

Oberlin

Digital Commons at Oberlin

Honors Papers

Student Work

2020

The Rise and Fall of Qigong

William J. Cramer
Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Cramer, William J., "The Rise and Fall of Qigong" (2020). *Honors Papers*. 685.
<https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/685>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.

The Rise and Fall of Qigong

William Cramer

Capstone Essay

Area Consultants: Andrew Macomber, Marc Blecher

Department of Religion, Oberlin College

April 13th, 2020

Abstract

This capstone engages the history qigong, a Chinese method of spiritual and bodily cultivation. Although similar Daoist practices have existed for thousands of years, the term qigong was invented by the Chinese military in the 1950s. Qigong exploded in popularity in China from the early 1980s to the late 90s. The Chinese state promoted, appropriated, regulated, and ultimately suppressed qigong. On one hand, the Chinese Communist Party (henceforth the CCP or the Party) wanted to measure and order qigong according to orthodox scientific and political principles, thus processing and controlling the explosion of spirituality known as “Qigong Fever.” Yet on the other hand, both within and outside the state, many people witnessed the miraculous power of qigong, came to believe in it deeply, and wanted its spiritual and religious elements to thrive. The interplay of these two approaches—to measure and control vs. to experience and believe—drove the state’s interaction with qigong, fueling qigong’s rise yet causing its fall. Ultimately, the religious elements of qigong operated on their own terms and proved impossible to control.

Keywords: Qigong; China; Religion; Spirituality; Science; Marxism; the State; Extraordinary Powers (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能); Bodies; Zhonggong; Falun Gong.

Acknowledgements

There are a lot of people to thank, but I'll continue in my eternal but ultimately failing effort to keep things short. My first thank you is to professor Cindy Chapman. You've been a wonderful guide for all of us seniors and I appreciated your stability during some of the times I was struggling. I want to thank Marc and Andrew for the long, interesting talks we had about qigong and other things. To the other religion majors, thank you for struggling through my work and being so kind and thoughtful with your feedback. I want to thank all my religion professors past and present, from Emilia Bachrach guiding me through research in Taiwan to James Dobbins patiently waiting for me to leave his office. Thank you, Oberlin. I'll miss you a lot. Thank you to my family and my friends for, alternatively, supporting me emotionally during really tough times and listening to me rant about magical powers. Seriously— Buster, Alec, Alex, Noah, thank you. I want to thank all the religious practitioners who have welcomed me with open arms as I came to study or practice myself. And I want to thank myself, too.

Introduction

Last spring, I walked down the street in front of Taipei 101 and saw a man handing out flyers and booklets. A sign stood next to him, covered in graphic images: people with fresh scars on their sides, lying on hospital beds. I took a booklet titled *Nine Criticisms of the Chinese Communist Party* (*jiu ping gongchandang 九评共产党*). I opened it and skimmed through the table of contents. The chapters read:

“What is the Chinese Communist Party?; The Origins of the Party; The Tyranny of the Party; The Party is Contrary to the Power of the Universe; Jiang Zemin and the Party Worked Together to Persecute Falun Gong...”

(共产党是什么，中国共产党是怎么起家的，中国共产党的暴政，共产党是反宇宙的力量，江泽民与中共相互利用迫害法轮功...)¹

Suddenly, I realized this person was part of *Falun Gong* (法轮功, also known as *Falun Dafa* 法轮大法), a religious group forced underground in China but perfectly legal here in Taiwan. In 1999, after they staged a peaceful demonstration in Beijing, the Chinese government denounced Falun Gong as an “evil cult” (*xie jiao* 邪教) and cracked down on the group.² Reports by journalists and the United Nations uncovered that the government was harvesting the organs of arrested practitioners to sell on the black market.³ The man was protesting this horrific violence; the people on the sign were from Falun Gong.

¹ Author Unknown, *Nine Criticisms of the Chinese Communist Party* (New York: Epoch Times Editorial Department, 2004), 2. (*Jiuping Falun Gong, Dajiyuan Xilie Shelun (niuyue, dajiyuan bianjibu, 2004)* (九评共产党，大纪元系列社论 (纽约：大纪元编辑部，2004。))

² Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 183-184.

³ David Kilgour and David Matas. “*BLOODY HARVEST: Revised Report into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China: An Independent Investigation Into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China*,” 31 January 2007. [Organharvestinvestigation.net](http://organharvestinvestigation.net); Manfred Nowak, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Addendum 19” (New York: United Nations Human Rights Council, 19 February 2008). Accessed December 18, 2019. <http://www.falunhr.org/reports/UN2008/Torture-UN-08.pdf>

But why would China attack Falun Gong in the first place? I often walked past small communities of practitioners on my way to work or class, watching them as they slowly moved between the postures of *qigong* (气功), a form of exercise and spiritual cultivation rooted in Traditional Chinese Medicine (*zhongyi* 中医, henceforth TCM). Falun Gong was just one kind of qigong, I knew— were they all treated this way? What could possibly be so threatening about qigong, practiced mostly by elderly retirees? Why did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) even care in the first place? I slipped the book into my pocket and thanked the man. But as I walked away, these questions reverberated in my mind.

This capstone seeks to answer these questions, diving deep into history to understand how and why qigong was born, grew, and eventually provoked such a dramatic response from the CCP. As I have discovered in the past year, this will not be an easy task. In addition to the normal confusions of history (for which I highly recommend the timeline and reference page listed in the appendices), the story of qigong is full of paradoxes, ambiguities, and conflicting narratives. It's often impossible to separate “real” from “fake,” neatly ordering everything so that it “makes sense.” Instead of letting this frustrate us, I hope we can let it excite us instead, pushing us to unpack this rich complexity. Yet even more difficult than the question of what “really happened,” I have found, is the question of where I “stand” on the events described (and where you should stand as well). This is a tempting but thorny question for religious scholars, and there are many valid approaches to it. I personally believe, however, that foregrounding this question prevents us from answering better, deeper ones.⁴ As such, I'll make an argument that

⁴ Closely related to the question of personal stance is that of authorial voice. Narrating is, inescapably, an act of power. With this in mind, I've tried to take an overall voice that avoids polemic from any side. At some times, my voice may fluctuate or mirror the subject I'm analyzing—when speaking from the perspective of qigong practitioners, scientists, or Party members, I'll use their respective language and tone in an attempt to elucidate things from an “emic” perspective. If I didn't take this approach, this entire capstone would be in scare quotes.

avoids normative judgements of any person or “side.” To this argument we’ll soon turn, but first it’s important to understand the historical context of the qigong movement.

Historical Backdrop

This story begins at the end of the Cultural Revolution and the start of a new era for China. China in the 1980s was in a state of rapid economic, political, and social transformation.⁵ With respect to qigong, three changes are important: the political climate became more moderate, broad ranging social and economic reforms were instituted (especially with regard to the healthcare system), and spirituality and religion returned.

Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), a more moderate leader who came to power in 1978, promoted a few core guiding ideological concepts: “seek truth from facts” (rather than ideology) and the “Four Modernizations” (agriculture, industry, the military, and science and technology).⁶ In doing so, he aimed to counter the excesses of the Maoist era,⁷ instead relying on rational and scientific thinking and policy-making. The CCP itself also changed, as Party members began to supplant ideology with technocratic solutions such as administrative networks and research

⁵ Scholarship on the transition period is both deep and broad ranging. For a study on protest and contention between workers and the government, see: Diana Fu, *Mobilizing without the Masses: Control and Contention in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); for an ethnographic account of urbanization and “modernization” that can be extrapolated to many of China’s cities, see: Andrew Kipnis, *From Village to City: Social Transformation in a Chinese County Seat* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016); For a deep dive into the emergence of a middle class “identity” and its social implications, see: Jean-Louis Rocca, *The Making of the Chinese Middle Class* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); For an ethnographic account of Chinese business culture and *guanxi*, see: Elanah Uretsky, *Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); For examining how the Chinese state channels its youth into different educational tracks to fit the needs of its economy, and the stresses of this system on China’s youth, see: Terry Woronov, *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); For more ethnographic work on unemployment and alientation, see: Yang Jie, *Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015). For more background, see: Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 698-699. I will cite Spence’s reader frequently as background, and it serves as an easy gateway into other secondary work or source material.

⁶ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 587;608.

⁷ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 611-614.

institutes (like the State Science and Technology Commission).⁸ However, the Party still needed to assert its ideological authority; it still needed to guide China and put forward some sort of normative vision, as this was core to its legitimacy.⁹ Thus, the CCP was searching for some kind of deeper principle that could shore up its claim to govern as it guided the country through dramatic change.

With regard to religion, the CCP moved away from aggressively Leninist, militant atheism and toward a more moderate stance.¹⁰ In 1982, it published “Document 19,” which listed the “acceptable” religions in China — Confucianism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity, and Catholicism — and placed them under the jurisdiction of the State Administration for Religious Affairs.¹¹ However, forms of “folk” religion outside of Document 19 had few options and faced persecution as “feudal superstition.” Moreover, according to the document, religion “would not be permitted to make use in any way of religious pretexts to oppose the Party’s leadership or the Socialist system, or to destroy national or ethnic unity,” nor was there to be religious

⁸ The growth of these extended structures of research/governance were critical to the success of the early qigong movement, as Party leaders could direct them to engage and grow the practice. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 257. In fact, the authors argue that, “Academic associations were key to organizational legitimacy of qigong groups... [whose] members were mostly state officials who retired from ministries that managed the qigong organizations, with many having been responsible for managing them. In their efforts to spread qigong more rapidly these qigong associations created sub-branches that were registered with the parent organization, thereby offering them administrative legitimacy as well as some management expertise and access to various resources.” In a way, my work is an extension of Ashiwa and Wank’s. Still, the Party members’ direct involvement with these associations immediately dispels the notion that they were merely “using” the qigong movement for political ends. Instead, it seems like from the outset, qigong had a solid number of people within the CCP who truly believed in it.

⁹ Judith Farquhar, “Multiplicity, Point of View, and Responsibility in Traditional Chinese Healing,” in Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, ed., *Body, Subject, and Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 135.

¹⁰ Lü Daji, a prominent scholar at the time, helped define “religion” as outside of Marxism in the mid-80s. See: Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 53.

¹¹ Richard Madsen, “The Upsurge of Religion in China” (*Journal of Democracy*, 21, 2010), 62. Document 19’s tolerance of religion was predicated upon its eventual death. This follows traditional Marxist analyses of religion as a phenomenon that only grows out of structural oppression. Once the economic superstructure shifts away from class oppression. For a translation of Document 19 itself, see: Donald MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 8-26.

involvement “in the administrative or judicial affairs of the state.”¹² Thus, qigong operated in an uncertain space. While it contained folk and Daoist elements, it could *not* be seen as “religious,” since that would make it illegal.¹³

Running parallel to these ideological shifts were deep economic and social changes under the umbrella term “Reform and Opening Up” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). These reforms moved China toward a relatively open, semi-capitalist economy and largely eliminated social entitlements from the Maoist era such as the “Work Unit” (*danwei* 单位). A Work Unit was not just an economic arrangement, but also a source of communal identity: an entire family might rely on it for housing, study of “Mao Zedong thought,”¹⁴ socializing, and perhaps even favors from the local Party head.¹⁵ Breaking this system led to large scale migration and social upheaval. Perhaps most importantly, workers lost their healthcare as the medical field became privatized and profit-driven. This economic and social displacement, as well as the new need for healthcare, drove many people to turn to qigong.¹⁶

¹² Benjamin Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 19. Also see Document 19, cited above.

¹³ Zhang Zhenhuan and Tao Zulai, “Today and Future — Some Thoughts on Qigong (Opening Address: First All China Qigong Science Academic Exchange Conference, Xingcheng, Liaoning Province, May 5, 1988),” in Hu Hangchang and Wu Qihui, ed., *Collected Works on Qigong Science* (Beijing: Beijing University of Science and Engineering Press, 1989), 4. Zhang chronicled qigong’s growth and influence, claiming that, “with the gradual dissolution of the dark clouds of “magic” and feudal superstition which covered it, a vast, mass-style qigong movement is now arising in China... having benefits and effects for society which are difficult to estimate.”

¹⁴ For more on the structural changes to work, see: Kipnis, *From Village to City*, 76; 94-95. Kipnis argues that new forms of work units or “work unit culture” have in fact emerged, which he terms the neo-danwei. “The neo-danwei form of [the workers’] organization,” he writes, “speaks to social desires that existed even before the 1980s and allows the continuation of a form of life in which a worker’s home and the social reproduction of his or her family are not entirely separate from his or her employment as a wage-laborer.” For the more coercive elements of studying Mao Zedong Thought, see: Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 553-554. It’s impossible to get around the fact that these forms of social organization came from direct Party intervention; as such, it could be argued Chinese state intervention in collective social identity has a long history.

¹⁵ Uretsky, *Occupational Hazards*. Uretsky describes *yingchou* (应酬), a practice where businessmen treat Party members to dinner and buy them prostitutes in order to cultivate relationships and connections (*guanxi* 关系).

¹⁶ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 1-5.

In this period of drastic change, religion—and especially “folk” religion¹⁷—provided an alternate route to community, ethical teaching, and reconceptualizations of the body and self.¹⁸ It countered the social anomie and alienation of living in a rapidly privatizing, industrializing society, helped people rethink and re-feel their cosmological place, connect with their heritage, and reclaim agency over their own bodies. Due to all these uses, spiritual practices boomed.¹⁹ This fit the historical role of religion: the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), for example, took place in a similar context and was driven by similar motives. Just like the 1980s, China around 1900 was grappling with transformative change due to modernization and its encounter with the West. And just like qigong practitioners, the boxers claimed that Daoist calisthenic techniques could transform how their bodies worked, both giving them miraculous powers and a renewed sense of cultural belonging.²⁰ Thus, the religious landscape in the early Reform period looked much like

¹⁷ The term “folk” has many connotations both within religious studies and the Chinese historical context. “Folk” religions have historically served as a foil to “world” or “great” religions, and thus tend to carry a derogatory connotation; they don’t meet the “universality” criterion of “world religions.” Moreover, “folk” religions are more likely to be seen as “unscientific” or “superstitious” by their detractors. These connotations were quite important in shaping the invention of qigong, as *everyone in the movement had to try their best to avoid them*. Qigong, in a way, was formed in direct opposition to “folk religion,” even if it shared its roots. For more on the creation of “world” and “folk” religions, see: Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Masuzawa chronicles attempts by European philologists, especially Ernest Renan and Max Müller, attempted to create taxonomies of religion based on language (or a lack thereof). This discourse, he persuasively argues, has important implications for what “counts” as a religion in the first place—and can be seen clearly in Document 19.

¹⁸ Scholar Xu Jian calls this the “Post- Maoist subject’s desire for a new body.” He argues the body in traditional Chinese thought is, “constructed not as an individual, but as a social body which varies according to norms and structures [of society].” See: Xu Jian, “Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese Qigong,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 4 (1999): 963; 968. Nancy Chen makes a similar point. She specifically engages concerns for health in the new economy, and argues that qigong provided a new approach for many people in this regard. See: Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 45. Many of Chen’s larger arguments about the political implications of restructuring consciousness through qigong practice are relevant and will appear later.

¹⁹ Yang Fenggang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 30. Religion in post-Mao China, to use Yang’s economic metaphor, was a chronic “seller’s market.” During the Cultural Revolution, clear expressions of religiosity were not allowed, and as a result, a pent up “demand” for religious “goods and services” developed (i.e., funeral rituals, healing practices, guides to spiritual development, etc).

