Qian Xuesen thus: “To praise such experiments, which go against normal scientific principles, as new scientific discovery, high-level experiment and the precursor of a scientific revolution, is not science but a farce!”⁸ Some party officials were unequivocal in their attitude as well. Gong Yuezhi, vice president of the Party School of the CCP’s Central Committee, spoke at a forum held by *Gongren ribao* on August 8, 1995:

Eye-witnessing may not be enough to prove something true. We can get to know the facts only by analyzing with our brains, with scientific knowledge and scientific methods. How many people had for how long witnessed the sun rise in the east and set in the west before science revealed to us the fact that it is the earth that goes round the sun! . . . To attempt to explain, or determine whether we can explain, phenomena that have not been ascertained by science as facts is seriously to fool ourselves, because it creates the false impression that these phenomena are already facts.

(CND 24 November 1995, 9)

Controversy over the claims of *qigong*’s power continues to develop, even though *qigong* practice in general has come under state regulation (Ots and Chen). Debates over whether unusual *qigong* phenomena are deceptive or factual have divided many concerned writers, scientists, medical doctors, and cadres into two opposing camps, neither side ready to yield or likely to “win.” This feud marks a crucial juncture in the history of *qigong*, even though it is an old practice in China with a sedimented accumulation of discourses, knowledges, and practices.

The Traditions of Self-Cultivation and the Chinese Body

Any historiography can only treat *qigong*’s origin in a speculative manner. Among various speculative constructions of the origins of *qigong*, the most widely accepted one emphasizes ancient Chinese techniques of promoting good health (*yangshengshu*). The health exercises that were later named *qigong* thus go far back in history. The earliest record of *qigong* is said to be from the Zhou dynasty (1100 B.C.–770 B.C.).⁹ Frequently, we cannot be sure whether some of the exercises recorded in ancient texts were indeed early forms of modern *qigong*, and not either gymnastics that used some breathing control techniques, or *taiji*-like practices informed by *qi* theories and adaptive to *donggong* (*qigong* forms practiced with bodily movements).

⁸Quoted in “Fenzheng shangwu jielun (Dispute not yet solved)” *China News Digest*—Chinese Magazine (hereafter CND), 24 November 1995, 7.

⁹For example, according to Lin Housheng, the earliest record of what we now call *qigong* was discovered in the inscriptions on the bronzes of the Zhou dynasty (1100 B.C.–770 B.C.). A cultural relic from the Warring States, a twelve-sided jade column called *xingqi yupei ming* 行气玉佩铭 (jade pendant with an inscription of *qi* practicing theory and methods on it), records a knowledge of *qigong* and the ways of its exercise. *Huangdineijing* (Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor) also describes *qigong*, and from then on there is a detailed record of it in every dynasty (Lin 1988, 16).

The component *qi* in the term *qigong* denotes what early Chinese philosophers conceptualized as a primary “matter energy,” the basic constituent of the cosmos. Many scholars rendering Chinese texts into English translated it as “vital energy” or “cosmic energy.” *Qi* plays an exceedingly important role in the history of Chinese thought. It is a formless “reality,” which, though not graspable by the senses, is immanent in all things. According to the cosmogony given in *Huainanzi*, a Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 8) Taoist-oriented summa of Chinese philosophy, before the birth of Heaven and Earth, there was only a formless, fluid state called *taizhao*, like a clear transparent void. This void, which is the beginning of Tao, gave birth to the universe. The universe in turn produced *qi*. That part of *qi* which was light and limpid floated up to form Heaven, whereas the part of *qi* which was heavy and turbid coagulated to become Earth. Therefore, *qi* can be understood as protomaterial, a vital creative force that gives “form” to everything in the universe.¹⁰ *Gong* means skill, the ability to strengthen and make use of the vital energy that circulates in the body and informs the natural world of which the body is a part. *Gong* can also mean “work,” in the sense used in physics of the transfer of energy from one physical system to another. When a *qigong* master is releasing *qi* to help a patient he is said to be *fagong* (transferring energy). Modern *qigong* in its common sense refers to the exercise and meditation that build up *qi* in the body and enable it to be used.

Those traditional forms of exercise and meditation designed to nourish *qi* or vital energy had always been indispensable to Chinese religions and philosophies, which were in fact inseparable. Taoism, Confucianism, and *Chanzong* (Chan school of Buddhism), which traditionally do denote both religion and philosophy, all needed sophisticated techniques to cultivate and temper mind and body along their paths to enlightenment. To achieve this high spiritual plane of consciousness, all three developed skills to exercise *qi*, mostly in the form of sitting meditation. Chinese martial arts, which have long transcended the mere utilitarian and developed distinctive styles and aesthetic values, also rely heavily on the use of *qi* as their inner *gong* (*neigong*, a command of inner sources of energy beyond those of the muscles and the skills of weaponry), without which they would be superficial and unsophisticated. Just as Chinese traditional cosmogony holds that everything in this universe is produced by the movement and transformation of *qi*, so Chinese medicine explains life as a concentration of this vital/primal energy (真元之气 *zhenyuan zhiqi*). The complications of the Chinese medical theory of *qi*, as articulated through the scheme of *yin* and *yang*, and the five phases (*wuxing*), were basically derived from this fundamental understanding. As Judith Farquhar points out, Chinese medicine’s method of analyzing the factors of illness “focuses almost exclusively on the war between heteropathic and orthopathic *qi*, the relations between climate or other environmental excesses (e.g., of heat, damp, wind) and physiological heat, damp, or sluggishness” (1994, 84). It is thus no surprise that traditional medicine has long actualized these correspondences by using *qi*-related exercises to improve the health of the sick and the weak.

In a certain sense, the various forms of *qi* exercises designated by the modern term *qigong* always resided at the center of Chinese culture, even though they were never regarded as self-sufficient cultural practices, but instead as ancillary to other cultural

¹⁰Livia Kohn writes that “The Tao in its tangible form on earth is cosmic energy or *qi*, a term hard to define and for which energy is no more than a crude approximation. *Qi* is the vital power of the Tao at work in the world—in nature, in society, in the human body” (1993, 133).

practices. Most forms were usually transmitted by the master to one worthy student whom he chose himself. Through this restricted legacy, those unique features of a form that would work to produce high power were usually esoteric. And many of the schools in history tended to be eremitic. Masters and students who transmitted knowledge of *qi* techniques usually did so in the name of a religion, or of a school of medicine or martial arts. It was unthinkable to study *qi* just for the sake of its form and techniques and not in the service of other goals. Not until after the Cultural Revolution was a master of *qi* techniques accorded professional status. Yet, despite the long-standing ancillary position of *qi* in Chinese culture, a study of its techniques is indispensable to any understanding of that culture's history of the body, because bodily self-cultivation was always central to many facets of traditional Chinese—not to say Asian—life.

Qi, as an all-pervading vital creative force, also gives “form” to the Chinese body. One can find two contrasting paradigms of the body's articulation in contemporary Western theory—one paradigm understands the body as a projection of the subject's psychical interior, a boundary that contains and delimits the subject's lived experience, while the other paradigm sees the body as an imprint of history, a surface for social inscription, which produces its interior.¹¹ In traditional Chinese thought, one could also identify two paradigms at work. Confucianism and Taoism have jointly done much to construct the “Chinese body,” which is represented in Chinese literature and art in forms unfamiliar to the West. Mark Elvin, for example, has noticed that “Chinese pictures of the human body, clothed or semi-clothed . . . are—to Western eyes—meager, schematic and inadequate” (Elvin 1989, 267). John Hay's research in “The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?” shows that the lack of nude bodies in Chinese literature and art is not due to anything like Victorian prudery; there has been “no lack of explicitly sexual descriptions and overwhelming pornographic drive” in Chinese literature and art. Yet, the “image of a body as a whole object, . . . as a solid and well-shaped entity whose shapeliness is supported by the structure of a skeleton and defined in the exteriority of swelling muscle and enclosing flesh” is absent (Hay 1994, 51). The reason for this, Hay suggests, is that the body constructed in Chinese traditional literature and art is a social body, that is, one which “must have varied according to social norms and structure” (p. 63). Referring to both literature and paintings, Hay demonstrates that through ornament and clothing, Chinese culture situates and defines the body inside a social context. Hence nudity would strip the body of its meaning as social or, let us say, socially inscribed. This is the Confucian body, cultivated as well through external ritual and etiquette. But interestingly, Hay also explains the lack of nudity from a perspective different from that which recognizes social inscriptions of meaning in the clothes and ornaments that adorn the body's surface. From this other perspective, the body is

to be understood as concentrations and conformations of *qi* rather than as geometric objects demarcated by solid planes and edges. . . . Surfaces were not impenetrable faces of geometric solids, but palpable interfaces through which the structural values of interiority interacted with the environment. Thus not only body organs, but bodies

¹¹I am indebted to Elizabeth Grosz (1994) for identifying these two contrasting approaches to the body. Grosz groups Freud, Lacan, Schilder, and Merleau-Ponty in one paradigm, which she entitles “the inside out,” and Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, and Lingis in the other, entitling their methods “the outside in.”

themselves were such phenomena. The body was the environment of the viscera and was itself within an environment at a higher level.