²⁰ Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as History, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The Boxers (so named by Westerners because of their calisthenic practices) attacked both the government and foreigners. They slaughtered missionaries, including thirteen Oberlin missionaries and their

this earlier period: a wide range of spiritual practices circulated, largely outside the state's sight. They promised new ways to understand the body and the cosmos as well as personal and societal rebirth,²¹ and often culminated in mass spiritual experience through the guidance of a master.²²

Yet the Boxer movement culminated in social upheaval and a disastrous war for China. With this history in mind, the problem the CPP faced was how to eliminate dangerous, violent, “superstitious” (*mixin* 迷信) practices while preserving the health and cultural heritage of its population. To do so, the CCP sent lightly trained and equipped medical practitioners called “barefoot doctors” into rural China, breaking with earlier state practices.²³ Barefoot doctors were supposed to use both TCM and Western medicine,²⁴ but they largely marginalized the former and replaced it with the latter.²⁵ This undermined the social role of healers, family practice and transmission, and largely flipped the traditional power dynamic between healer and healed.²⁶

Clearly, then, there were tensions between these two approaches to health and spirituality. On one level hierarchical, Western approaches to healthcare became dominant in

children in Shanxi province; these victims are now commemorated by our memorial arch. For more information on Oberlin's history with the Boxers, see: <https://www.oberlin.edu/memorial-arch>.

²¹ For more on the rediscovery/creation of the body as a proxy for rediscovery of identity, see: Farquar, “Multiplicity,” 78-80. Farquar argues that “the body is contingent not only on the vicissitudes of the natural environment but also on occasions of analysis and the purposes for which analyses are made,” which are “often framed as resistance to hegemonic Western formulations of the body.”

²² Nancy Chen covers these healing sessions and forms of what she labels “psychosis” in depth. See: Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 77-106. Chen's *Breathing Spaces* is one of the core secondary sources that I've drawn upon in this project.

²³ They were called “barefoot” because, like the peasants, they would (ideally) labor in the mud without shoes before returning to the village to practice. In reality, however, given the drastic level of need, they spent almost all their time and energy on healthcare. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 576; 634.

²⁴ “Defend Chairman Mao's revolutionary health route,” a sign outside one barefoot doctor training clinic read, “by resolutely following the path of the integration of Chinese and Western Medicine.” Fang Xiaoping, *Barefoot Doctors and Western Medicine in China* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 57.

²⁵ The reason for this shift, author Fang Xiaoping argues, was that Western techniques and pharmaceuticals were simply far more labor and cost effective. See: Fang, *Barefoot Doctors*, 3 (displacement); 60-66 (for ease of learning and use); 67 (for pharmaceuticals)

²⁶ For example, doctors were expected to travel to the home of the sick and treat them there Fang, *Barefoot Doctors*, 14-16, 25 (social role of healers); 40-45 (family transmission).

official circles. When the state withdrew from healthcare during Reform and Opening Up, a techno-bureaucratic approach to health, operating from an impersonal but authoritative system—measuring, analyzing, and diagnosing bodies—remained.²⁷ These systems could reduce subversive spirituality, but Chinese cultural heritage was unfortunate collateral damage. Yet on personal levels, people everywhere were using qigong to re-feel and rethink their bodies, as well as their places in the world. Perhaps the Party could try, once again, to merge these two approaches through qigong.

A Brief Definition and History of Qigong

Etymologically, qigong is a combination of the character “qi” (pronounced chee, written 气/氣) and “gōng” (pronounced like the instrument, written 功).²⁸ Qi is a fundamental aspect of Daoist cosmology. All cosmic energy has a primordial, monistic source called the *dào* (rhymes with wow, written 道). Energy from the dao becomes embodied as qi, or “life-energy,” so qi can be described as a “bio-spiritual” substance.²⁹ According to TCM, which is rooted in Daoist thought, the amount of qi and its circulation through the body determine health, vitality, and power; a total lack of qi means death.³⁰ Essentially, Daoism (along with all traditional Chinese

²⁷ Fang, *Barefoot Doctors*, 17. To add insult to injury, this diagnosing and measuring was done largely by imported, foreign expertise.

²⁸ I’m going to maintain lowercase, unaccented transliterations of qigong, as I feel this avoids distraction and is closest to Chinese (which of course has no capitalization). Exceptions may appear in titles or specific schools of qigong like “Dr. Yan Xin Qigong.”

²⁹ For more descriptions of qi as “biospiritual,” see: Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 15-20.

³⁰ For an excellent discussion of health and the evolution of medicine in China, see: Unschuld, *Medicine in China*, 2010. Unschuld is a giant in the field of academic study of TCM. Unschuld describes two two qualitatively different aspects of Chinese medical systems writ large. The first is the “durable paradigmatic core,” a “fundamental explanatory nexus” which governs cause-and-effect between phenomena. In this nexus, cause is determined *inductively* rather than *deductively* in the Western sense; i.e., if a fever is caused by an excess of the fire element, and a certain food contains the water element, then consuming this food will therefore reduce a fever. The second aspect is the “soft coating,” which governs, “perceptions of the nature of an illness-causing agent... functions and structure of the organism, [and] the formulation of behavioral norms designed for the prevention and treatment of

thought) is non-dualistic: that is, there is no distinction between the physical and spiritual realms.

³¹ Because of this non-dualism, Daoist cultivation provides theoretically infinite spiritual resources that may be converted to physical energy through qi.³² These resources, in turn, carry the potential for total human perfection and liberation.³³ *Gong* means meritorious deed or service, achievement, result, service, accomplishment, and work.³⁴

As a fusion of these two terms, qigong is fundamentally about developing the body through calisthenics and spiritual practice; it is a type of “body technology” that has deep roots in Chinese history and thought.³⁵ While the term qigong appears occasionally in older sources, it first came into popular use in the 1950s when the CCP and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) promoted it.³⁶ The state viewed qigong as a tool of socialist mobilization, “putting qi to work” by drawing on previous spiritual notions of health and vitality and embedding them within a new,

illness.” These two aspects of medicine—the explanatory and the normative—are deeply intertwined. For more discussion of conceptions of qi, see: Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 43.

³¹ For more on how the concept of *qi* is tied to (and stems from) the Dao, how the Dao transforms from an undefined monistic source of energy into multiple forms, see: Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, Trans: Karen C. Duval (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 61-62. For a good general discussion of Daoist cosmology and epistemologies, and a clarifying discussion of terms like *qi*, *shen*, and *jing*, see: Ronnie L. Littlejohn, *Daoism: An Introduction* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), *xvi-xvii*; 66 (for qi’s specific role in nourishing health, especially through qigong-like exercises); and 72-74 (for a discussion of its circulation in relation to morality). Almost all discussion of Daoism must be rooted in its foundational texts, as these were continually referenced and built up throughout China’s history. The most important is the *Daodejing*, written by the sage Laozi. *Dao* means “path” or “way,” *de* means “inherent character,” “inner power,” or “virtue,” and *jing* means “classic” or simply “book.” There are hundreds of translations of the *Daodejing*. For a well referenced, scholarly version, see: William Theodore DeBary, ed. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 2, (New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1999), 77-94. For a widely influential and more literary version, see: *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought*, Arthur Waley, trans. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1956). Although this study focuses on Daoist cosmology, Confucianism also possesses notions such as the “Supreme Ultimate” (太极), the source of all things and final law of the cosmos (promoted by Zhu Xi, among others). The Supreme Ultimate determines the qi of specific objects and is perhaps as applicable here as the Dao. For more, see: DeBary, *Sources*, 701.

³² Xu Jian, “Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese Qigong,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 4 (1999): 969.

³³ Xu, “Contemporary Chinese Qigong,” 969.

³⁴ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 7; Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 5; Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 5.

³⁵ For a flushed out explanation of the term “body technologies” and their role in Chinese history and thought, see: Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 1-10.

³⁶ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 5.

modern framework.³⁷ Other kinds of qigong were more explicitly Buddhist or Daoist and were lacking these socialist undertones.

As such, the boundaries between different “schools” of qigong, and around what “counted” as qigong in the first place, were hotly contested. Most practitioners would practice one school for a while, but freely switch if they stopped progressing, creating a “floating mass” of practitioners.³⁸ Qigong evolved and grew throughout the 1980s, reaching 60 to 200 million practitioners by the mid-90s.³⁹ Capturing these floating practitioners and teaching them specific forms of qigong became increasingly urgent, as they held vast political, cultural, and economic influence. Until the rise of groups like Zhonggong and Falun Gong, most qigong described in the paper is broadly similar, was supported by the state, and thus can be considered “orthodox.”

The Argument

This paper examines how healers, Party members, the scientific community, and ordinary people made sense of qigong.⁴⁰ First, it examines three figures — Yan Xin, Zhang Zhenhuan, and Qian Xuesen — who were leading members of these three groups, respectively, and who formed a sort of coalition, leaning on each other for practical and political support. (I’ll refer to

³⁷ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 7; Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 5.

³⁸ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 194.

³⁹ The issue of counting numbers of qigong practitioners is difficult precisely because of the fluid nature of the practice. Moreover, state sources following the suppression tend to downplay the number of qigong practitioners, while sources from qigong groups do the opposite. Various estimates can be found in the introductions of *The Religion of Falun Gong*, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, *Breathing Spaces*, and *Qigong Fever*.

⁴⁰ This is very much in line with David Palmer’s work. In *Qigong Fever*, another core secondary source for this project, Palmer states, “This book will argue that what makes *qigong* special is not so much the techniques in themselves... but rather the meanings *qigong* practitioners give to them, the reasons they want to practise them, and the social relationships created between people who promote, who teach, who learn, who practise, who don’t practise, and who oppose *qigong*... To practice *qigong*, then, is not only to practise certain traditional body techniques, but also to participate in the elaboration of meanings and social relations around the goals and ideals of the *qigong* movement” (Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 7-8).

these figures and the political/administrative networks that supported them as “the coalition.”) Each person believed in the broad-ranging importance of qigong for China’s future,⁴¹ and wanted to understand it as deeply as possible.

The “extraordinary powers” (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能) of qigong masters, it seems, were especially important to the coalition. By perfectly cultivating and ordering their bodies, the CCP believed, these masters produced miracles. If they could somehow *teach* this proper version of qigong to the populace, it could solve many of the challenges listed above: the loss of meaning, the subversive nature of these cultivation techniques, the need for healthcare, etc. But in order to prosthetize its own version of qigong, the coalition had to understand it first. And in order to understand it, the coalition blended together science, politics, and TCM to create a new and powerful system of thought. Next, the coalition sought to apply this system to studying how the masters’ bodies worked. This project culminated in hundreds of experiments that meticulously measured every aspect of the masters’ bodies and sought to detail how they produced miracles. However, just as important as measuring and recording the miracles was personally *witnessing* them. There was a core, religious element to the way qigong worked. Everyone, from masters to Party members, felt this power, and wanted to preserve it.⁴²

Moreover, the experiments the coalition performed were not just for individuals, but meant to apply to all society. The CCP believed that just as ordering the body allowed for

⁴¹ Zhang Zhenhuan, the leading advocate of qigong within the CCP, referred to the movement as the transition from “the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.” See: Zhang, “Today and Future”. Yan Xin, the most important early qigong master, claimed, “The substantial qi of qigong has energies that can do work, similar to a nuclear warhead in a nuclear weapon. An organ which hosts qi is similar to a missile that carries a nuclear warhead...” See: Yan Xin, Hui Lin et. al., ed., *Secrets and Benefits of Internal Qigong Cultivation: Lectures by Qigong Master Yan Xin* (Malvern, Pennsylvania: Amber Leaf Press, 1997), 58. Qian Xuesen, qigong’s leading scientist advocate, made similar claims.

⁴² This argument highlights the *humanity* of people within the Communist Party. Often, the Party is seen as some protean, faceless behemoth like Orwell’s Ingsoc or Huxley’s World State.

miracles, so did ordering the “body politic” empower a society and allow it to recreate spiritual meaning.⁴³ In order to be “healthy,” however, the “qigong sector”⁴⁴ needed two things: a clear, measurable organization that could receive “checkups” and “diagnoses,” as well as a spiritual (or even religious) core. As long as these two elements were present, qigong would be both powerful and non-subversive. Throughout the 80s and 90s, *the interplay of these two approaches—to measure and control vs. to experience and believe—drove the state’s interaction with qigong, fueling its rise and driving it to splinter apart*. Ultimately, the religious elements of qigong operated on their own terms and proved impossible to control.

⁴³ The term “body politic” is complex and deserves some unpacking. First, conceptualizing a society as a “body” has deep roots in Chinese thought, religion and history. Since ancient times, Daoist practices had conceptualized various “palaces” within “cinnabar fields” at various points in the body, such as the heart, kidneys, and liver. These palaces were filled with officials, and many forms of meditation consisted of navigating this network. For more, see DeBary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 235-282. In the early twentieth century, despite widespread attacks on TCM, educational reformers argued that understanding the anatomy of the body was inseparable from understanding the anatomy of the state. For more, see: David Leusink, “Anatomy and the Reconfiguration of Life and Death in Republican China,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 1009-1034. In the Mao period, Mao’s bodily health and vitality also stood in for the health of the people. His historic swim in the Yangtze River at the peak of the Cultural Revolution set off a craze for swimming. See: Shuk-Wah Poon, “Embodying Maoism: The Swimming Craze, the Mao Cult, and Body Politics in Communist China, 1950s–1970s,” in *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 1450–85.

I’m using the term “body politic” with this history in mind, but also in an anthropological way. The body politic, in this sense, breaks down into the various “organs” of its public, private, and state institutions: the education, health, economic systems, government bureaucracy, religious institutions, businesses, etc. In this metaphor, state organs are the eyes and the brain, whereas ordinary people and institutions make up the rest of the body. For more on the state’s “vision,” see: ee: James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). In his work, Scott details how land reform and adopting uniform weights and measures in different contexts all made local practices “visible” and “legible” to the state, allowing it to enforce new regulations and laws. Thus, imagining a new, measurable order is a form of power. As we will see, this specific type of envisioning was very influential when it came to qigong. For the “thinking” aspect of the metaphor, see: Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 93. Douglas details how institutions and states seem to act on their own, “fix otherwise dynamic thinking processes, hide their influence, and rouse our emotions to a standardized pitch on standardized issues.” In the qigong movement, Douglas’ “institutional thinking” played out through various research organizations such as the CQRS and CSSS, which, due to their very nature as scientific institutions, strove to define and systematize qigong. The Party’s regulatory bureaucratic apparatus played a similar role in its research institutions, “thinking” in a way beyond any individual by issuing and enforcing rules and regulations about the movement. While Yan, Zhang and Qian obviously didn’t read Scott or Douglas, it seems like these approaches—creating a bureaucracy that could both “see” and “think” in order to control “the body” of qigong and Chinese society—was core to their mission.

⁴⁴ The “qigong sector” essentially refers to the intertwined network of qigong practitioners, masters, scientists, and sympathetic Party members. For more on the term, see: Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 55.

This paper traces the story of qigong more or less chronologically. Part one of the paper begins with one of the most influential healers of the early 80s, Yan Xin, then moves to the politician Zhang Zhenhuan and scientist Qian Xuesen. It looks at primary materials from the three figures—lectures, books, speeches, and personal writing—to examine how each of these figures balanced, merged, or toggled between the two approaches to thinking about qigong. A new system of thought slowly emerged that blurred the boundaries between spirituality, politics, and science. It aimed to produce a common vision that was compatible with modernity, ethical/ideologically correct, scientific, distinctly Chinese, and miraculously powerful.

Part two examines how Yan, Zhang, and Qian applied this new system of thought through experiments of “research councils” on the extraordinary powers of “qigong sensitive” people, such as masters or children. These experiments aimed to display how a perfectly ordered body, when combined with a perfectly regulated spiritual conviction, could produce miracles. The experiments were thus a sort of bridge between rhetoric and social application; they proved these new theories worked and that spirituality could be regulated, and thus paved the way for broader applications of qigong.

Part three examines the CCP’s quest to bring this way of thinking to society as a whole, and how society responded. Some qigong groups, such as Zhang Hongbao’s Zhonggong, emulated the Party’s precise, orderly qigong, but lost the religious appeal that made qigong so powerful in the first place. Other groups, such as Falun Gong, did the opposite: they made overtly religious appeals to the people, and their lack of organization made them practically invisible to the state. Their widespread resistance finally uncovered a truth the CCP had buried deep beneath its qigong ideology: that spiritual experience is inherently subversive, breaking

down all categories, ideologies, and social constructions. This, the conclusion will argue, is the final takeaway of the qigong movement, the unavoidable truth that testifies to the immense strength of religion in the modern world.

Part 1: The Coalition

Yan Xin

Biography

Yan Xin (1950-) was an important figure of the early Reform Period. He was a doctor, healer, and qigong master who developed his own school. Yan studied at the Chengdu Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine (CIOTCM),⁴⁵ one of many universities founded to systematize and “modernize” the study of TCM during the CCP’s early exploration of it in the 1950s.⁴⁶ The CIOTCM trained both doctors and masters.⁴⁷ After completing his studies, Yan quickly rose to prominence through “miraculous healing,” a common way qigong masters grew in popularity during the Reform period.⁴⁸ In 1985, Zhang Zhenhuan, a prominent general and member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sponsored Yan, helping him rise to prominence.⁴⁹ Yet despite his fame, the influence of the CIOTCM must have remained, because Yan remained loyal to the CCP and its mission to systematically understand qigong. This began the slow entanglement of science, politics, and religion that would prove to be so influential later on.

As a loyal, powerful archetype of the ideal Chinese man and qigong practitioner, Yan was the perfect partner for the CCP. His well-ordered, well-cultivated body was like a map, his

⁴⁵ “About Dr. Yan Xin.” Yan Xin Qigong, International Yan Xin Qigong Association, 2002.

<http://yanxinqigong.net/aboutdryan/>.

⁴⁶ Ashiwa, *Making Religion, Making the State*, 254.

⁴⁷ “UniRank,” Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Accessed October 28, 2019.

<https://www.4icu.org/reviews/725.htm#>.

⁴⁸ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 137-145.

⁴⁹ A prominent general and organizer of the qigong movement, Zhang invited Yan to go on a speaking tour and give lectures in front of audiences varying from ordinary people to high level Party members. He also promoted Yan through state media, journals, and documentaries. Some of this media even went so far as to rework the qigong movement in his image, describing the popular phrase “qigong fever” as “Dr. Yan Xin Fever” and its effects as “Yan Xin phenomena.” See: Jo Ann Wozniak, Stevenson Wu, and Hao Wang, *Yan Xin Qigong and the Contemporary Sciences*, (Champaign: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Yan Xin International Qigong Association, n.d., 1991), 5-10; Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 75-77.

teachings, a compass pointing toward a new, miraculous future. There were a few blank areas on the map, uncharted areas that only Yan claimed to know... but the CCP was willing to overlook this because Yan was such a powerful partner. By synthesizing qigong with the official scientific (and atheist) ideology of the CCP, Yan made qigong permissible and non-subversive; qigong was *not* religion, it was science. Yet at the same time, allying with the state allowed him to bring religious notions of faith and miracles into the political and scientific spheres. Science could categorize and measure the body, but so could TCM. Relying on science without the deeper, spiritual understanding qigong provided was useless. True understanding, one able to produce miracles and change peoples' lives, could only be reached through qigong, and qigong could only be reached through Yan and the CCP's guidance.

Breaking Science

Yan located himself on a historical continuum of Chinese healing practices that privilege the views and decisions of healers, allowing him to reconceptualize and re-order the bodies of his subjects.⁵⁰ Chinese medicine is quite different from Western medicine. Instead of relying on a singular, objective "body" which exists prior to a diagnosis, Chinese healers "create" the bodies of the subjects they are healing out of multiple, equally valid epistemological frameworks.⁵¹ The body may be seen as a reservoir of different spiritual substances, a site through which ancestors act, or an open system of elements; Chinese healers regard each of these frameworks as equally valid "tools" for determining truth.⁵² In other words, applying many layers of interpretation and

⁵⁰ Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 11; Farquhar, "Multiplicity, 2. This reconceptualization, Farquhar argues, is one of the core elements of healers' powers.

⁵¹ Farquhar, "Multiplicity," 81-85.

⁵² Farquhar, "Multiplicity," 81-85.

meaning on the body help create a better, richer understanding of it. What makes Yan unique is that while most of TCM sought to subvert Western medicine by reframing its descriptions as “symptoms” while positing TCM-related causes as the deeper “root,”⁵³ Yan brought science into his repertoire of interpretive “tools” on an equal level as TCM. If the CCP wanted to truly understand the body, it needed to abandon its obsession with science.

Yan subverted the established hegemony of Western science when it came to labelling, measuring, and categorizing the body. For example, at the start of one of his lectures, Yan’s instructed his listeners on exactly how to sit, saying,

“Please keep the head and neck straight... This way will ensure that your neckbone, or cervical vertebrae, is relaxed. Only this posture can correct the cervical vertebrae conditions. Our daily [activities] all lead to overbending of the cervical vertebrae from its natural curvature, which in turn frequently makes people feel dizzy, tired, and having poor memory... [this new posture] helps to normalize *du mai*, or governor vessel meridian,⁵⁴ as emphasized in qigong traditional chinese medicine and acupuncture. *Du mai* governs the overall immune system of the entire human being. It controls human vitality, energy, and the lifespan... it governs *yangqi*. This posture automatically adjusts and enhances the *du mai* functions. It helps the *qingqi yangqi* or vital essence through enhanced energy work to bring out the *du mai* potential by itself. This makes our bodies change in terms of immunity and vitality and not get tired as easily.”⁵⁵

In the span of a few minutes, Yan repeatedly emphasized two terms: “cervical vertebrae” and “*du mai*,” both of which refer to the back and neck area. Yet he diagnosed the same symptom: fatigue, and gave functionally the same solution: better posture. In doing so he did not just argue that qigong techniques were scientific, but more importantly, he also argued that science was just

⁵³ Farquhar, “Multiplicity,” 94.

⁵⁴ *Du Mai* is the name of the channel on the back through which qi flows, one of the more important channels in TCM.

⁵⁵ Yan Xin. “Yan Xin Qigong,” YouTube video. 1:00:38. Jingui Golden Shield Qigong Austin, October 11, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHug6h3KyCE&t=259s>.

another form of labelling what qigong already described.⁵⁶ No matter whether one uses medical or qigong terminology to describe the body, he argued, the result was the same.

In fact, science needed qigong's spiritual guidance. In Chapter Three of *Secrets and Benefits of Internal Qigong Cultivation*, "The Scientific Nature of Qigong," Yan argued, "science needs qigong to resurrect itself, and through the process of resurrection and renewal, qigong will enable science to make a great leap forward."⁵⁷ Yan's rhetoric here is striking. He depicted current science as "dead," completely inadequate for addressing the needs of the country. Science was something antiquated, fallen into decay.⁵⁸ Yet when it cooperated with qigong, science could progress. Yan stated, "scientists should have a certain level of understanding of qigong and cooperate with qigong practitioners. Both scientists and qigong practitioners should, based on an *equal status and a foundation of equality*, collectively design, explore, and closely integrate basic theories, application science, and application experiments"⁵⁹ (emphasis mine). Scientists needed to respect the knowledge qigong created before they studied it, because qigong was key to science itself; indeed, qigong was the missing piece that science needed. Thus, Yan's message provided an impetus for "breaking" and reforming science together with qigong to create a new, better system of thought.

⁵⁶ The most important case of privileging scientific epistemology came from Guo Lin, another master healer, and Lü Bingkui, who worked for the State Administration of Chinese Medicine (which was under the Ministry of Health). In July 1979, Lü and 200 top officials and scientists met in Beijing, presenting various papers on qigong's potential to treat cancer or bring about miraculous physical feats. This meeting provided a "green light" for the study of qigong, and was a catalyst for the entire movement. Yet implicitly, it established that only miracles performed under the approving gaze of scientists and Party members would be valid; thousands of years of healing, done in other locations like the countryside, still were "superstition." For more information, see: David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 46-55.

⁵⁷ Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong*, 32.

⁵⁸ Could it be that Yan was consciously *challenging* the Party by drawing on Great Leap rhetoric? After all, by this point in the midst of structural reforms (1991), the devastation of Mao's policies had become clear. Could he be placing qigong itself as both the goal and method of revolution, directly parallel with Mao's ideas of permanent revolution? I'm not sure if I'm willing to go this far, given Yan's proximity to close party members. But the tension here—Yan's conspicuous appropriation of Maoist rhetoric—is intriguing.

⁵⁹ Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong*, 38.

Bioenergy and Bodily Transformations

One of Yan's core concepts—"bioenergy"—exemplified the power of this new system by how spiritual cultivation could be made physical, and therefore measurable. On one hand, bioenergy was like the soul for Yan. "Our approach to [bioenergy]," Yan claimed in his speech "What is Qigong," "should take into account the functions and ideals of the individual. What one has in his mind, the nobility and depth of his thinking, the mystic quality of his thoughts, *will be the precise character of one's bioenergy*... The special trait of one's character, especially in thinking and ideology, is *embodied in one's Qigong matter* [aka bioenergy]." (emphasis mine)⁶⁰ Bioenergy was thus quite similar to Daoist notions of qi: both were biospiritual and non-dual, tying together one's body and mind. Yet on the other hand, bioenergy was quite different from the soul: since it was physical and tangible, it therefore could be measured, classified, and controlled. Specialists could sort out different types of "qigong matter." Thus, Yan used bioenergy to bridge the epistemological tension between "measurability" and spirituality.

Understanding the paradoxes within Yan's thought was only possible through a religious lifestyle and deep, spiritual experiences. In one of his lectures, Yan explained:

Paying attention to the small things at hand, but forgetting the long term progress of a country and society is not enough... While doing and considering every action or thought, we must emphasize and produce virtue... even with grand virtue, we should accumulate more virtue. What kind of virtue exists beyond grand virtue? Mystery virtue. ... We should elevate our character to a level such that our self is inseparable from other people and subjects... This merger is accomplished through our body's skin pores, consciousness and thought processes, and the mental processes of being happy, angry, anxious, thoughtful, sad, fearful and frightened... If the concepts of great virtue, grand virtue, and mystery virtue seem religious to some people, they ought to master and apply these concepts... by doing this, one's psychological state is no longer the same.

⁶⁰ Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong*, 22.

One's outlook... on the universe has been adjusted... to a level based on high standards— a correct, complete, and scientific outlook on life.⁶¹

Mystery virtue was a kind of final, total fusion between subjects and the cosmos, breaking down all barriers between physical reality, morality, and subjective experience. It was what made Yan so powerful, providing an underlying ethic for the physical processes of “bioenergy” he described earlier. This approach was tied to a political agenda, as practitioners had to keep “the long term progress of a country and society” in mind. It was scientific and observable, “accomplished through our body’s skin pores.” But ultimately, there was an element beyond any kind of measurement, scientific or otherwise, that made qigong work: the religious one. Yan describes ego death and a total merger of “self” and “other”— both distinctly religious teachings. And he specifically disavowed religion because he knew that’s what he was advocating: a religious approach to life. Buried beneath layers of ideology that each attempted to describe and categorize Yan’s teachings was a kernel of religious teaching that had fundamental, transformative power. It promised that practitioners could reconnect to their communities that had been torn apart by the 1980s structural reforms, literally feeling each others’ emotional states. Cultivating virtue through Yan Xin’s qigong was a perfect way for China to respond to modernity on its own terms; it allowed for religious experience yet promised, “a correct, complete, and scientific outlook on life.” But people couldn’t get there on their own.

As someone who had already cultivated bioenergy and mystery virtue, Yan possessed the authority to show others the way, and his body contained a wellspring of qi to share. “The real significance of Qigong does not appear on the surface,” Yan taught, “but exists in the internal

⁶¹ Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 69-70.

absorption of bioenergy emitted by the master while giving his lecture or technical performance.”⁶² In fact, these “lectures and technical performances” were critical to Yan’s rise; hundreds of people flocked to his village every day, hoping to get a glimpse of Yan and absorb some of his qi,⁶³ and even high-level Party members attended some of his lectures.⁶⁴ No matter how much he explained his teachings and talked about the importance of science, at the end of the day, Yan had no real need for it; the efficacy of his cures alone were sufficient proof for those who he healed, just as they had been for thousands of years.⁶⁵ Science was certainly part of his system of thought as a way to explain how qigong worked. But it mostly served ideological needs, or helped him systematize and explain his teachings. Mysterious virtue was core to his power, and could only be understood after his subjects used qigong to see the cosmos from a higher, transcendent, holistic perspective—a perspective of all-encompassing knowledge and wisdom that came about through religious practice... a perspective of a master. Yan had already achieved this enlightenment, and the spiritual power deep within his body was proof.

⁶² Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong and the Contemporary Sciences*, 18.

⁶³ At these gatherings, Yan was not the only one emitting qi; people would emit and absorb it *together*. This ties into hopes for community once again, after the Cultural Revolution. For more, see: Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 145. Stephan Feuchtwang makes a similar point when discussing charismatic emission of and reactions to qi. He argues, “Ruptures and bursts of collective enthusiasm released through charisma should not be seen in opposition to tradition, but are in fact rooted in traditional hopes for transformation which present themselves as the memory of an idealized past.” Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 20. Perhaps ancient “folk” religion could re-spiritualize a disenchanting, modern world.

⁶⁴ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 75-77. In fact, these lectures created something Yan called a “qi field,” a concept that essentially entails a collective field of energy which transforms the minds and bodies of those participating within it. The fact that Party members were part of this qi field is quite important, and will be covered later.

⁶⁵ Unschuld, *History of Ideas*, 3-6.

Miraculous Transformations

Yan brought together all the elements of his teachings—scientific, political, and religious— through stories of miraculous healing. In one, he visits an old woman who was unable to walk because her legs had compression fractures. He speaks to her doctor, silently examines her x-rays, and says he will talk to her, but worries “a wrong and ominous answer” may hinder treatment. Upon entering the room, Yan pretends not to know her and asks, “We are going to the Great Wall for a hike. Are you coming with us?” She happily jumps up and hikes the wall.⁶⁶ Through qigong, China could reclaim its identity, symbolized through the Great Wall. In another story, Yan opens with, “On April 27, 1984, in the Chinese province of Sichuan, a young man on a bicycle was hit by a truck.” After discussing his injuries in a similar matter as above, Yan walks into the hospital and *commands* him to jump out of bed and do pull-ups. After being healed, the man claims, “I can now easily pry up steel ingots of seven to eight hundred pounds or carry three to four hundred pounds of steel, feeling no pain...”⁶⁷ Yan walked right into a hospital full of doctors practicing Western medicine, one of the most prestigious positions in Chinese society at the time. And with his mysterious power, he made them look like fools. In both cases, Yan’s inexplicable yet authoritative power was able to restructure the bodies of those he healed, both changing them physically and allowing them to emotionally reconnect with their heritage.

Yet Yan’s power didn’t just operate on a personal level, but could restructure all of society, to extraordinary effects. He covered this potential restructuring extensively in Chapter

⁶⁶ Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong*, 32.

⁶⁷ Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 1-2.