(Hay 1994, 66)

This environmental perspective, as compared with the Confucian social perspective we have just noted, is really Taoist in spirit, even though its worldview was eventually accepted by Confucianism. This Taoist component of literature and art is as fundamentally important as the Confucian one.

Confucian rituals worked at establishing and stabilizing such social norms as would have their effects on the body. Thus through the clothes and ornaments it wears and its performance in rituals, the Confucian body bears certain semiotic insignia. A body's ritual actions and its movement through social ceremonies are significations that express subject positions. These signs are accordingly capable of either stabilizing hierarchical order or bringing about changed configurations of social relations. Constantly engaged in social activities, the Confucian body is very much a public body. The Taoist body, on the other hand, is one with nature, a microcosm of the universe in which one can find all the resources of that universe. Therefore that body is understood by Taoists to enfold the means of human liberation and perfection. To discover those means is to use techniques of bodily cultivation that tap into corporeal vital energy and to combine the latter with cosmic energy, since both originate from *qi*. Through *qi* cultivation, one can hope to achieve longevity or immortality by merging one's *qi* with that of the natural world. Together with other Taoist bodily cultivations such as herbology, dietetics, acupuncture, and what Douglas Wile calls sexual yoga (Wile 1992),¹² the cultivation of the Taoist body is a private matter; it is performed by individuals in seclusion and solitude. Rested in tranquillity, away from all turmoil, the Taoist body is very much an interior body projected outward.

Qi practices as methods of Taoist bodily cultivation were often informed by occult knowledges about spiritual transcendence and immortality. The Taoist belief that individual perfection and immortality could be obtained through union with the mysterious and all-pervading *Tao* presupposed a liberation from the ego-centered self. Among various forms of *donggong* (*qigong* involving bodily movements) and *jinggong* (*qigong* focusing on quiet meditation), quiet-sitting meditation (*jingzuo*) was the most popular and durable technique of liberation. With it the Taoist mystics emptied themselves of emotions and rational knowledge to achieve a state of oblivion where they felt "the body like a withered tree, the mind like dead ashes" (Zhuangzi 1968, 36). In *Early Chinese Mysticism*, Livia Kohn informs us that early Chinese mysticism had its philosophical foundation in the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi; she avers that it is through a merger of the Lao-Zhuang tradition with shamanism that Taoism acquires its various techniques of "quiestic, concentrative" meditation and the corollary belief that "only when the body is ready can one reach for more spiritual attainments" (Kohn 1992, 164). Kristofer Schipper in his *The Taoist Body* (1993) shows the indispensable role of *qi* exercises in readying the body for obtaining *Tao*, as recorded in the *Canon of the Yellow Court* (*Huangting jing*).¹³

¹²Some forms of this "sexual yoga" are *qi* practices that have been left out of the category construction of modern *qigong*. What is called *huan jing bu nao*, for instance, involves techniques of gathering *jingqi* (not *jingye*, as Wile forcibly points out). See Wile 1992, 59.

¹³*Huangting jing* is a long poem in heptasyllabic verse dating from second century A.D.; it describes the inner landscape of the body that the practice of Taoist *qigong* must envision, as well as other psychophysiological practices involving the use of *qi*.

During the Han dynasty, however, this philosophic-yogic Taoism further changed, becoming inseparable from Taoism as communal religion. Although this turn institutionalized Taoism and popularized both its beliefs and techniques, bodily self-cultivation nevertheless remained a private matter.¹⁴ Later, starting in the sixth century when *Chan* Buddhism became popular in China, quiet sitting also became an eponymous practice of *Chan* for achieving the dharma body, which no doubt strengthened the asocial, other-worldly trend of thought in Chinese culture and was incremental to *qi* practices' mystic involvement.¹⁵

Considering *qigong*'s history of occult practices, it is understandable that *qigong* phenomena would become the objects of scientific inquiry; but isn't the claim that *qigong* itself has a scientific base a bit excessive? Since China's traumatic encounter with modernity, the emphasis on rational thinking and antitraditionalism, as evidenced particularly in the May Fourth movement and the socialist revolution, have meant disfavor for mysticism and occult practices. In mainland China after 1949, metaphysical knowledges around *qi* practice were suspiciously regarded, Taoist religious rituals and immortality cults treated as feudal garbage. The post-Mao claim that the fundamentals of *qigong* rest firmly on scientific principles that can be gradually revealed signals significant changes in people's attitudes toward traditional forms of self-cultivation.

When the Qing monarchy fell in 1911, traditional bodily self-cultivations through *li* (rituals) also disintegrated. New subject positions, no longer based on the Confucian hierarchical order, replaced the old, ritual-constituted subjectivities. Many forms of *li* came to be only the negative signs of the nation's weak past.¹⁶ In seeking a way to revitalize the enfeebled country, Chinese intellectuals looked to Western science and technology, to democratic politics and individualism, seriously believing that there was something terribly wrong with a tradition that regarded the inculcation of rituals and music (*li yue*) as the perfection of social engineering.

Further back in time, traditional bodily cultivation through *qi* also underwent disintegration after the Opium Wars.¹⁷ The Taoist belief in the boundless resources of the individual body and its psychosomatic potential for transcendence yielded to more pressing concerns over national sovereignty. For over half the ensuing century, the body was allowed to emaciate through opium use and the famines caused by wars and natural disasters. Hence, the familiar image of the bodies of the Chinese coolies, stripped to the waist, deformed, corpse-like, all ribs visible, apathetic, entered Western consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century. This image of "the Sick Man of East Asia" (*dongya bingfu*) would endure until Mao. During this time, as Kurio Miura tells us, traditional forms of exercise and meditation designed to nourish *qi* were sustained only in the hermetic daily lives of monks, nuns, and Taoists within

¹⁴See Kohn 1991 on the integration of Taoist philosophy with religion. Also see Dean 1993 on the institutionalization of Taoism in the late Han.

¹⁵See Faure 1995 for a study on the Chan body.

¹⁶James L. Hevia, in his study of Qing guest rituals (1994), shows that one of the traditional forms of bodily ritual, *koutou*, through which "subjects might be constituted and human agency enabled," was seen by the Western historians and diplomatic officials as a ritual of abject servitude, while in effect "the *koutou* empowers the lesser in a dependent relationship with a superior." Ironically, the view that *koutou* was an abject and servile bodily ritual has eventually been accepted by the Chinese as well, at least in the mainland after 1949.

¹⁷The Opium Wars (1839–42, 1856–60), the first major military clashes between China and the West, represented the beginning of a century of humiliation by foreign powers through the imposition of unequal treaties that extracted commercial privileges, territory, and other benefits from the Chinese government.

the walls of monasteries, abbeys, and convents. "These people were mostly specialists who spent all their time on the techniques and did not care to pass them on to a wider public" (Miura 1989, 332).

From Self-Cultivation to Medical Practice: Science as Strategy

Interestingly, in the early decades of this century, a preliminary of the debate under discussion seemed already in place. Some of the issues deemed important in the 1990s already had emerged in the beginning of the century. Jiang Weiqiao's *Yin Shizi jingzuo fa* (Methods of quiet-sitting meditation by Master Yin), which appeared in 1914 and became well known among the intelligentsia, might be the earliest attempt to popularize *qi* practice. In the preface written in the winter of 1917 for subsequent editions, Jiang (Master Yin) comments on how quiet-sitting meditation had been so mystified by *fangshi* 方士 (men with various Taoist skills involving exorcism, medicine, and divination)¹⁸ that nobody thought it could be studied anymore. He tells how he himself was cured of inveterate diseases by practicing it, which experience now prompted him to demonstrate and explain its effects scientifically. He writes:

I have recently learned that Okada Torajiro and Fujita Reisai in Japan are advocating quiet-sitting meditation and have tens of thousands of followers. The students of Okada have written an *Okada Method of Meditation*, while Fujita himself has authored one book on the method of resting and regulating the heart, and another on the key to strengthening the body-mind. These books have become quite popular and have been republished more than ten times. I was touched when I read them, saying to myself: These are our skills. But their books introduce them in such a straightforward, honest and reasonable way that they are no longer subjected to mysteries but explained by studies in science and philosophy. And their approach is so different from that of our classical books. I could not stop thinking about it afterward! I ruminated upon the character of our people: any learning, skills, techniques, or arts, once becoming excellent or superior, will be regarded as secrets and be held in private, not to be shown to others for public study. It has been like this since ancient times. The Japanese are different. When they have learned something from us, they study it in public. The result is that they surpass us. . . . Now the book I have written here does not rely on strange, monstrous mystifications, but tries to give explanations on the basis of psychology and physiology. All that I discuss in the book are results of my experiments.

(Jiang 1917, 1–2)

Apart from its echo of the strongly nationalistic feelings of that period, this passage sounds another note of modernity: the emphasis on rationality and scientific method. When Jiang was writing this preface in 1917, the New Culture Movement was in full swing. To thinkers like Chen Duxiu, the editor of the journal *Xin qingnian* (New youth),¹⁹ modern science was not just the antithesis of traditional culture, but

¹⁸There is no easy definition of *fangshi*, but see Kenneth DeWoskin 1983 for a detailed historical description of *fangshi* and their practices.

¹⁹*New Youth* was the center of the New Culture Movement, especially after January 1918, when the journal began to be jointly edited by Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Hu Shi, Qian Xuantong, Liu Bannong, and others.

a substitute for it. The debate in the 1990s over whether *qigong* practice and research are scientific is more revealing when seen in connection with what Jiang said in the beginning of the century. It tells us that the power of science to give legitimation was a phenomenon of Chinese modernity that had prevailed over the entire century.

In the West, scientific cognition is basically an activity of human subjects taken in relation to the objects of the natural world. The critique of modernity has often problematized the moral nature of scientific knowledge and application. The Frankenstein monster, born of scientific research and the scientist's playing "God," is a familiar trope in Western critiques of modernity for the precipitation of an unsolvable moral predicament and dire consequence. But in China since the New Culture Movement, the term "science" has itself been the discursive construction of modernity and the signifier of "truth" or "virtue." In Wang Hui's "The Fate of 'Mr. Science' in China," we find that "science" is used as a weapon to negate tradition, even while tradition ironically sneaks back into "science" by confining the meaning of science in traditional epistemology and moral philosophy (Wang Hui 1995, 1–68). The consequence of this traditionalized "science" is the belief of which Wang writes:

Science itself furnished an illustration of the organic connection among the universe, the world, society, and life—this cosmogrammar, with the qualities of teleology and moral philosophy, determined the ultimate direction (the true, the good, and the beautiful) of cosmic movement and showed clearly the basic norms (from political to moral) for how people should think and act.

(1995, 58)

Quiet-sitting meditation, a traditional *qi* practice, could be modernized if presented to the public in a rational, scientific form. That was, according to Jiang, what the Japanese were doing with this Chinese learning. But Jiang's effort did not meet with universal approval. One negative reaction—though it did not matter at that time—anticipated a major adjustment of *qigong* practice some forty years later. It was a published response from Mao Zedong, then twenty-five years old. Instead of seeing Jiang's work as sounding a note of modernity, Mao saw it as a continuation of the Confucian scholarly tradition:

Human beings are active animals and they love to be active. Human beings are also rational animals and thus they need a reason for their activity. Why is this?

Because activity secures survival. Yes, but that is an easy explanation. Because activity secures the fortune of the homeland. Yes, and that is a weighty explanation. Neither reach the basis of the matter. Activity is ultimately what nourishes life and satisfies the mind. This and none other is the truth.

Zhu Xi proposed respect, Lu Jiuyuan proposed tranquillity. Tranquillity is meditation, and respect is not activity either, it is but another form of being at rest. Laozi emphasized to be without activity, the Buddha wished all beings to be serene.

Sitting in meditation was advised by the followers of Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan over the ages, the most recent example being Master Yin's book. He praises his method as wonderful and highly spiritual and says that activity destroys the body. This is one way of looking at things.

However, I do not share these ideas. In my opinion, there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not activity.

(Mao 1917 quoted in Miura 1989, 334; translation slightly modified)

This preliminary disagreement surrounding a form of *qi* exercise sheds a great deal of light on *qigong*'s new face in the twentieth century. What Jiang is striving to

do, enlightened by the Japanese, is to disentangle *qi* exercise from its occult practice so as to keep it as a technique of self-cultivation, whereas Mao, making no dialogic comment on Jiang's advocacy of a rational understanding of *qi* practice, rather arbitrarily disapproves it as a tradition of nonactivity in the line of Laozi, Buddha, and of the Confucian gentry scholar.

The ensuing thirty years were most eventful. The anti-Japanese war and the Chinese Communist revolution wholly occupied history, making everything else seem trivial. If there was any literature on *qi* and its practice, it must have been lost. But we have reason to believe that *qi* practice continued, albeit only within a small section of the population. The emergence of persons like Liu Guizhen in the 1950s, who were masters of *qi* practice and advocated its medical uses, suggests that these persons had inherited *qi* exercise techniques from others before them.²⁰ The lack of medicine and medical treatment for the tremendous number of sick people at that time provided a test case for various kinds of traditional health practices; the most effective and practical of these thus survived and were taken up by ordinary people. These years were also when the discourse of Marxist materialism gradually came to dominance, along with changes in social and power relations. After 1949, the Maoist discourse became the guiding principle to which all social activities, and *qi* practice without exception, must adhere.

Qi practice eventually survived Mao's disapproval and came back with a vengeance, but not without losing something. For the cost of its survival was a gradual shift toward increased bodily movements in practice, and toward "ways of treatment that involved a high degree of active interaction between physician and patient" (Miura 1989, 334). In the 1950s, Liu Guizhen and others set up clinics and conducted experiments to adapt *qi* techniques to clinical use. Though Liu newly enhanced the curative effects of *qi* exercise as a branch of Chinese medicine, the neologism *qigong* no longer signified techniques of self-cultivation (at least not in its official use). Except perhaps in a very small section of the population, about which we have no verifiable knowledge, the *qi* exercises selected, experimented on, and modified by Liu's influential clinics became a legitimate medical practice used now by bona fide physicians. This practice began to be known as *qigong*, largely due to the book *The Practice of Qigong Therapy* (*Qigong liaofa shijian*, 1955) that Liu compiled.

The construction of the category *qigong* helped many forms of *qi* exercise to survive the antisuperstition campaigns aimed at many traditional bodily cultivation techniques. Besides those practices that were seen as part of the Taoist immortality cults, there were other Taoist bodily cultivation techniques that were lost. Among the lost practices were those that use sexual intercourse, as discussed by Schipper and also studied by Wile as an "art of the bedchamber" (*fangzhong shu*), as well as those that cultivate sexual desire to form "medicine," a "highly concentrated feeling of *qi* that is to be moved up along the spinal column to nourish the brain" (*huan jing bu nao*). There were also those that depended on visualizing gods inside the body in order to cultivate *qi*. These outlaw practices were not covered by the term *qigong*, while those that were so covered thereby acquired legitimation as part of traditional medicine.

²⁰Various reconstructed *qigong* histories usually mention the name of Liu Guizhen to represent the group of people working with him, presumably because he compiled the book *Qigong liaofa shijian* (Practice of qigong therapy, 1955) and headed the experiments and clinics set up in 1956 in Tangshan and Beidaihe. I could not find information on any of the other individuals who must have contributed to popularizing *qi* practice at that time.

The Body, *Qigong* and the Maoist Subjects

Apart from delivering “a high degree of active interaction between physician and patient,” *qi* was also practiced for the first time in group settings. In order to make a revolution and build a socialist state, the Communist Party needed the people to act as one uniform mass. The history of Chinese nation-state building was consequently also a history of turning individuals into masses. At all levels of society after 1954, collectivization on a national scale gradually but steadily wiped out anything like a private space. The transformation of private enterprises to state ownership and the building of the People’s Communes in the countryside went hand in hand with the new state rituals of confessional self-criticism and severe chastisement meetings. Besides building the socialist state materially, everybody had the task of “remolding his/her own world outlook” (*gaizao shijieguan*). Mechanisms of interpellation were employed to weed out what was named “private” and “selfish” from people’s minds and habits. The campaigns of “Struggling against the Private and Criticizing the Revisionist” (*dousi pixiu*), which got underway in 1967, included such activities as diary writing, learning from Lei Feng, political study sessions, struggle meetings, and self-examination writing (Mayfair Meihui Yang 1994, 266–67).

The transformation of traditional forms of bodily self-cultivation into modern *qigong* is commensurate with changes in the body politic and in subject formation with the onset of Chinese modernity. The body did not disappear in the People’s Republic. On the contrary, Mao Zedong placed a great deal of importance on the health of the body, which he saw as the basis for the health of the nation. “Develop physical culture and sports; strengthen the people’s physiques” (*fazhan tiyu yundong, zengqiang renmin tizhi*), the sports slogan he penned in 1952, dominated the central space in every sports field and stadium for almost forty years before it came to share that space with more eye-catching Marlboro and Coca Cola ads. When Mao decided to launch the Cultural Revolution, he swam across the Yangtze to demonstrate the fitness of his own body for the enterprise. China has since moved up in international sports competitions. The image of the “Sick Man of East Asia” is gone. Yet the body nurtured by socialism is very much a public, mass body. Individual, private bodies have effectively disappeared. Susan Brownell writes in *Training the Body for China*:

In the Maoist order, the body was to serve socialism primarily through labor and military service. The goal of physical culture was to promote public health, increase productivity, and prepare the people for national defense. . . . Maoist body culture was also egalitarian in that, in a sort of twisted logic, not engaging in physical training would emulate the privileged exemption from exercise of the feudal elites; thus, people could be under a good deal of ideological pressure to train their bodies. . . . To Westerners, news footage of hundreds of darkly clad, sexless Chinese exercising in perfect harmony provided one of the enduring images of the Maoist era. (Brownell 1995, 58)

As Lei Feng, the authorized model to emulate during this era,²¹ wrote in his diary, everybody was a tiny screw in the giant machine of socialist revolution. Everybody

²¹Yang writes, “Lei Feng was a People’s Liberation Army hero whose diary was first published and promoted in 1963. During the Cultural Revolution, Lei Feng enjoyed a minor cult status as one of the most faithful of Chairman Mao’s followers” (1994, 258).

was now equidistant from the center, the single head of the state. Thus the body was brought into alignment with and by the building of the socialist nation and the forming of the Maoist subjects.