Two of his book *Secrets and Benefits of Internal Qigong Cultivation*. The book claimed that in children and young people, qigong increased intelligence, school ability and “social consciousness.”⁶⁸ In adults, it reduced needed sleep to 1-2 hours a night and could “eliminate fatigue.”⁶⁹ Qigong also helped women during menopause become less “talkative, irritable, and offensive” so they can preserve their family relationships, and for the elderly it brings about “effective and direct extension of life” as the best “remedy for pessimism” so they can “contribute with housework and increase workplace productivity.”⁷⁰ Other extraordinary abilities, Yan claims, can come from qigong practice, such as the ability to see oil and coal underground.⁷¹ Thus, mass qigong practice could vastly enhance productivity and social harmony. Elements that would have been especially challenging in Reform Era China, such as strained family dynamics and a concern for workplace productivity, were especially emphasized. This was one of the key elements that made it so attractive to the CCP not just for transforming individual bodies, but in reordering the entire body politic. If it adopted his teachings, all of China could become like Yan and obtain his power, solving the problems that the shift to market capitalism had caused.

Conclusion

Yan built a variety of intellectual currents and discourses into qigong. Qigong could bring about a higher and deeper understanding of the cosmos and allow practitioners to reconnect with themselves and their communities through religious experience, yet it also was scientific,

⁶⁸ Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 19-20.

⁶⁹ The book references a master who “had not slept for over sixty years” to show that “practicing internal qigong is superior to sleeping.” See: Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 20.

⁷⁰ Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 22.

⁷¹ Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 26.

material, and easy to measure and control. The tension between systemization and spirituality was overlooked because qigong was so *useful*, and because personal spiritual experience could prove that his teachings were true. Qigong, it seemed, could do everything for everyone at once. Thus, the very contradictions and paradoxes core to Yan Xin's qigong were integral to its rise, propelling him and qigong to fame in the early 1980s. Yan's approach was taken up next by Zhang Zhenhuan, the leading advocate for qigong within the CCP.

Zhang Zhenhuan

Biography

Zhang Zhenhuan (1915-1994) was a retired general who had fought in both the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1945-1949). He was one of the most ardent supporters of qigong within the CCP and on the public stage.⁷² He was also involved with the Commission for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense (COSTID), which was formed in 1982.⁷³ Perhaps most importantly, Zhang spearheaded research into and publication around qigong, founding several associations of scientists, Party officials, and qigong masters called "research councils" that aimed to systematize research into the extraordinary powers of masters.

Throughout his time engaging the movement, Zhang toggled between three approaches: viewing qigong as culture, witnessing qigong as religion, and studying qigong as science. In doing so, he nimbly defended qigong, grew a deep conviction in its power among some Party members, and established its vast potential for remaking China. Zhang's promotion of qigong

⁷² Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 75.

⁷³ Ibid. COSTID is a department that procures military equipment for the Chinese military. The implications of this will come out later and in the section on Qian Xuesen.

reflected the state's paradoxical dilemma. On one hand, as long as the Party approached it rationally, they could understand, systematize, and control even the deepest and most mystical spiritual experiences. Yet on the other hand, the miraculous, seemingly inexplicable power of qigong masters was what made qigong so appealing in the first place. While Yan turned inward, resolving this paradox deep within his body, Zhang turned outward—to science. If scientists and the Party could chart the unchartable, they could unlock and control a whole new form of power.

Defending Qigong as “Culture”

Zhang needed to know how to categorize qigong, as what “label” qigong fell under had dramatic implications for the treatment it would receive from the state due to Document 19. In 1982, in response to the rapid growth of state research into qigong, many prominent Party members led an attack against qigong as “pseudoscience.”⁷⁴ Zhang and his pro-qigong allies fought back by creating a new analytical framework with which to see qigong: culture. The state TV station produced a documentary on Yan Xin titled, “Chinese Superman,” which praised qigong, its potential for healing, and its cultural roots.⁷⁵ Despite acknowledging Yan's healing abilities and growing fame, the documentary ended with a striking statement:

“In its 3000 year history, *Yan Xin is only a drop in the ocean*. As he puts it, he is only one of the finger tips of those great Qigong masters. But *just the ‘finger tip’ starts a Qigong fever*. Qigong is neither superstition, nor miraculous medicine;

⁷⁴ The leader of this group was a politician named Yu Guangyuan. In a way, Yu serves as a foil to the entire qigong movement. Yu was an early critic of Lysenkoism, a Russian school of thought that believes ideology transforms scientific rules themselves. He instead consistently advocated for moderate political and economic policies, pointing out that Lysenkoism was a key factor in the disastrous Great Leap Forward. By the late 70s and 80s, Yu was an important political figure and thinker behind Deng's faction of the CCP. For more on Yu and his influence on pulling the CCP away from Lysenkoism, see: Li Peishan, “Genetics in China: The Qingdao Symposium of 1956,” *Isis* 79, no. 2, (1988), 233. Struggles against Yu come up frequently in the primary sources of this study. Yet paradoxically, one takeaway from these conflicts was the authority of science to determine truth, setting the stage for Qian Xuesen and the scientific apparatus around qigong masters.

⁷⁵ Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong*, 4-8.

neither a monster, nor an ancient achievement in scientific research. *Qigong is Qigong; it is one part of Chinese traditional culture.*⁷⁶ (emphasis mine)

The CCP goal was not to co-opt individual masters, no matter how influential they were. The only way to truly influence qigong was to co-opt the discourse around it, and the best way to do so was by emphasizing it as part of Chinese culture.

On a deeper level, this shows the CCP understood qigong as a religion, since studying religion as “culture” reduces its ideological incorrectness and obscures its scientific inaccuracy, thus nipping these critiques in the bud.⁷⁷ Culture is broad and amorphous; it may contain elements of history, religion, politics, morality, and even distinct epistemologies and cosmologies. Referring to any of these elements as “cultural” blurs the boundaries between these different fields, relativising them. Yet at the same time, since qigong was Chinese culture, it contained its own powerful, rich, distinctly “Chinese” truth. And as the guardian of China, the CCP could essentialize and control this truth for its own specific ends.⁷⁸ Just as Yan claimed that the religious truths at the core of qigong were subjective and depended on spiritual experience, so did Zhang argue that qigong, as culture, was greater than mere science. Thus, Zhang did categorize and label qigong as culture, but in doing so intentionally gave it a label that paradoxically defied measurement and control of science or ideology.

The Importance of “Witnessing”

While the policies of Zhang and his allies may have relativized qigong within spheres of culture or health, their *personal* perspectives were much different. It seems they experienced the

⁷⁶ Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong and the Contemporary Sciences*, 7-8.

⁷⁷ Yang, *Survival and Revival*, 55.

⁷⁸ Susan D. Blum and Lionel M. Jensen, *China Off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom* (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 10.

power of qigong much like many other practitioners at the time: deeply and spiritually. In 1982, the China Somatic Science Society (CSSS), an organization Zhang Zhenhuan had founded to study extraordinary powers, invited a charismatic qigong healer named Zhang Baosheng (1960-2018) to Beijing. Zhang Baosheng was one of the first healers to propose the idea of a “cosmic field”—a network of energy in which participation (usually through qigong practice) brought about extraordinary powers or even miracles.⁷⁹ Zhang Zhenhuan had Zhang Baosheng demonstrate his extraordinary powers to the group, which included passing cigarettes through solid objects and making objects disappear.⁸⁰ The CSSS also confirmed his extraordinary power through experiments.⁸¹ Yet neither side stopped there. In fact, Zhang Baosheng actually travelled into the Zhongnanhai compound, where all the top Party officials lived, and healed the Party members themselves.⁸² Allegedly, Zhang Baosheng travelled to the home of Marshal Ye Jianying (1897-1986), a high level general and one of the architects of the coup which overthrew the Gang of Four and put Deng Xiaoping in power, who had fallen ill with a respiratory illness.⁸³ Zhang emitted *qi*, stroked Ye’s chest, and revealed in his palm a handful of phlegm. He had extracted it from Ye’s throat. Party members participated in Zhang Baosheng’s *qi* field, to extraordinary effect.

It would be easy to write off these stories as propaganda, concocted by Zhang Zhenhuan for his own political motives. But it seems this argument runs into several problems. First,

⁷⁹ Wu Xianghong, *Paranormal in China*, The Sceptical Inquirer, March 1, 1995. https://skepticalinquirer.org/newsletter/paranormal_in_china/. Yan Xin clearly built on Zhang Hongbao’s notion by promoting “participatory *qi* fields.”

⁸⁰ Pamer, *Qigong Fever*, 72-75.

⁸¹ Song Kongzhi et al., “Research into Paranormal Ability to Break Through Spatial Barriers” in, “Chinese Journal of Somatic Science,” Vol 1, No. 1, (Beijing: China Somatic Science Editorial Department, 1990). These experiments are the focus of Part Two.

⁸² Pamer, *Qigong Fever*, 74.

⁸³ Pamer, *Qigong Fever*, 74.

advocating for qigong during the “Four Modernizations” era was not a politically advantageous move. Zhang had little to gain from devoting himself to a movement that ran so counter to “seeking truth from facts.” Second, and perhaps more importantly, taking this perspective dehumanizes Zhang, turning him into a sort of machiavellian figure only out to manipulate others. There is no greater, fundamental mistake than assuming without evidence that the leaders of a country don’t care about the country they run, and that they only pursue narrow self-interest.

⁸⁴ Why would Zhang experience qigong differently than the thousands of other practitioners at the time? A more plausible explanation for Zhang’s actions is simply that he was moved by qigong’s power and thought it could be useful for China. The nexus of belief, spiritual practice, and miraculous events is deep and complex; perhaps Zhang, like others, truly felt that he had witnessed these powers.

Building, Guiding, and Controlling Qigong

This is not to say that Zhang submitted himself to the authority of healers like Yan or Zhang Baosheng. Rather, by bringing traditional Chinese religious practices back under the purview of the state, he could guide their development. Zhang genuinely believed qigong could be measured, ordered, and controlled; his belief in qigong’s current power was tied to his belief in its potential. If qigong operated within the CCP’s ideological and scientific framework, then the CCP was its rightful inheritor and guardian.⁸⁵ As early as 1972, leaders within the People’s

⁸⁴ My thanks to professor Darko Opoku for pointing this out. He was talking about leaders in postcolonial African states, but I often find it applies to China as well.

⁸⁵ This is in disagreement with Palmer’s vision of qigong’s ideological structure, which envisions scientism and marxism coming together to form a “utopian vision” for society (see the graphic in: Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 104-105). I believe both the different agendas and epistemological frameworks of actors involved prevented any coherent, unified direction toward a unitary utopian vision. Or, in other words, utopia wasn’t necessarily a *goal* of

Liberation Army (PLA) were attempting to build these frameworks. They claimed, reporting on the use of TCM in the army, that:

The [doctrines underlying] the theory of Chinese Medicine — yin yang and the Five Phases — represent a kind of original materialism and spontaneous dialectic. They are an expression of opposition to the religious and superstitious doctrine of the existence of spirits; they incorporate the understanding that the world is composed of matter; they include the knowledge that all things are related to one another and that in all things the two forces of yin and yang are present in the mutual dependence and mutual conflict. By adopting such perspectives to provide information about the prevention and treatment of illnesses, Chinese medicine has — over the course of history — been of enormous benefit for the development of our native medicine... [but these doctrines'] subjective guessing games inevitably lead [those who utilize them] to sink into idealism and metaphysics.⁸⁶

Zhang had been in the military for decades, so their conviction that the “uncorrupted” philosophical core of TCM could in fact be measured and ordered must have influenced him. It was simply that the “religious and superstitious doctrine of the existence of spirits” had caused TCM “to sink into idealism and metaphysics.” As long as one remained vigilant about succumbing to these “religious” concepts, it was possible to systematically understand and make use of these traditional Chinese ideas. Thus, the PLA’s ideological framework for understanding TCM supported the need to measure and order qigong, rather than just witness it.

To accomplish this mission, Zhang set up “research councils.” The first of these, authorized by the Beijing Association for Science and Technology in December of 1979, was the Beijing Qigong Research Society.⁸⁷ It was composed of retired, qigong-practicing CCP officials

the movement, it was just one of its many implications. The goal was to understand qigong for its own sake, on its own terms.

⁸⁶ Author unknown, “Report to the Committee of the Department of Hygiene under the Department of Logistics of the Army Unit Canton,” (Location unknown: PLA, 1972), p7, in Unschuld, *History of Ideas*, 253.

⁸⁷ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 57.

and scientific researchers.⁸⁸ In September of 1981, Liu Guizhen, Guo Lin, as well as 120 masters and scientists met to found the All-China Qigong Research Society (ACQRS).⁸⁹ By early 1986, the number of research councils had proliferated greatly, resulting in the founding of the most well funded and supported institution yet: the China Qigong Science Research Society (CQRS). (The group eventually dropped “science” from its name.)⁹⁰ Zhang was president. In 1987, he also founded the Chinese Somatic Science Society (CSSS), which specifically investigated “extraordinary powers” (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能).⁹¹ Of these organizations, the CQRS and CSSS were most important.

Yet although these research councils were allegedly scientific institutions, from the outset they drew on both political ideology and spiritual experience. At his marking the opening of the CSSS, Zhang put forward a vision for the study of qigong:

Our work is guided by the philosophy of Marxism. How is it led? This should be very specific... when it cannot be explained in terms of old concepts and old viewpoints, we should create new things... Since [the study of qigong] is from qualitative to quantitative, the researchers themselves must have personal practical experience in the things they are researching... If you are doing research in human paranormal abilities, it would be best if you possessed paranormal abilities yourself...⁹²

Zhang argued that all those involved in qigong needed to have spiritual experiences to truly understand how qigong worked. This paralleled Yan’s assertion that his spiritual cultivation unlocked an incomprehensible “mystery virtue.” Spirituality, even within a

⁸⁸ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 57.

⁸⁹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 57.

⁹⁰ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 75-76. Institutions that published qigong-related work include: the Guangdong Science Research Society, ACQRS, Shanghai municipal government, Beihaide “Qigong Hospital,” and the Beijing Qigong Research Society.

⁹¹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 77.

⁹² Zhang Zhenhuan, “The Working Task of the Chinese Society of Somatic Science,” in “Chinese Journal of Somatic Science,” Vol 1, No. 1, (Beijing: China Somatic Science Editorial Department, 1990). Note: from declassified CIA documents. Declassified 08/11/2000, 14-15.

commitment to marxism and science, was the key for Zhang. It allowed access to a higher plane that could bend material reality itself. Yet just like Yan's explanation of bioenergy, Zhang asserted that human thoughts and spirituality could become material, and thus, measurable. Order was still attainable. Science and Marxism could structure this spirituality, helping qigong practitioners process and understand it in the right way.

Zhang continued to build on this project, both rereading qigong itself as an expression of the materialist progression of history and expressing the need to continue framing the movement this way. This was Zhang's mission when he helped to establish the CQRS and CSSS. "Today and Future — Some Thoughts on Qigong," was delivered at the CQRS in 1987, one year after its founding.⁹³ In this speech, after drawing on the above narratives about the decline of qigong in "feudal" times,⁹⁴ he claimed that in the postwar period, "the societal content of qigong has grown and become more important. The evolution of qigong clearly bears the traces of human social development and the progress of material civilization."⁹⁵ As such, he argued,

the development of our nation's qigong profession has entered a new stage. In this new stage *it is demanded of us that we make a historical examination* from the height of human civilization. This requires us to make a realistic estimate of the course we have walked and to carry out a *strategic consideration of our future path*. The key to the problem is comprehension of "qigong" and an understanding of the relationship between "qigong" and the future development of human civilization. [qigong]... is the path from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom.⁹⁶ (emphasis mine)

⁹³ Zhang Zhenhuan and Tao Zulai, "Today and Future — Some Thoughts on Qigong (Opening Address: First All China Qigong Science Academic Exchange Conference)" (Xingcheng, Liaoning Province: May 5, 1988), 4, in *Collected Works on Qigong Science*, Hu Hangchang and Wu Qihui (eds), (Beijing: Beijing University of Science and Engineering Press, February 1989). Note: from declassified CIA documents. Declassified 08/10/2000.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 4, 8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

Zhang was not stressing this study of the past to bring about some abstract, intellectual understanding of qigong's history. Getting qigong's history "correct" was strategic in that it oriented the CCP's attempts to control the future production of knowledge about it. This way, always aware of the potential for TCM to regain its religious component (as it did from Yan Xin), the CCP could repurpose it for socialist mass mobilization.⁹⁷

Conclusion

Zhang clearly possessed a deep conviction in the power of qigong. The political climate, however, forced him to define it in multiple, overlapping and contradictory ways. To defend it against attacks from the CCP and to control the discourse around it, he called it "culture," not religion. In scientific circles, he stressed a personal, spiritual understanding of it. Yet on a societal level, order was key. In each case, Zhang understood the *realpolitik* of measuring and systematizing qigong; its label determined who had power over it. Zhang thus drove qigong's rise and institutionally embedded it within the state by masterfully navigating these dynamics. Qigong was brought into the body politic and made core to the CCP's promise of a better future for its people. But its underlying religious nature remained, if not on paper, then in the hearts and minds of Zhang and his comrades. Whatever happened to qigong, no matter the criticism it received, they had witnessed its power, and they did not want to let it go.

⁹⁷ By 1991, Zhang felt that, "after several years of stable growth, the vast majority of activists who are really conducting scientific research or organizational and liaison work in somatic science have already been absorbed into our society." He completed his goal, at least administratively. Yet in his speech, "Opening Address to the Second Session of the Second All-China Academic Symposium of the Chinese Society for Somatic Science," he also stressed that scientists themselves ought to make qigong research their main focus and devote more serious time to it, rather than seeing it as a side job.

This will come out further in the section on the experiments themselves.

Qian Xuesen

Biography

The final discursive thread that we must trace is science, the final character, the enigmatic rocket scientist Qian Xuesen (1911-2009). Qian's personal transformation, from an American scientist to a political player in the CCP, was striking. He was born in China, but attended MIT on a grant, after which his professional development blossomed, culminating in his work on the Manhattan Project under the auspices of the U.S. government.⁹⁸ During the "Red Scare" of the 1950s, Qian was accused of being a Communist.⁹⁹ He decided to return to China, but was detained for five years before he was eventually released.¹⁰⁰

This experience, along with living in isolation in a tumultuous China, must have changed Qian, because he quickly entered into the complex game of CCP politics (he eventually reached the Central Committee, a group of about a dozen most powerful decision makers in the Party) and developed a close personal relationship with Chairman Mao.¹⁰¹ Qian preached the "Party line" to other scientists, going so far as to publish a "self criticism"¹⁰² that focused on his own "bourgeois thoughts," although this decision probably increased his ideological credentials.¹⁰³ His paper outlining a potential 20-fold increase in grain production won him favor with the Party

⁹⁸ Iris Chan, *Thread of the Silkworm*, (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 35. The grant he received was a "Boxer Indemnity Scholarship," which sent Chinese students to the United States (mostly MIT), as a form of reparations for American Imperialism during the 1890s and 1900s.

⁹⁹ Chan, *Thread*, 158-172.

¹⁰⁰ Author unknown, "Tsien Hsue-Shen Dies," (California: Caltech Times, 2009).

https://web.archive.org/web/20100612190920/http://today.caltech.edu/today/story-display.tcl?story_id=39604

¹⁰¹ Chan, *Thread*, 237-254.

¹⁰² Self Criticisms were a common political stunt during the Maoist Era. Sometimes they were done freely, but far more often they were coerced. During the Cultural Revolution, self-criticisms became extremely widespread, and were often paired with other forms of public humiliation like the "airplane posture," which forced people to stand hunched over with their hands in the air behind their backs for hours at a time. The political pressures of the Maoist era were extremely complex, yet they serve as an important pretext to this story and the "qigong boom." For a good memoir on the era, see: Rae Yang, *Spider Eaters*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁰³ Chang, *Thread*, 239.

and may have been an impetus for the Great Leap Forward.¹⁰⁴ During the Cultural Revolution, the faction Qian supported was ousted, and many of his friends were killed.¹⁰⁵ Afterwards, Qian sided with the Gang of Four, leading to a diminished status within the Party after Deng Xiaoping took over.¹⁰⁶

While before it was possible to separate the spheres of science and politics, Qian’s experiences taught him that the way they structure “understanding” could be linked; that is, ideology drew legitimacy from scientific proof, and science had to meet ideological goals. Humans were not governed by the ironclad laws of science, but were blank slates upon which anything could be created, given the proper social circumstances.¹⁰⁷ Since Qian was a representative of science in the public eye, much like Albert Einstein or Neil Degrasse Tyson, this shift had enormous influence. Suddenly, “qigong science” became not just acceptable, but a powerful framework both for the organization of the state and an understanding of the individual body. In other words, qigong became an all encompassing organizational principle. It didn’t lose its power because of Yan and Zhang’s internal contradictions, Qian argued. Instead, these were its strengths, the very things that made it true science.

¹⁰⁴ Chang, *Thread*, 240. The degree to which Qian is a Lysenkoist thinker is unclear, but the parallels are certainly striking. For more on Lysenkoism, see footnote 75.

¹⁰⁵ Chang, *Thread*, 250-254.

¹⁰⁶ Chang, *Thread*, 256.

¹⁰⁷ Steven Pinker provocatively suggests that this basic belief—the interdependence of nature and nurture, and that there are no “hardwired” elements to human nature—has served as a powerful tool for merging political ideology with seemingly objective research. A blank slate means that anything can be written on it. Qian, certainly, would fall into the group that Pinker critiques. See: Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 126-128.

Qian's Spiritual Science

For Qian, science was creative, expressive, and even mystical or spiritual. In his 1984 speech given to a research council on Somatic Science, which was subsequently published in China's biggest science journal "Nature," Qian argued that science went beyond logic, since logic was merely used to explain *post hoc* what had happened or been discovered.¹⁰⁸ Instead, at its core, Qian believed science was built on "creativity"; it consisted of "guessing," which led to a "sudden realization of the truth."¹⁰⁹ This rhetoric of sudden realization, along with the destruction of previously held beliefs and systems of knowledge, was a clear overture to popular religious themes of enlightenment in China. Qian, like Yan and his mystery virtue, possessed the ability to stand outside of a rational epistemology. Through this new, spiritual form of science, he had access to a new perspective in which he could understand everything at once, intuitively.

As a result, broader frameworks like "consciousness" had to become the true study of Somatic Science; only these objects of study bridged all systems and thus could account for the miraculous powers of qigong. Once these qualitative tools were used to understand qigong, the "data" they gleaned could be transmuted *back* into objective, quantitative knowledge. Qian claimed:

The beginning point for answering a question is from a qualitative, confused, restricted perceptual knowledge. A model is compiled using different peoples' different feelings at different times... and is used to calculate data. It is also used to combine qualitative perceptual knowledge and actually measured data a little bit at a time... This *elevation from qualitative to quantitative, from perceptual to the rational* is true dialectical materialism. First, it is material, second it is

¹⁰⁸ Qian Xuesen, "A Memorable Important Day: Address Given by Qian Xuesen at The Symposium to Commemorate the Fifth Anniversary of Research in Human Paranormal Capabilities in China," in *Research into Human Paranormal Capabilities Quarterly* vol. 2, editor: Research in Human Paranormal Capabilities, Editorial Department (no specific editor given), (Beijing: Nature Magazine Press, March 11, 1984), 5.

¹⁰⁹ Qian, "Important Day," 5.

dialectical... This method will play a role in the next cultural renaissance.¹¹⁰
(emphasis mine)

Just like Yan's mystery virtue, true Somatic Science integrated the subjective experiences of everyone involved, creating a new and powerful collective mode of understanding. This could in turn allow for a cultural rebirth. And importantly, this rebirth was the apotheosis of Marxist dialectics. Yet unlike Yan, Qian didn't view this knowledge as hidden deep within the practitioner, accessible only through individual spiritual experience. At the end of the day, Somatic Science could transform and fuse together subjective, qualitative experience and objective, quantitative data. Thus, Qian was drawn to qigong because it fulfilled a need for a kind of total order, harmonizing even the subjective feelings of the Chinese people into one giant, understandable system.

Qian's Mission: Creation Medicine

Qian believed that his organized-yet-spiritual science could allow people to gain extraordinary powers, while at the same time embedding an "orthodox" spirituality within them.

In the same speech to the CSSS as above, Qian expressed this idea, saying:

I feel there should be a fourth medicine [in addition to TCM, Western medicine, and reconstructive, organ-healing medicine] which is the stimulation of abilities which most people lack, paranormal activities. I shall call this, "Creation Medicine". We must create ourselves, *create a man superior to that created by "god"*... somatic science should study the fourth medicine."¹¹¹ (emphasis mine)

By mastering and controlling the paradox that Yan and Zhang had so struggled with, the CCP could literally reorganize the bodies of its subjects, imbuing within them the power to produce

¹¹⁰ Qian Xuesen, "Some Knowledge," 1.

¹¹¹ Qian, "Some Knowledge," 6.

miracles. This mission—producing subjects that could overcome all previous scientific and political limits to bring about miracles—mirrored Yan’s mystery virtue and emission of qi, since both authority figures (Yan and the scientists) channeled a spiritual source of energy (qi and dialectical materialism) to restructure and recreate the bodies of their practitioners/subjects.

Qian, like Zhang, recognized that such a mission was a risky endeavor, but he believed the CCP had the authority and power to undertake it and prevent qigong from getting out of control. After thanking Zhang for his earlier defense of qigong,¹¹² Qian said,

Chinese Somatic Science Research is also guided by the Party.... In the past, in the [case of the] nuclear bomb, we relied on a unified leadership, relied on a high degree of political awareness, high degree of organizational discipline, and high degree of science. This type of organized integrated operations is what somatic science needs.¹¹³

Qian was part of both American *and* Chinese nuclear weapons programs; he knew what it took to lead a successful mission. Only by centralized, powerful oversight of research into qigong could the CCP accomplish its mission, keeping qigong from sinking into various “traps” of idealism, religion, Western-ness, etc. Party leadership, control, “production,” and use of Somatic Science was crucial in harnessing the latent potential energy of the Chinese people and producing a “bomb” of national energy. Moreover, central control was crucial in protecting qigong against foreigners. “This method was the creation of the Chinese people,” Qian claimed, “The foreigners do not have it yet.”¹¹⁴ With this new spiritualized, unified, and distinctly Chinese version of science, Qian fully took up Zhang’s mission of using qigong to remake society, empowering it

¹¹² Qian, “Some Knowledge,” 1. It’s also covered by other Party members in *Research into Paranormal Activities*.

¹¹³ Qian, “Some Knowledge,” 8.

¹¹⁴ Qian, “Some Knowledge,” 6.

with nuclear bomb-like power.¹¹⁵ Thus, Qian stressed central control because he believed it could impose order on the study of qigong, controlling the direction of its development.

Conclusion

Qian's vision represented a kind of fusion of all previous discourses covered so far. Far from shying away from the paradoxes they contained, Qian embraced them wholeheartedly. The people of China needed qigong to re-understand and recreate their own bodies, and the state needed qigong to reorganize itself. Collective spiritual experience was powerful, transcending the usual limitations of science and political theory. But the CCP had to guide, integrate, and control this new and powerful spirituality—something Zhang and Qian adamantly believed could be done. The first step in starting this process, they believed, was through deep and prolonged research. It's to these sources we'll now turn.

¹¹⁵ The theme of nuclear bombs is a common rhetorical and metaphorical thread across the thought of Yan, Zhang, and Qian. Often, the Chinese people possess a kind of “latent energy” that can be harnessed, just like the power of the atom, for national military rejuvenation, ending the “Century of Humiliation.”

Part 2: The Experiments

The Experiments: An Overview

Having examined the thought of Yan Xin, Zhang Zhenhuan, and Qian Xuesen as well as the history of the CCP's engagement with qigong, we are now ready to look at the most baffling yet rich primary sources in the study: the experiments of the CQRS and CSSS.¹¹⁶ Although more of these experiments were presumably carried out and published, due to the limits of this study we will examine several “batches” of experiments published in: *Research into Human Paranormal*¹¹⁷ *Activities Quarterly* (1984), *Collected Works on Qigong Science* (1987), *The First World Council for Exchange of Medical Qigong Abstracts* (1988), and *Journal of Somatic Science* No. 1 (1990) and No. 2 (1991).¹¹⁸

These experiments fused the two approaches—measuring and controlling vs. experiencing and believing—that the coalition used to think about qigong. This carried deep political consequences. The experiments brought personal belief into science and, as Zhang and Qian had asserted, thus allowed the believer to break science's rules. The CCP had discovered a new way that qigong practitioners, and China in general, could become productive, healthy, and

¹¹⁶ In these primary sources, a few minor problems of grammar appear. Chinese has no tense or plural, instead relying on context for these meanings. However, in English translations, this often results in confusing cases of subject-verb disagreement or tense shifts. In obvious cases, I've taken the liberty of fixing these problems, so that grammatical errors or clunky brackets will not distract from the meaning of the text. In more ambiguous situations, I use brackets. Speeches by Qian and Zhang are drawn from these same sources, as well as secondary literature, but perhaps due to their more general rhetorical tone their translations fared better.

¹¹⁷ It seems likely that “paranormal abilities” is simply this translator's choice to render of *teyi gongneng* (特异功能), which I have been calling “extraordinary powers.” Throughout the sources, this translation remains consistent.

¹¹⁸ Many of the following sources, as well as all of the transcripts from experiments conducted by the CQRS and CSSS, came from a project the CIA conducted called “Star Gate.” This project, according to information from public archives, aimed to use “remote viewers who claimed to use clairvoyance, precognition, or telepathy to acquire and describe information about targets that were blocked from ordinary perception.” It seems like the CIA was carefully monitoring China's work on qigong in an attempt to emulate its results. For more information, see the CIA's summary of the archive at: <https://archive.org/details/CIA-RDP96-00792R000701080001-1/page/n1>

extraordinarily powerful. As long as they maintained faith in the Party's version of qigong (which itself relied on faith, whether labelled as "dialectical materialism" or "creativity") they could counter the economic upheaval and loss of healthcare that had come with Reform and Opening Up. Moreover, the experiments brought analytical tools to personal belief and subjective experience. They measured and ordered previously unmeasurable, spiritual elements of qigong (such as TCM) according to both scientific and ideological frameworks, claiming to reveal a new, deeper understanding about how they worked. Since qigong represented a kind of perfected Chinese culture, this meant that the CCP could define, measure, and order cultural belonging, rooting out the elements that challenged its authority. Overall, then, the experiments showed how this final fusion could produce the perfect subject: spiritually advanced, culturally Chinese, and politically correct.

The experiments all seemed to operate with four distinct steps: (1) they used scientific tools to measure and record the bodies of the subjects, establishing a harmony between science and TCM, (2) they ensured that the subject was "pure," allowing their consciousness to enter the proper spiritual state, (3) they temporarily broke down all categories and emphasized the religious power of qigong through "witnessing" and (4) they reconstructed the subject according to this new, fused understanding, thus bringing together science, spirituality, political ideology, history, and Chinese identity under a single, new, powerful order.