We can now sense why Mao implicitly objected to Jiang Weiqiao's promotion of quiet-sitting methods: behind the rhetoric of bodily activity lies the problematic of the individual body versus the mass body, later to be politicized into an opposition between the elite feudal body culture versus the Maoist communist body culture. In such a situation, the small number of people who during the Cultural Revolution practiced *qigong* for other than urgent medical reasons must have done so underground, since they risked chastisement for belonging to the feudalist "leisurely and carefree party" (*xiaoyaopai*). Nevertheless, interstitial and marginal as it was, *qigong* secured for itself a space in Chinese traditional medicine along with massage and acupuncture. After the Cultural Revolution, the first batch of *qigong* masters who came out to teach *qigong* were all medical doctors, and their teachings all followed the pattern set in the fifties by Liu Guizhen's *qigong* clinics.²² In a way, the reorganization of separate and discrete health practices into the general category of *qigong* was a signal of their detachment from the intelligentsia and their relocation among the masses. The thirty years after 1949 constituted an important period of adjustment in this respect. Many traditional methods were tested, revised, incorporated into *qigong* and thus made accessible to ordinary people in the name of medicine. Another significant change we should note was that *qi* practice became more easily accessible to women. Although there had traditionally been women practitioners, their numbers were few compared to those of their male counterparts. Now, *qigong* became truly a unisex practice, and it is in fact common to find more women than men practicing in large groups.

The death of Mao was a shock to the many who had never thought of his body as mortal. The preservation of Mao's dead body, though intended symbolically to preserve the Communist Nation, was inevitably also a reminder that an epoch was over. "Economy" became a key word in the ensuing Chinese vocabulary. It defined the ethos of the new era and also brought about crisis. "With the decline of Maoist subjects, what took place was a restrengthening of the redistributive state apparatus, even as economic reforms in the 1980s introduced new market forces, which began to curb some spheres of its operations" (Yang 1994, 276). The new policies established to foster rapid economic growth also unleashed forces that "created a predicament for China's socialist system. Economism, taken to its logical conclusions, is at odds not only with the socialist revolutionary vision, but with the existing socialist system as well" (Dirlik 1989, 35). Amid the contestation between a state redistributive economy and a commodity economy, not to mention the contradiction between a socialist moral vision and capitalist consumerism, there arose among the populace considerable confusion, dislocation, and disillusion.

The new subject was interpellated into new ideologies by such truisms as "only practice is the yardstick for truth." The "thought liberation movement," as it was called, initiated by discussions on the criteria of truth, paved the way for the reemergence of an ideology of humanism with its advocacy of the precept of the independent, autonomous and self-regulating existence of the human being. The post-Maoist subject thus began to react against the collectivization of individual will. In the 1980s, something similar to the May Fourth movement period took place. Intellectuals, students, and other sectors of the urban population stood up to claim

²²Except for Guo Lin, formerly a popular Beijing actress, who was not a doctor, but whose *New Qigong Treatment* (Xin qigong liaofa, 1980) was devised for curing cancer.

individual autonomy and uniqueness. They emphasized individual thought and expression and demanded recognition of individual dignity and individual rights. These ideas were consistently condemned by official discourse as “bourgeois liberalism,” but they continued to exert great influence on post-Mao culture, even after the tragedy of Tiananmen Square. In fact, the Tiananmen massacre only momentarily shrank the cultural space that had opened up to a humanist understanding of the body. The individual body is once again seen as a natural ontological category with its own values, its own history of pain and joy, detached from society. Against this backdrop of transformation of the ideologies of the body politic reemerges the idea of the individual subject/body that had predominated in the Taoist tradition.

The Construction of *Qigong* Discourse and Its Counter Discourse

Nothing could have predicted the extent of the explosion of *qigong* activities all over the country toward the mid 1980s. At the beginning, the scientific claims made for *qigong* were modest: apart from its traditional mystic beliefs, the method of *qigong* does effectively cure many, hence its results could be explained in scientific terms. If that could be done, the method could be demystified and used more regularly to benefit more people. This simple idea had also motivated Jiang Weiqiao's efforts to popularize *qigong* early in this century. Hence there followed in the 1980s attempts to describe *qigong* phenomena objectively with reference to scientific knowledge. Wang Peisheng and Chen Guanhua's *Relaxing and Calming Qigong*, for example, tries to describe “the feeling of *qi*” (*qigan*):

It is not known what causes the feeling of *qi*. Here we will introduce a hypothesis about it. In recent years some scientists have found that in the state of *qigong*, brain waves have a lower frequency and greater magnitude, and are more synchronized. Also, the temperature at the acupoint to which one's attention is directed is 1 to 3 degrees C higher than at other parts of the body. From modern physiology we know that such an action as bending a finger is caused by brain waves whose messages are sent to the finger through the nervous system; the terminal of the nerve releases some chemicals which enable the corresponding muscles to stretch or to retract. Proceeding from these facts, we propose that special brain waves, generated while practicing *qigong*, cause the expansion of the micrangiums in *yishou chu*,²³ thereby increasing the blood supply and stimulating the acupoint. Consequently there is a rise in temperature and other unusual phenomena at the acupoint, which in turn causes a feeling of warmth, expansion and other sensations—the feeling of *qi*.

(Wang and Chen 1987, 3–4)²⁴

Instead of explaining and defining *qi*, the authors describe the feelings of *qi* and make propositions about it in scientific language. Thus, what matters is not whether *qi*

²³“Micrangium” is defined as a capillary in *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* (1994). *Yishou chu* 意守处 is the “acupoint” (穴位 *xuewei*) to which one's attention is directed in *qigong* practice. Fixed spots on the body where *qi* is thought to concentrate, *yishou chu* has become a more preferred term than *dantian* 丹田, because *dantian* has complex associations with the “cinnabar field” of alchemical Taoism and because there are disagreements as to whether certain places where some schools of *qigong* direct attention should be called *dantian*.

²⁴The translation is modified from an original translation by Chen Guanhua.

really exists and what kind of substance it is, but the special effects achieved through the exercise that bears its name. As more books on *qigong* began to come out, this approach, which was based on an effort to be objective, gradually got side-tracked. The book *The Scientific Basis of Qigong*, published in 1988 by Xie Huanzhang, a professor in The Beijing Institute of Industry, summarizes some scientists' work in examining *qi* as a material force. It introduces Qian Xuesen's idea of establishing "Phenomenalistic Qigong Studies" (*weixiang qigong xue*), first raised by Qian in a speech given at a forum held by the Chinese *Qigong* and Science Research Association on February 23, 1986. Although the term "phenomenalistic *qigong* studies" implies both the present inability to explain *qigong* phenomena in terms of modern science and the need to systematize the mass of sporadic practical experience as well as scientific experiments already made on *qigong*, Xie nevertheless thinks that the key issue is whether *qigong* is only a religious technology, a superstitious, deceptive quack practice, or whether *qi* "objectively" exists. This is the entire base of his advocacy of *qigong* studies (Xie 1988, 29). In a chapter devoted to proving the "material base of *qigong* emanation" (*waiqide wuzhi cunzai*), he introduces a series of researches made since 1978 on *qigong* emanation that show as their results the low frequency fluctuation modulated infrared radiation effect, the low frequency magnetic signals effect, the infrasonic wave effect, the static electricity increment effect, and the effect on liquid crystal, all charted, well-documented, and originally published in major scientific journals in China. On the strength of these findings, he takes a step further to speculate about *qigong* emanation's capability of affecting the biogenic field, decreasing the entropy of the human body, and working as "energy carriers of life informational waves." Although Xie makes interesting connections between various theories of the biogenic field²⁵ and Chinese traditional *qi* cosmology, his studies also provide a lot of science-fiction imaginings. At one point, for instance, he suggests that neither the auras drawn around the heads of the Buddha and Jesus Christ in Christian paintings, nor those seen in Chinese mythological *fengshenbang* tales, are merely fantasies. "To the minds of *qigong* masters in our country, ancient and modern, they have a material existence. They are the images of *qi* and of the biogenic fields" (Xie 1988, 287). Thus, ironically, a work that aims at a scientific method in its effort to prove the existence of *qi* ends up in revivifying ancient myths. It "scientifically" reinaugurates the Taoist body, replacing its supernatural powers with a modern discourse of *teyi gongneng* (supernormal prowess).²⁶ Xie says more explicitly at another point: "Some extraordinary phenomena would happen to a person well trained in *qigong*. He would, for example, be able to speak a special language, to see the inside of a human body, and to see, hear and feel what ordinary people are unable to see, hear and feel" (Xie 1988, 326). While these phenomena may indeed be attached to some specific, concrete instances of the practice, they have never been thoroughly verified by scientific methods.