In the first step, science established that the previously unmeasurable—such as qi or the results of miracles—could in fact be measured. Scientific equipment was crucial for this process. This comes out most strikingly in the experiment, "Research in Restoring a Broken Leaf

Through ESP,” conducted in 1986.¹¹⁹ In this experiment, different types of leaves were torn up and handed to qigong masters, who emitted qi to mend the leaves back together. After confirming the leaves had mended, the scientists moved to advanced equipment, examining the leaves under a microscope, then *again* under an electron microscope. They then recorded careful notes about these images, especially on the “order” of cells which lined up again.¹²⁰ A similar reliance on scientific tools appears in “Research into Paranormal Ability to Break Through Barriers (1990).¹²¹ The miraculous act — causing objects or bugs to travel through solid glass containers — is recorded from multiple angles, and the scientists discuss rewatching and slowing down the film to prove there was no deception.¹²² These scientific tools aimed to collapse any distinction between “subjective” and “objective” truth. Just as Yan had claimed many years before, science and TCM were both ways of labelling the same reality.

This new “measurability” extended to the bodies of test subjects themselves. For example, in “Investigation into the “Force” in Parapsychological Writing,” the researchers constructed sophisticated instruments to measure the mechanical, thermodynamic, and piezoelectric forces that the master emitted.¹²³ And in “Analysis of Tests on the Transmission of Sensations Through Channels in Psychic Children,” scientists used a litany of devices which measure temperature, electrical current, blood pressure, pulse, and blood flow, attaching them at various acupuncture points on the subjects’ bodies.¹²⁴ These are just a few examples among

¹¹⁹ Wang Chongyuan et al, “Research in Restoring a Broken Leaf Through ESP,” in *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science* 1, no. 2, (1991), 18.

¹²⁰ Wang, “Restoring,” 19.

¹²¹ Song Kongzhi et al., “Research into Paranormal Ability to Break Through Spatial Barriers” in, *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science* 1, no. 1, (1990).

¹²² Song, “Break Through,” 57.

¹²³ Huang Jinggen et al, “Investigation into the ‘Force’ in Parapsychological Writing,” in, *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science* 1, no. 1, (1990).

¹²⁴ He Qinnian, “Analysis of Tests on the Transmission of Sensations Through Channels in Psychic Children,” in *Research into Human Paranormal Capabilities*, 40-41.

many. The deepest spiritual elements of TCM, elements masters might have claimed were only accessible through spiritual cultivation, suddenly became legible with scientific tools. The important thing here was not the actual measurements, data, or results in this first step. Rather, it was the *process* of “doing science,” a kind of performance that reproduced an “empirical” epistemological framework for interpreting the results.¹²⁵

The second step in the experiments’ progression was purifying the subject’s consciousness. This often came after the basic “qigong sensitivity” was established, but sometimes took place before it as well. “Each person being tested was ideologically prepared beforehand to ensure his close cooperation,” the first step of one experient’s methodology read.¹²⁶ For experiments on children, the scientists always emphasized that their subjects earned good grades, were obedient and well-behaved, and were patriotic.¹²⁷ Only these pure subjects had access to extraordinary powers. Since qigong science was both a spiritual process and operated within principles of marxism, according to Zhang and Qian, it was important that the test subjects understood this and thought accordingly.

The third, and perhaps most important step of the experiments was the moment in which the extraordinary power itself was demonstrated. In many ways, this moment was imbued with deeply religious components, culminating in a miraculous event that the scientists *had* to accept.

¹²⁵ In a way, looking in the mirror and thinking about how *we* view science makes this point obvious. Rarely does anyone ever truly look at raw data. This is because we feel that we don’t need to. The important thing is the framework which produces the data; we love to cite “studies” in any argument as a sort of powerful conversation ender. “Because *science*.” Since the scientific method can’t be wrong, questioning “studies” becomes a challenge to truth itself.

¹²⁶ He, “Transmission of Sensations,” 42-43; Nai Chijing, “Research into the Psychic Magnification Effect,” 41-42.

¹²⁷ He, “Transmission of Sensations,” 43. This could also relate to Yan’s practice of having children serve as a sort of host for illnesses. In a few cases, he has children urinate out kidney stones of people who go to visit him (see: Yan, *Secrets and Benefits*, 91). As ideal, pure, loyal subjects, children’s power had not yet been corrupted yet. This could also tie back to Vinyasa Buddhist practices that used children as spirit mediums, as professor Macomber pointed out.

Just like the Party members watching Zhang Baosheng perform, there was a deeply personal element to these experiments, centering on the religious element of “witnessing.” While scientists established that they could measure the “before” and “after,” they conceded that they fundamentally could never explain the “during.”¹²⁸ In one experiment on “Psychic Seal Affixing,” which involved a child named “Z” reading letters inside a sealed envelope, the scientist was forced to concede that he couldn’t explain how it worked. Instead, he claimed, “This kind of perceptual knowledge from direct observation, after repeating many times, forced the observers to consider: the envelope... was no hindrance to “Z”’s psychic abilities.”¹²⁹ Seeing was believing, no matter what. Moreover, the scientists didn’t hesitate to bring personal testimonials into the experiments themselves. “It should be noted that during the entire process of the experiment,” one recorded, “those persons being tested affected me very deeply in many ways...”¹³⁰ Just like Zhang Zhenhuan himself, the scientists professed a *personal conviction* in the power of the masters.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Again, this ties back to some of Yan’s work. As mentioned before, he broke down the boundaries between scientific and spiritual epistemologies. Like Qian, Yan claims, “Modern scientific methods do have limitations. In other words, *the whole modern scientific paradigm, including its theories, technologies and precision instruments, is very restricting...* completed qigong experiments are very narrow in scope... [and] cannot measure many of the indeterminate processes... the unobserved is much greater than the observed.” (Wozniak, *Yan Xin Qigong and the Contemporary Sciences*, 32) (emphasis mine) We can see the influence Yan exerted on the experiments, stressing the core importance of a kind of religious faith as tied to both effectiveness and a greater understanding of the miracles themselves.

¹²⁹ He Qin-Nian, “Breaking Through the Obstacles of Space for Psychic Writing and Seal Affixing,” in *Research into Human Paranormal Capabilities*, 25.

¹³⁰ Nai, “Psychic Magnification,” 44.

¹³¹ This naturally brings about the question: were the scientists colluding with the masters, lying through their teeth about the results of the experiments and merely using them for propaganda? This is definitely a valid question to ask, and the answer is probably: somewhat. But whether or not these miraculous events “really happened” isn’t especially relevant. After all, according to everyone involved they did, and this became the official line, influencing state policy further down the road. And the scientists must have had *some* conviction in the power of qigong, because why else would they risk their credibility and choose to work in such a fringe field? It’s important to keep in mind that many of those involved in qigong may have followed Zhang Zhenhuan’s exhortations to both take up qigong themselves and commit themselves personally to qigong in general. For the purposes of analyzing the motivations behind the experiments as well as their effects, then, it makes more sense to treat them as if they occurred.

The scientists were not the only ones who were wonderstruck by this concept-defying religious power. In “First Investigative Activities for Human Psychic Functions Launched on the Tibetan Plateau,” the entire village showed up to watch three children (two Han and one Tibetan)¹³² display their powers. The image of a community coming together around these children would be entirely irrelevant to a conventional scientific report, but here, it tied the entire experiment together. The empirical proof of these experiments found expression and use through the Tibetan audience; they could witness the performance and begin to *believe* in the new science and its power, and thus, tacitly, the power of the Party that created it. Thus, emotional and spiritual witnessing and personal transformation all remained core to qigong, even within the scientific and ideological frameworks of the experiments.

Yet not wanting the experiments to hinge on this religious element, the scientists instilled order back within their subjects, reordering their body according to a new, synthesized framework. The primary way they did so was by establishing the “material substance of extraordinary power.” “Material” extraordinary power took many forms, such as energy containing information¹³³ or the potential for telekinetic force,¹³⁴ but one especially illustrative example is “thought waves” and “matter waves.”¹³⁵ In this experiment, after failing to record changes on any of their devices, the scientists, “lean[ed] toward the conclusion that there is no

¹³² The inclusion of a Tibetan child builds on socialist ideology, signifying that accessing the “Chinese” identity and its corresponding extraordinary powers did not depend on ethnicity, but rather, proper moral behavior as a subject. As long as this was present, latent extraordinary power could be “activated.” It also makes clear overtures to Zhang’s mission of mass mobilization. The conclusion of the experiment claims that qigong could, “be used to *build up the ranks* of psychics... [the first steps are to conduct] an inducement study, then do repeated screening, then select those with stronger powers for directional training.” See: Authors unknown, “First Investigative Activities for Human Psychic Functions Launched on the Tibetan Plateau,” in *Research into Human Paranormal Capabilities*, 53.

¹³³ He, “Transmission of Sensations,” 41. The scientists claimed, “When [the test subjects] receive the information from the test card, which is transmitted along the veins to the brain, it stimulates those brain cells in a state of relative rest into an active state... [it] undulates within layers of the cerebral cortex.”

¹³⁴ Author unknown, “Tibetan Plateau,” 53-56.

¹³⁵ Huang, “Parapsychological Writing,” 65.

“external force” at work in parapsychological writing [that] cannot be explained using current knowledge... We envisage that ‘wave and particle dualism of nature’ may be one way to explain it.”¹³⁶ The scientists explain:

Persons with paranormal abilities transmit “thought waves” of different frequencies under different “states of excitation.”¹³⁷ When these “thought waves” come into resonance with the “matter waves” of the object being used, the “matter waves” ... will be greatly increased... [the subjects] first use their thoughts to imagine the “pen” and when the “pen” appears in their “mind”, they imagine the object on which the pen is to write (paper, tape, etc). Finally, the “pen” will suddenly write or make a mark on the paper or tape in their minds with a flash and the process is over.¹³⁸

The power of thought waves lay in their ability to creatively imagine a new reality. When the subject was in an excited state, he could bring this new reality into being; the guidance of the scientists and wisdom of TCM worked together, providing methods that could provoke this excited state. Furthermore, all of these mental processes operated within a scientific-ideological framework which the CCP created and guided; Zhang’s dialectical materialism, focused on the synthesis of seeming opposites and infused with a spiritual power (as opposed to mechanical materialism), provided the theoretical backdrop for the harmony between thought and matter waves.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Huang, “Parapsychological Writing,” 65.

¹³⁷ Similar concepts of the “excited state” appeared in, among others, the experiment on psychic children. The scientists sought to prove the materiality of information, claiming, “When [the subjects] receive the information from the test card, which is transmitted along the veins to the brain, it *stimulates those brain cells in a state of relative rest into an active state*... [it] undulates within layers of the cerebral cortex... [the substance] may be energy... [yet] must be launched repeatedly” (emphasis mine). He, “Psychic Children,” 41-42. This “active state” ties back into ideas of mass mobilization and total efficiency covered earlier.

¹³⁸ Huang, “Parapsychological Writing,” 66.

¹³⁹ Providing a theoretical backdrop for understanding the cosmos has always been part of the Chinese state’s role, from the reading of oracle bones to predicting eclipses and other astrological events. In his study on the Chinese state’s historical engagement with religion, Anthony Yu examines Confucian writings of “Anomaly accounts,” which, “not only sought to legitimize reflexively such accounts by acknowledging their unavoidable (read historical) occurrence past and present adumbrated in canonical sources, but also revealed the desire to domesticate the strange, the exotic, and the local by prescribing discursive explanation” In a way, these experiments can be read as a sort of prolonged system of anomaly accounts in Yu’s terms. For more, see: Anthony C. Yu, *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives*, (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2005), 60-61.

This focus—bringing these religious experiences back into the material realm—became explicit in the experiment on the broken leaf. The scientists claimed, “*The individual consciousness becomes the main participant in the experiment.* The so-called individual consciousness is, the author believes, the ideas of paranormal abilities.”¹⁴⁰ (emphasis mine) The scientists, just like traditional Chinese healers, were not simply measuring a body that existed prior to the experiments. Rather, measuring the subject according to these new frameworks *created* the subject’s body and consciousness; extraordinary powers didn’t just stem from a transformed consciousness, but rather *were* the transformed consciousness.¹⁴¹ According to Nancy Chen, “Thinking with the body illustrates how hegemonic institutions come to reside in the very core of one’s physical being and environment.”¹⁴² These experiments, ultimately, were about instilling a new order in the bodies of the state’s subjects, even if they took a few leaps to get there.

Conclusion

Everything was measured, everything was ordered, everything was controlled. Never mind that the core of qigong’s power depended on a deeply spiritual core and the convictions of

¹⁴⁰ Wang, “Broken Leaf,” 22. In Chinese, “so-called” (*suowei* 所谓) does not have the negative association it has in English. The scientist is simply defining individual consciousness as the source of extraordinary powers.

¹⁴¹ This way of thinking actually has deep roots in the Chinese philosophical tradition, which may have informed it. Specifically, neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (and the mind-only school of Buddhism) made similar claims that the mind constructed all reality. See: Debary, *Sources*, 849.

¹⁴² Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 13; David Palmer, “Embodying Utopia: Charisma in the Post-Mao Qigong Craze,” *Nova Religio* 12, no. 2 (California: University of California Press, 2008), 69–89. Chen refers to how qigong practice *subverted* these institutions (which I will cover later). But an equally valid interpretation of her point can take a top down approach, looking at how the state embeds these institutions in the first place. David Palmer makes a similar point. He argues that charisma and miraculous events can be understood within the context of “collective utopian expectations,” which become “embodied experiences” when a leader can link these expectations to specific feelings. Here, the experiments serve as a proxy for Palmer’s charismatic leader, but they orient the subject not just through their experience, but also scientific and ideological paradigms.

those who witnessed it. The experiments, for the CCP, were the logical conclusion of the epistemological and ideological groundwork that Yan, Zhang, and Qian laid. They put qigong on an empirical, material basis and showed its usefulness, blending together all the discourses they had drawn upon to create something extraordinarily powerful. It was time to show the world.

Part 3: The Qigong Sector Splinters Apart

Introduction

For the CCP, the experiments were not just meant to apply to individuals, but rather all society. The CCP conceptualized society like a body.¹⁴³ A practitioner could use qigong to cultivate their individual body according to a powerful yet orderly framework, thus finding spiritual meaning, achieving extraordinary powers, and becoming a loyal subject. Perhaps the state, the coalition believed, could study and regulate the “body politic” just like they studied the bodies of people in their experiments. This could maintain society’s “health,” increase its productive power, and help it rediscover its Chinese identity.¹⁴⁴ Proper, politically “orthodox” qigong practice was key to this mission. The CCP regulated the qigong sector because they believed that if it was well-ordered, it could produce a kind of ideal cultural ethos—one that maintained society’s spiritual vitality, yet was *not* subversive or challenging to the state.¹⁴⁵

However, the tension within this mission—controlling the body politic according to a rational order yet promoting spirituality—caused the qigong sector to splinter apart in the late 90s. The CCP’s fused, all-encompassing form of qigong was ultimately impossible to apply outside the lab. Initially, new groups like Zhonggong were ordered and regulated according to qigong orthodoxy. Yet Zhonggong failed. The rigorous scientific method that was supposed to legitimize Zhang Hongbao’s extraordinary powers instead undermined them. Worse yet,

¹⁴³ For a review of how I’m thinking about bodies and using the term “body politic,” as well as their history in Chinese political thought, see footnote 43 on page 13.

¹⁴⁴ This desire went all the way back to Yan Xin and the social benefits of qigong he promised in *Secrets and Benefits of Inner Qigong Cultivation*. See page 26.

¹⁴⁵ In order to understand this point, it may be useful to consider what happened when the government *failed* to intervene and regulate the practices of the body politic: the Boxer Rebellion. When the government allowed the Boxers to grow in an entirely unregulated way, it produced a violent, millenarian group.

Zhonggong's advanced degree of organization merged perfectly with capitalism, not socialism, disenchanting and commercializing the practice. Having paid good money for spiritual transformation, Zhonggong practitioners felt scammed. Even if it built upon the ideological groundwork that the coalition laid, Zhonggong could not fulfill the coalition's goals. Zhonggong was making money, not miraculous cadres. As a result, Zhonggong lost state support.

Zhonggong's collapse showed that orthodox qigong, which the Party had so meticulously constructed throughout the 1980s, had no choice but to implode under the weight of its own internal contradictions. When spirituality was perfectly explicable through science, followed an orderly economic logic, and was perfectly politically correct, it ceased to be spirituality at all.

In response to this collapse, more religiously oriented¹⁴⁶ groups like Falun Gong exploded in popularity because they foregrounded religious experience *on its own terms*, shedding the other systematizing elements that orthodox qigong relied upon. Falun Gong resisted state intervention, rejected all forms of bureaucratization, and largely disavowed the discourses (like science and marxism) that legitimized earlier schools. At the end of the day, practitioners' spiritual experiences—including the extraordinary powers of masters—defied the CCP's efforts to label and control them. Spiritual experience broke down the layers of science and political ideology that earlier schools used to process and interpret it. Falun Gong and other unregulated schools were so dangerous to the CCP, therefore, because they carried the risk of "contagion"; they could bring unorganized, radical, religious experience into society. This would allow people to reimagine themselves within a wholly different cosmic order, re-feeling their bodies and rethinking their place within the body politic. Ironically, the very element that drew the coalition

¹⁴⁶ Like all qigong masters, Li Hongzhi argues that Falun Gong is not religious. Yet throughout his works, he maintains that Falun Gong is of the "Buddha school" of qigong, and he draws on religious concepts extensively.

to qigong—a religious core that possessed immense power, but that one needed to experience to understand—fueled Falun Gong’s rise, resulting in its final conflict with the state.

The Rise and Fall of Zhang Hongbao

Zhang Hongbao (1954-2006) was an influential qigong master in the late 80s. He founded a multi-million-member, multi-million-dollar qigong group: Zhonggong. At its peak in 1987, Zhonggong claimed to have 38 million members.¹⁴⁷ For reference, that year the CCP had 46 million members.¹⁴⁸ Zhonggong is a shortened form of the school’s full name, “Chinese Qigong for Nourishing Health and Increasing Wisdom” (*Zhonghua Yangsheng Yizhi Gong* 中华养生益智功). Zhonggong had many similarities with Yan Xin Qigong: both initially drew on networks of supportive Party members and scientists within the CCP,¹⁴⁹ gave a variety of demonstrations and “qi emitting lectures,”¹⁵⁰ and outlined ascending levels of powers that could be attained with devotion to the practice.¹⁵¹ Broadly speaking, their teachings were quite similar: they represented fusion of Daoist cultivation techniques and lineages, morality, and

¹⁴⁷ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, #.

¹⁴⁸ Stanley Rosen, "The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Society: Popular Attitudes Toward Party Membership and the Party's Image," in *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 24 (1990), 55.

¹⁴⁹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 146-150.

¹⁵⁰ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 146-150.

¹⁵¹ For Zhang, these were described as “eyes” that one could develop. Each eye unlocked an ability to see and perform different miraculous feats. These eyes were the:

- 1) Eye of flesh (perceiving qi)
- 2) Eye of heaven (x-ray vision)
- 3) Eye of wisdom (seeing into past and future, bringing messages)
- 4) Eye of Dharma (telekinesis), and
- 5) Eye of Buddha (changing people’s lives with wisdom)

Interestingly, just as Yan’s highest level stems from “mystery virtue,” Zhang’s final level does not have to do with miraculous feats as much as it does with moral and intellectual ones. This perhaps speaks to the need for belonging; the highest level a trainee could achieve was the ability to personally touch others, reaffirming their humanity.

extraordinary powers.¹⁵² And Zhang followed a similar path to fame as Yan, demonstrating extraordinary powers, gaining academic and scientific approval, drawing the attention of the media, and garnering political support. Until his break with the Party in 1995, Zhang's Zhonggong was like the perfect application of orthodox qigong within the body politic, fulfilling the coalition's initial goals for qigong.

From the CCP's perspective, Zhonggong's organization was ideal because it brought regulation and standardization to the body politic. Zhonggong possessed a well-organized administrative system,¹⁵³ and it marked its practice spots with signs or banners, categorizing these spaces as distinctly its own.¹⁵⁴ Although initially many qigong groups had neither of these elements,¹⁵⁵ over time thousands of other, smaller qigong groups imitated Zhonggong's basic organizational structure.¹⁵⁶ From the Party's perspective, Zhonggong was therefore immensely beneficial. Suddenly, the Party could "see" and label different qigong groups, picking specific followers out of the crowd of previously amorphous qigong practitioners. Just like how scientific tools allowed the Party to track the flow of qi throughout the body, bureaucratic tools allowed it to track the growth and influence of Zhonggong and other schools like it, tracking positive or nefarious practices. With office headquarters in Beijing,¹⁵⁷ it was clear Zhonggong saw itself as fitting into the body politic, supporting its order and health.

¹⁵² For more on Zhonggong's exact teachings, see: David Palmer, "Chinese Religious Innovation in the Qigong Movement: The Case of Zhonggong," in Adam Yuet Chau, ed., *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 182-202.

¹⁵³ Palmer, "The Case of Zhonggong," 9.

¹⁵⁴ Palmer, "The Case of Zhonggong," 9.

¹⁵⁵ Such as the community Nancy Chen introduces at the beginning of *Breathing Spaces*.

¹⁵⁶ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 194.

¹⁵⁷ Palmer, "The Case of Zhonggong," 9.

Furthermore, Zhonggong brought the Party's qigong out of the lab, applying it in its training "workshops." This was the coalition's dream: teaching the people to practice qigong, cultivate their bodies and minds, and attain extraordinary powers on a mass scale. David Palmer explains the structure of these workshops as follows:

It was a standardized training model, with its set curriculum and manuals, replicable in thousands of stations and centers across China. The stress was on output, with quantified targets for the sale of workshops. Workshops had a highly structured organization of time, in which each task, as well as the moment of its execution, was clearly assigned in written procedural manuals. Trainers were to systematically induce participants into a state of suggestibility... for instance... lengthen[ing] one's finger by a few millimetres through mental effort [to] support the "mental force theory" (*yinan li lilun* 意念力理论), one of the elements of Zhonggong philosophy. Seeing himself able to visibly prolong his finger, the participant saw himself as already in possession of a minor paranormal ability or "Extraordinary Power"; he could now believe in all paranormal phenomena, for which Zhonggong theory provided a conceptual framework. The idea that persistence in practicing Zhonggong would allow him to acquire even more paranormal abilities would motivate him to continue the training and practice with enthusiasm.¹⁵⁸

This training method parallels experiments in the CQRS and CSSS precisely. On one hand, order was important. The "master" (in this case the practitioner running the workshop) needed to follow a clear, measurable procedure, performing each task exactly. Doing so legitimized the event; it proved that the action's underlying theory clearly applied, so long as the preconditions were met. Yet on the other hand, the training centered around "witnessing." An audience surrounded the master confirming for each other that the miraculous event did in fact occur.¹⁵⁹ After seeing, the trainees could believe. Once they believed, they could "activate" their latent extraordinary powers (which naturally operated according to well-systematized "mental force theory"). Extraordinary powers were the "key" that opened the subjects' minds to an entirely

¹⁵⁸ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 148.

¹⁵⁹ Although this quotation uses the singular for the trainee, there were often multiple.

new world, allowing them to transcend their bounded, ignorant ideas of physics and human bodies, awakening them to a higher reality where all conceptual boundaries broke down. The entire, precise structure of the workshop led up to this critical act. Thus, Zhang appropriated the coalition's earlier experimental framework—and the fusion inherent within it—applying it within his own organization.

However, the Party's orthodox qigong did not advance a socialist agenda, but rather blended naturally with Zhonggong's commercial goals. Making spiritual progress technical and measurable also made it easy to monetize. For example, Zhonggong charged practitioners for workshops like those covered above.¹⁶⁰ The organization also charged a fee, sometimes up to a week's wages, for attending one of Zhang's "power-emitting lectures."¹⁶¹ At these events, Zhang would emit qi energy, which his listeners would absorb before falling into trances, convulsing uncontrollably, dancing, yelling, and otherwise undergoing intense spiritual experiences.¹⁶² On a bureaucratic level, spiritual and economic progress were also tied together. Progress through eight distinct stages of Zhonggong's training (which each carried their own powers) depended on how many new practitioners one recruited to the lower stages.¹⁶³ In all of Zhonggong's operations, Zhang insisted that since his qi constituted the organization's "invisible capital," 70% of profits generated by all its endeavors needed to be passed along to him.¹⁶⁴ Zhang's claim—that he possessed an economic *right* to the spiritual experience provided by Zhonggong—was plausible because the Party's earlier ideological and experimental work had ordered, defined, and put this experience in the hands of all-knowing master figures. Whether practitioners purchased

¹⁶⁰ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 148; Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, 75.

¹⁶¹ Palmer, "The Case of Zhonggong," 15.

¹⁶² Palmer, "The Case of Zhonggong," 8-9.

¹⁶³ Palmer, "The Case of Zhonggong," 16.

¹⁶⁴ Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, 75.

extraordinary powers or trance-like states, qigong was a commodity, the various schools of qigong, a market.

Zhonggong Controversy, State Ambivalence

The state responded ambivalently to Zhonggong's growth, as while its version of qigong remained orthodox, its commercialization made it seem spiritually bankrupt. Through the early 1990s, some members of the CCP and anti-qigong members of the public both began to attack it, accusing it of "quackery"¹⁶⁵ or of cheating people out of their money.¹⁶⁶ These attacks were well founded: both Yan and Zhang Hongbao, for the first time, *failed* in their "qi emitting lectures" to bring about any sort of change in their listeners. A woman suffered a heart attack at one lecture, but since other practitioners were used to seeing others convulse and froth at the mouth, they did nothing, and the woman died.¹⁶⁷

On top of this horrifying event, a skeptical journalist produced videos that explained, step by step, how Zhang performed his "miraculous powers."¹⁶⁸ Among those who witnessed these failures firsthand and knew about these videos was Hu Ximing, director of State Administration of Chinese Medicine and Deputy Minister of Health. He shifted the state's position on qigong from promotion to skeptical regulation; some masters, such as Zhang Xiangyu, whose methods induced glossolalia, were arrested.¹⁶⁹ However, Zhang Zhenhuan and others continued to defend

¹⁶⁵ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 159-160.

¹⁶⁶ It's also important to recognize the importance of the 1989 democracy movement and the subsequent crackdown at Tiananmen Square. Although too complex to go into here, the widespread pressure from civil society must have altered the CCP's thinking about qigong at every level of the bureaucracy. Just as qigong became a tool for legitimacy when merged with Marxism, it could become subversive when paired with a liberal-democratic ideology. And indeed, as we'll see with Falun Gong, the Party had become much more wary of mass movements. For more on the pro-democracy movement, see: Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 639-655.

¹⁶⁷ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 168.

¹⁶⁸ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 168.

¹⁶⁹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 163.

the movement, and appealed directly to Deng Xiaoping, who reiterated the three nos policy (which included no publication of materials critical of qigong), perhaps because he had practiced himself.¹⁷⁰ As a result, Yan and Zhang's failures were swept under the rug, blocked from publication.¹⁷¹

Party leadership wanted to preserve Zhonggong, even in the face of increasing blowback, because qigong was still useful for constructing the body politic. With both its administrative structure and its teachings, Zhonggong still fit the CCP's need for order. And Zhonggong still drew on traditional Chinese ideas of the body, providing its own unique approach to healthcare at a time when the state was withdrawing from the sector. Even if Zhonggong's practices felt or appeared hollow at times, it was better than nothing, the Party believed. Qigong was a way to respond to modernity on China's (and the Party's) own terms,¹⁷² shaping what spirituality and Chinese identity looked like. For this reason, Zhonggong was still valuable. The Party still controlled the discourse around qigong, so Zhonggong (and qigong more generally) was not a threat.

Beyond Zhonggong, the CCP continued to regulate the "health" of the qigong sector in an attempt to salvage qigong's reputation, and by extension, Party legitimacy. It seems that Zhonggong's recurring crises had taught them that something was off with qigong—some element was either missing or corrupting the body politic, blocking the power that qigong was supposed to provide. In an attempt to track down the cause of this illness, the Party, led by Hu Ximing, created licensing and accrediting regulations for qigong denominations,¹⁷³ organized

¹⁷⁰ David Kelly, "Representative Culture: Official and Unofficial Values in Tension," in *China Review* 16, (1991), 1-26.

¹⁷¹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 168.

¹⁷² Kelly, "Representative Culture," 2.

¹⁷³ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 181.

qigong groups' economic arrangements,¹⁷⁴ and even purged “low quality” masters, cutting them out of the social body.¹⁷⁵ Now, *all* groups had to register with local officials, as well as post a banner at their practice spot with their certifications and state regulations for qigong practice.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, government officials began to raid local qigong book stands for illegal qigong publications.¹⁷⁷ Overall, this regulation brought previously invisible “schools” of qigong (*gongfa* 功法) under the purview of the state, allowing the state to see, classify, and then measure and evaluate them like a doctor checking a patient's temperature. Only total control could find the elements that were causing Zhonggong to fail. However, as the Party was soon to see, these attempts would prove futile. The problems of Zhonggong, and orthodox qigong more generally, stemmed from the schools' own internal contradictions—an excess of order, not a lack of it. Increased attempts at rigid order and control only brought increased spiritual resistance, driving the qigong sector into two separate camps.

Popular Resistance to State Intervention

Practitioners resisted state intervention in many ways. First, although many state-sponsored and state-suppressed schools of qigong, ideologies, and value systems competed and mixed throughout the Reform period, the mindset of ordinary Chinese people was quite relativistic, captured in the common phrase, “You do your thing and I'll do mine.” (*ni zuo ni de*

¹⁷⁴ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 169. I'm following Palmer's lead here by referring to qigong groups with different qigong practices (*gongfa* 功法) as “denominations.”

¹⁷⁵ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 175.

¹⁷⁶ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 148-150

¹⁷⁷ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 148-150.

wo zuo wo de 你做你的我做我的)¹⁷⁸ It sounds simple, but after such a prolonged period of intense ideological conflict, it made sense for common people to be wary of such grand ideas.

Another way people subverted state intervention in the qigong sector was by satirizing it. An underground publication in 1990, for example, targeted scientists, bureaucrats, and masters themselves. One cartoon depicted scientists with their heads stuck in sand exclaiming, “what is paranormal ability? It’s all superstition.”¹⁷⁹ Another depicted a bureaucrat labelled “soldier of revealing qigong,” next to an aged tiger¹⁸⁰ dressed in cadre clothing. The caption read, “Turn against one group and speak against it so another may benefit.”¹⁸¹ And a third negatively depicted a former master named Mr. Ma, whose “debunking” videos were so effective that the CCP purchased them and ran them on the state-run channel.¹⁸² Taken in the aggregate, these cartoons rejected the privileged position the CCP gave itself, and by extension, the notion that their spiritual practice depended on Party gatekeepers for legitimation. Scientists, politicians, and collaborationist masters had no place in the qigong sector, the cartoons seemed to suggest, because they clearly couldn’t understand its deeper, spiritual truth. These popular sentiments in many ways sowed the seeds of qigong’s collapse, as well as the rise of Falun Gong, later in the 90s.