²⁵"Biogenic" is defined in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* as "produced by the action of living organisms." Xie discusses Von Reichenbach's Odicforce, Kilner and Muftic's aura, Inyushin's bioplasma field, the Bendits' and Tansely's nadis field, and Chakra, to mention a few. They are all supposed to be "biogenic fields," comparable in concept to the Chinese understanding of the body's *qi* emanation. Although these special terms would still be too vague for the laymen of "body science," I include them here to facilitate those who understand them.

²⁶*Teyi gongneng* is usually manifested by extrasensory perception and psychokinesis. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines psychokinesis (PK) as "the production or alteration of motion by influence of the mind without somatic intervention in objects discrete from the subject's body."

Xie might be the first scientist who tried to make *qigong* scientific by evoking the limitations of scientific cognition in understanding *qigong*. Following his brief discussion of the curative effects of *qigong* on cancer, vasculitis, and paralysis, he deplores, for instance, the fact that *qigong* is still not officially acknowledged in formal documents that summarize recent years' cancer cures in the country. He analyzes the cause of the neglect in this scenario:

A doctor made a definite diagnosis that a patient had cancer. That patient then tried and succeeded in curing himself by practicing *qigong*. When he came back to the doctor for a re-check and told him what he had been doing, the doctor, facing the fact that the cancer disappeared, would rather admit that he made a mistake in diagnosing the patient than acknowledge that *qigong* had cured his cancer. Because the medical education he had received and the modern medical knowledge he had had nothing to do with *qigong's* cancer cure, he could not explain the phenomenon at all. Without "reasonable" explanation, he certainly could not accept and acknowledge it. What do *zhenqi* [genuine *qi*] and *yuanci* [primal *qi*] mean? Where could they be found in physics, chemistry and modern medical science?

(Xie 1988, 19–20)

Again ironically, a discourse that advocates making *qigong* scientific can easily be read as indicating the inadequacy of science: the irrational nature of *qigong* phenomena is not a problem by itself; it is rather modern science that is not developed enough to have concepts and terminology to define and explain those phenomena. Thus, almost imperceptibly, *qigong*, which used to be thought of as superstition and lacking a scientific basis, and was therefore dismissed when China entered the modern era, now subtly turns the table on science. By challenging the authority of science, *qigong* discourse begins to situate itself in an ambivalent position between science and mysticism. Gradually, the very inability of modern scientific knowledge to understand and explain *qigong* phenomena in medical cases became a popular topic. People seemed to enjoy a great deal the presence of something inexplicable, mysterious, and baffling to science, something like UFOs and Bermuda Triangles, yet much less remote, much more substantially real, something working with perceptible effects on the materiality of the body. Numerous training sessions throughout the country turned out countless people who declared themselves to be cured of inveterate diseases or who claimed to have acquired unusual powers as a result of the training. There appeared across the country societies and associations dedicated to study of *qigong*. Different from the "how-to" guidebooks that teach with pictures and diagrams a particular kind of *qigong* but do not much comment on its power beyond promoting health, a literature appeared that was clearly developing the discourse of its mystical powers into an ideology.

Qigong daigong baogao (*qigong* report with actual *qi* emanation) became a very popular source of this literature. These were reports given by *qigong* masters who would release their *qi* while speaking to the public in order that the listeners in the auditoriums could themselves physically benefit. The "reports," consisting of anecdotes, episodes of popular history, grapevine news, exhortations, and legends, were usually improvised and were understood to be not really an end in themselves. Nevertheless, they were preserved as mimeographed transcripts and cassette tape-recordings and widely circulated. These materials carried the most obvious signs of invention and construction. For example, they sought credibility by claiming that all great *qigong* masters are people with superior moral strength; therefore, one's *gong* advances in direct proportion to one's moral growth and one's cultivation of *gongde* 功德

(virtues related to one's *gong*). Yan Xin's early *qigong* reports invariably reiterate this point and also include the dubious claim that Mao himself was adept at *qigong*. At about the same time, magazines on *qigong* appeared. These contained a variety of articles that ranged from the exegesis of Taoist or Buddhist texts on *qigong* to reports of current *qigong* activities to discussions of modern scientific methods of studying *qigong*. Quite a few passages from the *Daodejing* as well as the *Yijing* (Book of Changes) were interpreted as containing messages directly related to *qigong* practice. In the mid 1980s, books were published that treated *qigong* as a systematic field of study, one with a historiography, a theory, and a citing of the major popular schools at that time. The titles of these books usually included phrases such as "*qigong xue*" (*qigong* studies) or "*qigong xue gailun*" (an introduction to *qigong* studies), which make *qigong* sound in Chinese like a disciplinary subject such as physics or economics. Along with general studies such as these came "cross-disciplinary" studies that explored *qigong* from cultural, philosophical, scientific and psychological perspectives. These essays and theses sometimes appeared in journals of physical education or martial arts. Toward the end of the 1980s *qigong* fiction emerged, usually stories about *qigong* masters and the incredible feats they would perform.

One of the important things that has happened to *qigong* in the 1990s is that *qigong* discourse has found its own standard-bearer. Ke Yunlu, a well-known mainstream writer who has published seven novels and numerous stories and essays, and who was well liked for his novel *Xinxing* (The New Star, 1984), suddenly began to turn out a large quantity of literature on *qigong*. In the preface to his novel *The Great Qigong Masters* (Da qigong shi, 1994), he issues some bold challenges to the philosophical foundations of Marxism:

Marxist materialist philosophy teaches that matter is primary while consciousness is secondary. Matter decides consciousness, while consciousness reacts upon matter. Many repeated scientific experiments made on *qigong* masters and ESP and PK phenomena lead to the conclusion that consciousness is matter. *Qi* is released by consciousness, and when at a high level of *gong*, consciousness and *qi* become one. Consciousness itself is a special kind of energy taking the form of a field. *Qigong* masters can break a steel bar or reconnect it by thinking about breaking it or reconnecting it.

(Ke 1994, 13–14)

The protagonist of the novel is a young man who befriends *qigong* masters, researches on the basis of cross-disciplinary studies, and writes about the mysteries of *qigong*—a person who in many ways resembles the novelist himself. He is driven to search for an explanation for well-known *qigong* phenomena: is there any connection, for instance, between the way Yan Xin cures compound bone fractures simply by talking to his patient and the way Zhang Baosheng removes tablets from a sealed medicine bottle and returns them without breaking the seal?²⁷ The protagonist's thoughts are often occupied by his attempts to answer such questions in a mystifying language. Should we understand the feats as a result of returning things to their original state, so that time is reversed locally? Or is there another level of the universe where the theories

²⁷Zhang Baosheng has performed a series of magic shows all over the country and is recognized as having "*teyi gongneng*," which means he is not considered a mere magician. Removing tablets of medicine from a sealed bottle and returning them without breaking the seal is one of his performances that has been widely discussed. For a report of his performances, see Ou Nianzhong 1987.

of our physics do not make sense and to which some *qigong* masters of high calibre have access? Not only can time be reversed but space shifted at different levels of the universe. Yet may these speculations themselves be confined by our constructed conception of physics and its mode of thinking so that they do not lead us anywhere?

Ke also tackles the dangerous zone of *teyi gongneng*, known as *shen tong shu* (techniques of communicating with the spirit-self) in traditional literature, and tries to free it from the modern label of “superstition.” In his *Qigong xiuliande aomi yu wuqu* (Profound Mysteries and Possible Areas of Errors in Qigong Training, 1995), one of a dozen recent books in the Ke Yunlu Life Science Culture Series, he writes:

Shen tong, teyi gongneng, is an especially sensitive topic. The reason for this is that it goes beyond our common sense. . . . According to modern physics, it is unthinkable to take medicine out of a sealed bottle without breaking the bottle. But a person with *teyi gongneng* succeeds in doing it, in the public gaze. Facing this physics phenomenon, the scientists all confront the question of negating themselves, and they instinctively adopt a negative attitude. Why? Because the phenomenon conflicts with all your experience, knowledge and learning. To go deeper than this, it is as much as to say it conflicts with the social status you have achieved. As a physicist, or a medical specialist, when all your theory cannot explain this simple fact—you cannot explain it without changing your theory, you would not be willing to change your theory because your authoritative position is based on this theory. Obviously this is a sensitive topic. . . . Now if all the *teyi gongneng* phenomena are openly acknowledged as true, all the theories and doctrines will have to be rewritten. At that point, the question of what superstition is becomes especially acute. To my mind, remaining at the stage of ancient god worship and making a fetish of all phenomena of *teyi gongneng* is superstition, but staying at today’s level of science and calling all phenomena of *teyi gongneng* superstitious and pushing them aside is also superstition.

(Ke 1995, 27–28)

Though Ke points to the personal investment that scientists may have in maintaining the authority of science, the political implications of his critique go even further. The situation he describes here can easily be paralleled in the political arena—people who have a heavy political investment in Maoist-Marxist discourse will not let it go, even when it proves unable to explain and guide present social practices, because negating it is to negate their own hard-earned social status. In some of his writing, Ke holds that seriously believing in and practicing *qigong* necessitates questioning the basic theoretical premises of the Marxist discourse and even a radical change of faith. Ke’s *The Great Qigong Masters* weaves into its plot a confrontation between a high-ranking state leader who is an authority on Marxist philosophy and theory, on the one hand, and the protagonist, on the other. The powerful man, a representative of the dominant ideology, is obstinately blind to the extraordinary phenomena demonstrated in *qigong* masters’ performances, even though he witnesses them himself. In defending the thus enfeebled political ideology, he organizes a campaign to criticize those who “spread reactionary philosophical thinking in the scientific field” (Ke 1994, 148). The novel characterizes his outlook as narrow-minded, bigoted, and dogmatic in a world of constant change and proliferating mysteries.

The impulse to reinterpret mysterious phenomena in the world, a look back toward the *Yijing* (The Book of Changes) and *bagua* (the Eight Trigrams), Lao-Zhuang philosophy, and various kinds of traditional cultural practices and rituals in search of “buried” meaning, and a hermeneutic quest that tries to disregard important principles of modern science and to seek new perspectives from which to see the

world—all these reflect a general desire after the Cultural Revolution to revive traditional beliefs and values and to reconstruct on the “ruins” of a national culture. This tendency is not limited to the discursive field of *qigong*; it engages the imagination of a broad spectrum of cultural practices, but *qigong* discourse seems to represent the most enduring of these revivals. It is not difficult to figure out why. Given its historical roots and its mystic relation to the materiality of the body, *qigong* is not only an ideal cultural institution for inventing a “tradition” that can conveniently replace the now dead “meaning” of the Maoist ideology, but it is also a site of resistance to a new competing ideology that negates Maoist ideology from the opposite direction, as we will see below. It is important to note here two things: (1) what is appealing in the “revival of tradition” is very much its irrational aspect, and (2) this “revival” does not effect a true return to the tradition negated by the spirit of the May Fourth movement. The rebellious strain in the present drive toward modernization can be understood as the negation of a negation, which, as Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, “does not bring about its reversal” (1973, 159). The cultural transformation calls into question the privileged signifiers of the Chinese socialist symbolic order; what has been presented as scientific truth and objective rationality begins to be perceived as a particular form of representing the world, but not the only form.

Ke Yunlu’s clarion voice has eventually met its no less vocal opposition in the articles and speeches of Sima Nan, who has taken upon himself the task of exposing pseudopractices in *qigong*: it was he who initiated the discursive battle over the scientific nature of *qigong* phenomena in 1995. The following quotation, taken from his long essay “Weiqigong zhongheng tan” (The Long and Short of Pseudo Qigong), first published in four parts in four issues of *Beijing qingnian bao* (Beijing Youth) from May 12 to June 2, 1995, later collected in his two-volume book *Shengong neimu* (Behind the Curtain of Mysterious Qigong), shows concisely the reasons for his opposition:

On an occasion of high level performance, a “Chinese superman” faked *teyi gongneng* with simple magic tricks and performed teleport and shook medical tablets from a sealed bottle. From a psychological point of view, I really wish it was all true, because that way, the world would be more glamorous. . . . But, considering the fact that over a hundred years both at home and abroad, this kind of supernatural phenomena have been repeatedly exposed, and also in relation to my own experience these few years when I followed certain “men with high-power *qi* skills” (*gaoren*), “supermen,” “great masters” and was duped, I am more inclined to think it false.

(Sima 1995, 1–90)

Apart from writing and giving speeches, Sima Nan also performs in public. He is capable of many incredible feats, the same as those performed by *qigong* masters. After the performance, when everybody is convinced of the power of his *qigong*, he will surprise his audience again by revealing the magic tricks he has used, pointing out that they have actually nothing to do with *qigong*. He calls Ke Yunlu a great wizard (*dawu*), Yan Xin “the patriarch of a new religion” (*xin jiao zhu*), and challenges all their claims of *qigong*’s extraordinary power. Sima Nan professes a very close relationship with many “great *qigong* masters” and declares that he has learned those magic tricks from them. “If I exhibit my abilities just like them, people probably will not be able to recognize them as false. If I don’t declare my performances to be pseudo-*qigong*, it may take quite some time and effort to reveal them as such” (Sima 1995, 8).

One important strategic move in Sima Nan's counterdiscourse is to argue that *qi* does not really exist, let alone *waiqi* (emanation of *qi*). What enables *qigong* masters to cure patients in the name of *waiqi* is actually psychological suggestion (*xinli ansbi*). Sima Nan attributes this explanation to Zhang Honglin, associate researcher, director of the *qigong* research section of the Chinese Research Institute of Traditional Medicine. Sima explains some of Yan Xin's successful cases in this light, but questions his case of curing compound bone fractures. He suggests that that cure was fabricated by *Chongqing Daily's* news reporter Ao Dalun, and that it cannot be replicated. Sima's book includes an open letter to Ke Yunlu, whom he attacks with biting sarcasm. Although Sima's performance devastates anyone's impression of any *qigong* master's mysterious power, thus earning him the title "China's Randi,"²⁸ one may find his often vitriolic writing dubious itself—for being insufficiently analytical. It was not until the spring of 1996, when Zhang Honglin's book came out, that the counterdiscourse seems to have gained equal strength and credence with the discourse of *qigong*.

The theoretical cornerstone of Zhang Honglin's book *Return Qigong to Its Original Look* (1996) is also the argument that *qi* as matter does not exist, but Zhang offers a brief discussion of *qi* in early Chinese philosophy and medicine in which he argues that the early philosophical *yuanqi lun* (theories of primal *qi*), the medical *xiantian zhi qi* (*qi* as the result of a union of parental *yin* and *yang*), and *houtian zhi qi* (nutrition derived from breathing in the air and taking in food) all reflect naive materialism; they are not really metaphysical. He thinks that the *zhenqi* (genuine *qi*) in the *qigong* discourse discovered in *Huangdi neijing* refers to physiological function and is the effect of *qigong* practice, not something originally there in itself. But what "pseudo-*qigong*" means by *qi* now, he writes, is an entirely different matter. "It is an illusory *qi* in the name of traditional medicine and *qigong*, with a surreptitiously changed definition, in the service of the totem worship of a heretical religion" (Zhang 1996, 31). He declares that all those experiments made to find the material existence of *waiqi* were not strictly scientific and therefore lack repeatability. Challenged by people asking how his definition of *qigong* could deny the material base of *qi* from which *qigong* got its name, Zhang Honglin argues that it was Liu Guizhen's "grave historical mistake" to name in the 1950s the various kinds of traditional health practices—Taoist yoga, circulating *qi* exercise (*xingqi*), meditation, inner elixir—*qigong*. This naming is what helped "pseudo *qigong*" lay its theoretical foundation (Zhang 1996, 29). To explain why *qigong* masters did successfully cure patients without touching them, Zhang Honglin points out the function of psychological suggestion and even hypnotism. He writes:

Before the patient decides to seek *qigong* therapy, he has already known about the mysterious power of *waiqi* treatment through various channels such as newspapers, journals, radio and television, relatives, friends and colleagues; thus he has already prepared the foundation for receiving psychological suggestion. When he steps into the therapy room and sees all kinds of silk banners, certificates, newspaper and journal

²⁸As early as 1990, Zhang Yangzhou published an article titled "China's Randi" in *Jiaoyu daobao* (Education Guider), introducing Sima Nan and his performance to the public. James Randi is the American author of *Flim-flam! : The Truth about Unicorns, Parapsychology, and Other Delusions* (New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980), and *The Faith Healers* (Buffalo, N. Y.: Prometheus Books, 1987). He is said to have exposed numerous supernatural feats of famous magicians, mystic healers, "spokespersons" of God, supermen, and the like. He can imitate many of the tricks himself. For twenty years he has carried a ten thousand-dollar check for anyone who can prove to him that he has supernatural capability. No one has been able to take that money from him yet.

clippings displayed to prove and eulogize the master's power and goodness, the patient is more psychologically prepared for the extraordinary capability of the *qigong* master.

(Zhang 1996, 19–20)

Zhang Honglin then stresses the importance of the *qigong* masters' language, gesture, and facial expression in effecting the patient's psychological transformation. Zhang says that based on the numerous observations he and his colleagues have made, he believes that nothing would happen if the channels of both verbal and nonverbal communication were to be obstructed while *qigong* masters are releasing *waiqi* to their patients (Zhang 1996, 20–21). Together with six other scientists, Zhang has been investigating and challenging the Yan Xin experiments made by a group of scientists at Qinghua University; he has called those experiments "pseudo science" on account of their lack of strict procedure and of the repeatability factor. Zhang's book also introduces James Randi to the Chinese reader and includes Randi's pictures and a picture of Zhang and Randi together.

Toward an Ideological Analysis of *Qigong* Discourses

The counterdiscourse represented by Sima Nan and Zhang Honglin may well be closer to the "truth" of science. As we have seen, despite modern efforts to provide *qigong* with a scientific discourse, what gives *qigong* current cultural value is not really its scientific basis; it is rather something irrational, some scientifically inexplicable quality that has come to represent Chinese traditional culture. It is rather those "superstitions" that Ke Yunlu discusses, derived from traditional self-cultivation techniques, that both give *qigong* its enigma and make it popular.

"Science" has been a high-powered word in China, signifying truth since the onset of modernity. For example, Marxism is truth because it is "scientific." Scientific discourse as developed in China has always been seen as unpositioned, value-free, and not culture-bound. After the Cultural Revolution, in reaction to Maoist voluntarism and ethic-purism, this scientific discourse developed into a scientism, claiming to be the only way to know the truth and to be able to solve all the socioeconomic and political problems caused by the Cultural Revolution.²⁹ That is why *qigong* relied heavily on medical science for the better half of the 1980s. But ultimately, one's belief in *qigong*'s capability to cultivate *teyi gongneng* does not seem to depend on the proof of a scientific method. Nearly every school of modern *qigong* observes some form of the time-honored maxim in *qi* cultivation: "It will work if you believe in it" (*xin ze ling* 信则灵). The situation bears some similarity to Kierkegaard's well-known critique of the proof of God: Attempts to prove God's existence have little worth because they are unnecessary for people of faith and will be regarded as impossible by people who do not have faith (Kierkegaard 1985, 39). Just as Christians do not believe in Christ because they consider him wise and good, but because the act of belief itself gives them an insight into his alleged goodness and wisdom, those who believe in the potential capabilities of the human body for *teyi gongneng* find reason everywhere

²⁹Shiping Hua 1995 analyzes the historical contingency and the ultimate failure of scientism in remolding the political culture in contemporary China.

for their belief and do not need to be reassured by science. Indeed, they may rightfully see modern science as not “scientific” enough to explain *qigong*, whereas those who do not believe simply cannot be convinced even when witnessing phenomena of *teyi gongneng*. There seems ultimately to be no “truth” there.

The same goes for medicine. As Zhang Honglin’s theory of psychological suggestion shows, those who believe in the mysterious power of *qigong* stand a chance to be cured, while those who do not believe see *qigong waiqi* as nothing but deception. The curative effects of *waiqi* are very likely those of faith healing. To nonbelievers, *qigong* emanation simply does not exist; *qigong* is just another form of health practice.

While “faith healing” does not command much respect, and although people frequently associate it with manipulation and deception, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School connects it to “a scientifically profound source of healing,” which he terms “remembered wellness,” more commonly known as the placebo effect. Based on a series of medical studies that he documents in his *Timeless Healing* (1996), he shows that the majority of the time, “the complaints patients bring to medical clinics are of unknown origin and are probably caused by ‘psychosocial’ factors” and cannot be healed “with external tools and devices. . . . Instead, doctors must rely on patients’ internal mechanisms” (pp. 49–50). Dr. Benson posits not only that “the marvel we attach to healers and to conventional and unconventional therapies may be therapeutic in and of itself” (p. 189), but also that “all of us have the wiring that predisposes us to find faith enormously healing” (p. 206). He goes on to aver that “religious faith is a particular soothing form [of healing], but beliefs of all kinds assume tremendous influence over the body” (p. 221). Backed up by numerous cases of successful faith healing, Dr. Benson contends that faith healing does not need to be in conflict with scientific truth.

It is interesting to juxtapose Benson’s observation that “beliefs of all kinds assume tremendous influence over the body” (Benson 1996, 221) with Bourdieu’s remark that I cited in the introduction: “the body believes in what it plays at” (Bourdieu 1990, 73). What both statements point at is the intimate and mutually affecting relationship between belief and the body. Not only does belief produce effects on the body, but the body, by practicing what is asked by belief, forms and strengthens that belief. In this light, any meaningful explanation of *qigong* phenomena needs to attend to the body’s material practice of belief. It is very likely that the bodily practice of *qigong* brings many in contact with what Benson alludes to as “the wiring that predisposes us to find faith enormously healing” (1996, 206). In this sense, faith in the master and in the kind of *qigong* he or she teaches is not only a ritual that serves a symbolic purpose; it also has a more practical psychosomatic reaction on the practitioner.

Zhang Honglin may be correct in pointing out that the *qi* of “pseudo *qigong*” is illusory. Historically, *qi* indeed does not refer merely to a substance. It resounds in Chinese culture and carries a value beyond its nature and function. Although the concept of *qi* as it is understood in the cultures of East Asia—as a vital energy/substance circulating in the body and informing everything in the universe—may be compared with similar concepts in other cultures such as *mana*, *aether*, *shakti*, *prana*, and *akasha*, the perceived effects of *qi* during practice are nevertheless inseparable from their culturally specific mode of articulation. What is behind the highly transformative power attributed to modern *qigong*, but is denied to other forms of traditional exercise such as *taiji*, is a special narrative of empowerment. Zhang Honglin’s discussion of the conception of *qi* in early Chinese philosophy and medicine sees *zhenqi* (genuine *qi*) merely as a physiological function; it thus overlooks this special narrative that gives modern *qigong* its cultural value. By reducing that in *qigong* which

people believe in to mere illusion, the rational, scientific counterdiscourse makes itself unable to account for the body's production of belief through practice.

But the counterdiscourse does draw our attention to the question of why *qigong* discourse, and for that matter the entire postrevolutionary revival of tradition, invests so much in irrationalism or mysticism. In other words, what is the appeal of mysticism, and why does it become for many practitioners the particular form of belief that the body enacts through *qigong* practice? *Qigong* discourse has in the past fifteen years helped open a private space in the symbolic order of Chinese socialist modernity for those who want to cultivate their individual bodies. But some *qigong* lovers do not seem content with this and continue to claim more theaters of operation for *qigong*. What contemporary relevance is there in the mystic vision of ancient bodily cultivation? Can the vision of immortality and reaching the gods reassert its power today in a changed form after a long absence? Behind disputes over the scientific nature of *qigong* phenomena seem to hide more fundamental issues. By way of conclusion, I will now suggest what some of those issues are.

A great part of *qi*-related bodily cultivation has historically resided in a special space in the symbolic network. It is a space of fantasy where desire is constituted. This fantasy-construction constitutes a veritable ideology, one that has been outlawed since the onset of modernity with its proliferation of new ideologies valorizing the "rational" and "scientific." The death of Mao and the abrupt end of the Cultural Revolution, marking a radical exhaustion of Maoist ideology, left a huge void. For many who had identified their whole being with the Revolution, this void was commensurate with the threat of loss of any positive content of the self. For in another way, the Chinese socialist symbolic order was also built around a central lack, namely a Maoist projection of utopia and dystopia at the same time.³⁰ The virtual content of this projection was an incomprehensible future plenitude resembling the imagined lost plenitude of some past social formation in which all temporary historical formations such as the family, private ownership, and the state would simply vanish.³¹ This vision, largely based on a radical critique of capitalism in the West, was for a people with a Confucian tradition and an underdeveloped industry, both attractive and forbidding. The Maoist social-political theory which posits this vision is an ideology precisely in the sense that it masks or explains away a central felt lack in the lived experience of Maoist subjects.

What is at stake in the debate about the scientific nature of *qigong* also involves, it seems to me, a similar fantasy space. We know that the unusual power of modern *qigong* results at least partly from a materialist discursive construction. *Qigong* is empowered by discourse inasmuch as the body gives the discourse a material form by turning it into belief. In traditional China many forms of *qi* practice owed much of their power to the belief in immortality and the possibility of reaching the gods, whereas in contemporary China, under the influences of both the discourse of *teyi gongneng* (e.g., ESP and PK) and the practice of obscurantism of many *qigong* masters very much in the spirit of Eastern "enlightenment," *qigong* has been elevated from a medical device to the position of a special, high-powered technology of the self, situated between science and mysticism. The enigma, the magic spell, the irrational nature of *qigong* rather than its scientific truth have made *qigong* practice popular; the two corollary beliefs, that it cures where medicine fails, and that through *qigong* training humans have a way to improve themselves morally and biologically, conspire

³⁰For a history of the Maoist vision of the future, see Meisner 1982, 184–211.

³¹See Engels 1972 for a historical presentation of this belief.

to produce another potent cultural identity founded on the vacuum of a “lost tradition.” For the many who practice *qigong* because *qigong* fulfills their fantasy and whose belief in *qigong* constitutes who they are, to expose magic tricks will not make much sense.

The discursive politics of *qigong*, opening a space of fantasy and developing otherwise only potential bodily capabilities, thus satisfies a basic need in post-Mao China, namely that of reinventing the body. The individual, private body had gradually disappeared, since individuals all had only to bear signs for the socialist symbolic order. In discussing socialist rituals of subject-making such as the Party practice of labeling individuals or households as “law-abiding” or “spiritually civilized,” Ann Anagnost writes: “They [rituals of subjection and subject making] produce docile bodies and transform these bodies into signifiers that figure in a master narrative of progress toward a socialist modernity. These rituals objectify subjects in a way that does not individuate them but causes them to be subsumed within a mass identity, the ‘people as one,’ for whom the party becomes the sole authorized voice” (1994, 139). But along with a rejuvenated economy, the subjects of theretofore Maoist-politicized bodies began to desire a rejuvenated, depoliticized body. *Qigong*’s reinvention of the body in defiance of modern science parallels the economic reform of a superseded “orthodox” socialist economic system. In a certain sense, *qigong* discourse would not be able to circulate if the reform policies had not first loosened the grip of the state ideological machine.

The strong desire to reinvent and to empower the body, however, is also a reaction to post-Mao social conditions. As quite a few Marxist scholars of China in the West have observed, post-Maoist Marxism is based on a deterministic reading of original Marxist texts and emphasizes “objective economic laws” to the neglect of human will (Meisner 1989, 341–61). The Maoist belief that human behavior can play decisive roles in the course of history and effect leaps in nature is rendered obsolete (Brugger 1989, 117–35). In its investment in the economism of modernization theory, the ensuing post-Maoist/Marxist, supposedly socialist, ideology in fact reconciles all too well with the spatial and temporal teleology of capitalism (Dirlik 1994). “The social tendencies that have resulted from . . . ‘reforms’ . . . are simply incongruous with any conception of socialism” (Meisner 1989, 353). This transformation of a “critical Marxism” that had recognized the dynamic role of human will to a “scientific Marxism” that entrusts everything to the “objective laws of history”³² has given rise to certain crisis in the subjects of the “socialist” modernization. A sense of powerlessness has arisen in them with the disappearance both of the human agent and of the attendant notion of the possibility of transforming people’s worldview. Since the lessons of the Cultural Revolution seem to confirm that there is nothing to be done at this stage to hurry the course of history, except perhaps to prepare the material conditions for what the “objective laws” dictate is to come, it does not matter much how the task of actually developing the country’s productive forces is carried out. Under the terms of this rationale, anything that contributes to economic growth can be labelled “socialist.” Private entrepreneurs who succeed in getting rich are hailed

³²Alvin W. Gouldner traces the development of the two divergent Marxisms to the works of Marx himself. He writes, “Scientific and Critical Marxism are divergent paradigms because Marx’s ‘science’ is especially concerned to discover laws independent of human will and which cannot be suspended by science itself, while his ‘critique’ is concerned to exhibit the manner in which outcomes depend on human efforts. His science’s standpoint, then, is deterministic and structural; his critique’s standpoint is voluntaristic” (1980, 70).

as “socialist entrepreneurs.” Bureaucrats and capitalist tools are paid more and more in recognition of their contribution to socialist modernization. As the new socioeconomic inequalities increase, a considerable part of the population that has remained poor, hence of low social status, feels alienated from the symbolic order of socialist modernization. Those, especially, who are weak or old must feel jeopardized in the extreme. Yet because the present ideology of socialist modernization can call up the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution to justify itself, the sense of impotence and alienation that people feel cannot but be repressed.

Thus we have reason to read *qigong* discourse as a symptom of repressed desires. People like Xie HuanZhang and Ke Yunlu have in effect worked as translators; they translate and conceal “the real of their desire,” and the desire of many post-Maoist subjects, into the language of the “political unconscious,” and thus open a fantasy space. What *qigong* discourse now provides is a badly needed sense of power, a sense of power derived from sources outside the symbolic network of socialist modernization and founded upon the cultural heritage “outlawed” since the May Fourth movement. This “reinstated tradition” is psychologically healthy to many, and it appears very subversive sometimes, but on the whole, as ideology goes, it probably maintains more than undermines the symbolic “reality” of Chinese socialist modernization.

Now the counterdiscourse of Sima Nan and Zhang Honglin, which champions a rational, “scientific” position, is also an ideological construct; it too arises in reaction to the modernization drive. As Shiping Hua argues, “iconoclasm is the precondition for the surge of scientism, while scientism is a major by-product of iconoclasm” (1995, 144); the ideology of scientism naturally negates much of traditional and Maoist cultural heritages, deeming them feudal and superstitious on grounds that they cannot be “scientifically” proven. It is precisely “feudal superstitions” (which can include the personality cult of Mao) that the counterdiscourse repeatedly denounces, not “pseudo *qigong*” or “pseudo science,” per se. The subjects of this ideology are people whom Arif Dirlik calls “‘socialist’ modernizers.” He writes: “‘Socialist’ modernizers, or what is left of them, as in China, simply continue to insist that modernity will also result from socialism. Symptoms to the contrary, regardless of how serious and insistent they may be, are consequently attributed to the ‘backward’ legacy of the past that must be cleared away for modernization to succeed” (Dirlik 1994, 65). The “modernizers” cannot see the oxymoronic nature of the phrase “socialist modernization,” as Dirlik tries to show. Their “scientific Marxism,” initially launched as a correction to Maoist “critical Marxism” and on which is based all the coherence of developing socialism with capitalist means, has not enriched Marxist theory, but rather impoverished it. Such an ideology threatens the possibility of any social change in the near future. Precisely its failure to understand the need for an imaginary space for the body politic makes its scientific, rational discourse depressing. The “socialist” modernizers will not see social dislocation as reflecting the internal problems of the ideology, but rather attribute these problems to the “backward legacy of the past.”

It is possible, of course, to argue that people like Sima Nan and Zhang Honglin represent the government’s attempt to gain control over *qigong* practice by defining which kinds of practice are sanctioned and which are deviant (along the lines of Ots’s and Chen’s studies). But the disadvantage of such an argument would be its tendency to reduce writers, scientists, and *qigong* masters on this side to a sort of “medium” or the spokespersons of the Party/state, thus neglecting the economy of *qigong* as a cultural practice that is based on a particular form of belief. As *qigong* masters themselves, Sima and Zhang were likely making sincere efforts to get rid of the aura of mystery historically surrounding *qigong* practice and to base it on such a new, rational, belief. We also need to be aware that it is only in theory that a neat division

of the two ideologies is possible. Even though the two sides seem to divide themselves around the controversy as complete opposites, in many ways they are closely connected. For example, Sima Nan has personally experienced deception at the hands of his teachers, but ironically he himself uses methods of *waiqi* treatment to cure patients. His accounts of those treatments in *Shengong neimu* (Behind the Curtain of Mysterious Qigong) give the impression that he would never expose the “illusion” to his patients as long as it was working, even when he was taken for a semi-god. Could the same be true of the majority of the *qigong* masters who demand faith in, rather than rational understanding of, *qi* from their students? Likewise, Zhang Honglin should be seen as a defender of *qigong* rather than its detractor, because his demystifying practice is obviously driven by an intention similar to that of Jiang Weiqiao at the beginning of the century. On the other hand, Xie Huanzhang’s effort to situate *qigong* in the language of science can hardly be thought of as antiscientism, even though his “scientific” study mystifies *qigong*. And outside of this debate, the two ideologies in many subtle ways complement each other. Although the discourse of revival of tradition conflicts with the present socialist modernization ideology and works as a protest against its overly materialistic form, both sides negate the Maoist ideology, and both adopt strategies to cope with century-long unsatisfied psychological and economic cravings.

At present, the dispute over the scientific nature of *qigong* phenomena has not been resolved. The contestation between the two discourses, and their seemingly awkward coexistence, are a reality in post-Maoist China, a reality not only in that their ideologies are embodied in material practices, but also, perhaps more importantly, because their discourses constitute the real itself. Although the current Falun Gong incident may have enabled the scientific discourse momentarily to gain the upper hand inside China, the lingering of the debate also testifies to the strength of the embodied mystic and psychosomatic beliefs. The mutually opposed discourses of *qigong*—the one a privileged signifier of what is mystically Other to “modern science,” the other a cosmogrammar of a science in the dubious service of antitraditionalism—are simultaneously fantasy constructions of *qi* that speak in response to a particular historical condition, namely the multiple crises of Chinese modernity. Because the official Marxist discourse has leaned entirely toward the objectivism of science, the need arises for an oppositional discourse that will keep the balance. The result is a widespread revival of a host of “traditions,” ranging from the Confucian cult, ancestor worshipping, and Buddhist pilgrimages (merged with tourism) to lavish weddings. Eric Hobsbawn writes in the introduction to the book *The Invention of Tradition*:

Insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it [this past] is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the “invention of tradition” so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.

(Hobsbawn 1983, 2)

It is in this sense of “invented tradition” that the individual body of the Taoist tradition has been reclaimed. In the midst of this extraordinary waxing of “traditional” activities and beliefs, *qigong*, with its fairly recent history of construction conveniently forgotten, thrives as a self-sufficient cultural form.

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