Yet perhaps the most challenging, subversive element of qigong was not put forward by practitioners, but stemmed naturally from qigong practice. Throughout the 80s and 90s, a

¹⁷⁸ Ian Johnson, personal correspondence (November 9th, 2019).

¹⁷⁹ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 151.

¹⁸⁰ Tigers were common Daoist symbols of power and vitality. Thus, the old awkward tiger depicted a Communist party that has lost its power and isn’t really much of a threat.

¹⁸¹ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 152.

¹⁸² Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 67. The film Mr. Ma produced is fascinating. Disguised as a peasant, Ma demonstrates a variety of extraordinary powers to a local audience in front of a high school, swallowing glass, breaking bricks, breathing fire, holding back motorcycles with his teeth, emitting qi to a television, and more. Then, after vanishing off screen, he reappears in a Western suit and calmly explains how each trick was performed. The physical transition from illiterate peasant to a rational urbanite perfectly embodied CCP discourses on civilization and modernity.

phenomenon called “qigong deviation,” (*qigong piancha* 气功偏差) became increasingly common. During qigong deviation, practitioners would “deviate” from their normal psychological state, undergoing intense spiritual experiences beyond their control. Nancy Chen’s *Breathing Spaces* analyzes the phenomenon in depth, including several case studies.¹⁸³ One follows a student who participated in the Tiananmen protests of 1989, fled but was arrested, practiced qigong in prison, and believed he developed extraordinary powers and could heal others. The student was diagnosed with schizophrenia.¹⁸⁴ From examples such as these, Chen brings out the threat qigong deviation posed to the authorities as challenging, “the very foundations of scientific order that the socialist bureaucracy sought to promote.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, while the Zhonggong controversy revealed how the CCP’s attempt to create rigid order in the qigong sector was spiritually bankrupt, qigong deviation revealed the other half of the coin: that many of the intense experiences qigong created were beyond control and categorization. By pathologizing these phenomena, the CCP attempted to cut these practitioners out of the body politic and thus protect it from contamination.¹⁸⁶ Yet this phenomenon persisted outside anyone’s control. As long as there was qigong practice, powerful and subversive experiences were impossible to avoid.

The Collapse of Zhonggong and the Qigong Sector

¹⁸³ Chen’s main idea examines the CCP’s desire for social order in light of its pathologization of qigong deviation. See: Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 101.

¹⁸⁴ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 101.

¹⁸⁵ Chen, *Breathing Spaces*, 106.

¹⁸⁶ In this treatment of qigong, the CCP may have once again been influenced by the Soviets, who also pathologized behaviors that they viewed as irrational, and therefore subversive. See: Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 4. Starks writes, “Soviet hygienists associated mental acuity, political orthodoxy, and modernity with lives lived according to the concepts of balance and reason... strong bodies generated balanced minds that would, in turn, choose the most rational, equitable, productive, and inevitable of political, social, and economic structures, namely, socialism.”

The controversy around qigong reached its first peak with the death of Zhang Zhenhuan in 1994 and the publication of Yan and Zhang Hongbao's failures in 1995.¹⁸⁷ Zhang Zhenhuan legitimized qigong from a political perspective, maintained that its materialist and Marxist roots helped it strengthen the state, and set up an academic and bureaucratic structure that mirrored this conviction. His death, then, not only took away one of qigong's biggest advocates, but also called into question the underlying logic behind the entire structure he set up. After all, many of the local bureaus tasked with regulating qigong were more concerned with sharing the profits garnered from Zhonggong's organizational model than actually controlling the teaching of the qigong group itself.¹⁸⁸ And because the Reform period Chinese state operated off a "fragmented authoritarian" model¹⁸⁹ with many layers of discretion at lower levels, even if these authorities could measure, order, and control qigong groups, they also allowed them to buy their way into national associations. This prompted many allegations of corruption from all sides. Thus, while the CCP continued in its attempts to sponsor orderly, measurable, controllable qigong, this very interaction revealed the qigong as spiritually bankrupt.

The publication of the "debunking" videos quickly followed Zhang's death in 1995, showing the final death of the CCP's grand experiment and its claim to spiritual authority more broadly. If Party members themselves had met and been healed by Zhang, the videos suggested, they had either also fallen victim to his tricks or were deliberately misleading the public. Both outcomes were damning to the pro-qigong faction of the CCP. And finally breaking the "three Nos" policy, the ever-strengthening anti-qigong faction showed that masters outside an

¹⁸⁷ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 169-173.

¹⁸⁸ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 169.

¹⁸⁹ Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton, *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Barkley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

ever-shrinking sphere of regulation would be subject to increasingly tight controls or virulent criticism. Even teachings that weren't originally viewed as subversive, such as Zhonggong, were not exempted. Although a few schools remained legal,¹⁹⁰ qigong was pushed out of the cultural mainstream.¹⁹¹

Thus, the CCP failed in its attempt to work outwards from its experiments and build a broader ordered "body politic" of qigong. While the organizational structure of Zhonggong was not subversive, it *disenchanted* qigong, stripping away the religious elements of the practice, such as a moral framework and collective spiritual experience, that had served as the glue holding the entire movement together. Without these elements, qigong became a sham, treating extraordinary powers and spiritual experience more generally as a commodity that could be bought, sold, and instilled in the bodies of customers for a fixed fee. Emulating the Party's experiments worked at first, but quickly collapsed as practitioners resisted and subverted the authority of its systematized, progressive, bureaucratic approach to extraordinary powers and spirituality in general. On the other hand, the spiritual experiences brought on by qigong practice, such as "qigong deviation," proved extremely difficult to measure, categorize and control. In fact, the depth of these experiences suggested to practitioners that the state didn't actually understand qigong. Thus, qigong went from a form of official culture¹⁹² to an escape from it. The fused paradigm that Yan, Zhang Zhenhuan, and Qian created and promoted ended up splintering apart again; their ordered body politic fell into disarray.

¹⁹⁰ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 182.

¹⁹¹ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 174. Palmer makes the argument that qigong "failed to enter" the mainstream. However, I believe the widespread practice and state sponsorship shows that it was widely embraced and could be considered mainstream, even if it did face criticism as well.

¹⁹² Kelly, "Representative Culture," 4.

The Rise of Falun Gong

It is in this light that we can understand Falun Gong: as a reassertion of spirituality in and of itself, needing no outside validation and rejecting any outside control. Falun Gong (法轮功) translates to “dharma wheel practice” and is also known as Falun Dafa (法轮大法) or “Great Dharma Wheel Teaching.”¹⁹³ It was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi (1951-).¹⁹⁴ Although Li largely modeled his thought on the earlier masters we’ve examined,¹⁹⁵ for our purposes, Falun Gong broke with other qigong groups in three relevant ways. It rejected (1) their focus on extraordinary powers, (2) an ordered, scientific, political, and economic logic, and (3) a fused legitimizing framework. Instead, it taught (1) a broader religious perspective, (2) a decentralized, free, practitioner-centric model, and (3) a disregard for traditional Party and scientific gatekeepers. The combination of these three breaks with orthodoxy are what made Falun Gong so subversive, as they undermined all of the Party’s last two decades of work.

First, although Li did claim to possess extraordinary powers, he foregrounded moral teachings, and taught that these powers only develop incidentally through moral practice and the development of one’s “heart nature” (*xinxing* 心性).¹⁹⁶ “It is of little use for someone at a low level to acquire supernormal abilities,” Li claimed, “save for trying to employ these to show off his or her abilities in front of everyday people and hoping to become the stronger one among

¹⁹³ For a broad overview of Falun Gong that covers “redemptive societies” and popular religious movements, as well as their historical relation to the state, see: David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008). For an analysis of the teachings themselves, see: Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*. Li Hongzhi’s writings are collected in two main compilations, *China Falun Gong* and *Zhuan Falun* (which translates to, “Turning the Dharma Wheel”). For *China Falun Gong*, see: Li Hongzhi, *China Falun Gong* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1999); or Li Hongzhi, *Falun Gong (Revised Edition)* (Taipei, Taiwan: Yih Chyun Book Co. Ltd., 2009). For *Zhuan Falun*, see: Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun, 3rd edition* (Taipei, Taiwan: Yih Chyun Book Co., Ltd., 2002).

¹⁹⁴ Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 9.

¹⁹⁵ Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 123.

¹⁹⁶ Li, *Falun Gong*, 7-8.

them. If this is the case, it indicates precisely that the person's *xinxing* is not high and that it is right not to give him or her supernormal abilities." In Li's eyes, the craze for extraordinary powers was showboating, a bastardization of qigong. And as someone who understood the deeper religious truths of qigong, it pained him to see everyone's fascination with them. "Some *qigong* masters feel awful during performances and want to cry afterward," he pleaded. "Don't force them to perform!"¹⁹⁷

Li also subverted the CCP's regulation of masters' bodies and the body politic by both repurposing the Party's own scientific metaphors and bringing a broader, cosmological, explicitly religious background to his teachings. Zhang claimed,

Going further beyond, one finds the existence of a larger cosmic body, which is totally different from this cosmic body of ours... [Buddhas, Daos, and Gods in the larger cosmic body] see us just like we see the Buddhas, Daos, Gods, humans, and things in a microscopic world of a microscopic cosmic body. So they belong to yet another system, which is incredibly huge... in their eyes you're a microorganism and have nothing to do with them. That's why many of our cultivators often feel the same way when they see scenes in rocks, sand, or even smaller microscopic particles.¹⁹⁸

While scientists and Party members may have believed they could unlock vast power by ordering and understanding masters' bodies, Li revealed this to be ultimately insignificant. Having worked with the CQRS up to 1992,¹⁹⁹ Li must have been familiar with their focus on microscopically measuring and understanding the body. Perhaps he intentionally used this metaphor in order to subvert this focus, showing that his cultivators understood their relative place in the universe, rather than just the elements that compose it. For Li, the practitioner was only a grain of sand in the vast cosmos, and

¹⁹⁷ Li, *Falun Gong*, 7-8.

¹⁹⁸ Li Hongzhi, *Falun Buddha Fa: Lectures in the United States* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1997), 11-12. Also available online at www.falundafa.org.

¹⁹⁹ Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 10-11.

needed to understand themselves as such. Thus, the CCP's approach to qigong was fundamentally misguided, not because of any technical reasons, but simply because it lacked the proper *religious* components.

The religious elements of Li's teachings naturally went deeper than these simple comparisons with the CCP's version of qigong. According to Li, the body underwent deep transformation with the practice of Falun Gong. Yet paradoxically, this difference could not be detected. Li wrote that after sufficient practice, the body was:

...no longer composed of its original substances, as it has undergone a change in its fundamental properties. But cultivators live and cultivate among everyday people and they can't disrupt the way human society is. So this kind of change alters neither the body's original molecular structure nor the sequence in which its molecules are arranged; it just changes the original molecular composition... A person thus transcends the five elements, having turned his or her body into one composed of substances from other dimensions.²⁰⁰

Because the body was socially embedded, the standards with which society measured it would not be able to capture its change. On the surface, order would remain. But on a deeper level, the practitioner's body transcended the material world by entering "other dimensions." This emphasis on transcendence, running through much of Li's thought, shows that his conception of qigong was, at its core, dualistic.²⁰¹ This dualism ran directly counter to "bioenergy" and the harmony between "thought waves" and "matter waves"—concepts that were core to the official form of qigong. Thus, Yan's underlying conception of spiritual practice broke down the order that orthodox qigong attempted to create.

²⁰⁰ Li, *Falun Gong*, 42-43.

²⁰¹ Naturally many elements of Falun Gong, such as the cultivation of *gong* energy, require non-dual presuppositions. It would be wrong to categorize Falun Gong as *entirely* dualistic. Still, the basic orientation of Li's thought is much more towards spiritual transcendence of mundane reality, rather than a harmony between the two.

Li's second and third differences with the Party—a decentralized network and lack of concern with Party gatekeepers—further subverted government control. Unlike other qigong groups, Falun Gong was not very hierarchical, nor did it cost anything. Practitioners were encouraged to study Li's books and practice on their own. After their fall from grace in 1992, the group claimed that there were no offices or administrative systems like Zhonggong's (or the Communist Party's), and that they had officially disbanded.²⁰² Moreover, Falun Gong also took special care not to commercialize their teaching, prohibiting fees for healing.²⁰³ In the aggregate, these activities aimed to make Falun Gong “invisible” to the state.

As a result, Falun Gong broke away from government control and eventually protested their influence in qigong, with tragic results. After Zhonggong's collapse, the State Sports Commission released an accreditation process for various qigong groups. They had to fill out forms on the origins, history, and content of their teaching (*gongfa* 功法), provide copies of books and materials, submit “scientific proof” of their school's health benefits (with at least 30 medical histories), and finally meet the committee in person.²⁰⁴ While some smaller qigong groups thus received accreditation, Zhonggong and Falun Gong were left off the list.²⁰⁵ After all, there was nothing to regulate; Falun Gong had no “body” of organization, and Li had no desire to lower himself to the Party's level anyway. What the Party couldn't measure, regulate, and control, it feared. This is the core reason behind the suppression of Falun Gong after its 1999 Zhongnanhai demonstration.

²⁰² James Tong, "An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong: Structure, Communications, Financing," in *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002), 642. Tong makes the solid point that Falun Gong was incentivized to depict itself this way, whereas the CCP was incentivized to depict it as an organization (so that it could declare it illegal).

²⁰³ Tong, "An Organizational Analysis," 637 (esp. footnote 4).

²⁰⁴ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 182.

²⁰⁵ Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 182.

Thus, Falun Gong was the final death of the Party's dream for qigong. It revealed that despite the Party's past two decades of work, orderly regulation and powerful spirituality were incompatible. After 1999, qigong entered a new phase of conflict, radicalization, and suppression. Official forms of qigong were brought into the state, medicalized, and stripped of any potentially subversive elements. Falun Gong, meanwhile, was suppressed as an evil cult in China, but proliferated throughout the world and continues to advocate for its cause. There is plenty of scholarship on this period,²⁰⁶ so there is no need to go into its dynamics here. The powerful qigong that could allow people to bend steel rods, connect China back to its cultural roots, provide for the health of millions of practitioners, bring about a scientific revolution, mobilize society to achieve utopia, and bring about a new cosmic order was dead. So it's here that, for our intents and purposes, the story must end.

²⁰⁶ Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*; James R. Lewis, *Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2004); Danny Schlechter, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or "evil cult"?* (New York: Akashic Books, 2000); Mickey Spiegel, *Dangerous Meditation: China's Campaign Against Falun Gong* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002). There are also many reports from the United States Government and United Nations about the conflict.

Conclusion

This capstone has attempted to uncover the roots of qigong and its relationship with the CCP. It examined how leaders within the CCP built various discourses, along with their personal convictions, into their definition of qigong. Through unpacking the messy contradictions that these leaders brought to the practice, it argued that their tragic quest for ordered spirituality drove both the rise of qigong and its fall from grace.

At first, religious elements were embedded deep within scientific and Marxist thought systems, serving as a sort of glue that held together explanations of how qigong worked. Many leaders personally witnessed this element, often in the context of seemingly miraculous events, and were moved by it. Qigong satisfied a broader need for the leaders and the people of China more generally. It was deeply personal. It could help them make sense of their place in the world, harmonizing what it meant to be Chinese *and* modern *and* scientific *and* Marxist, giving them a sense of cultural belonging and tying them back to their communities after the dramatic upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. And it changed how they related to themselves as well, allowing them to understand their very own bodies and the deep, extraordinary power they contained. In tandem with this religious fulfillment, leaders of the early qigong movement maintained that they could systematically explain how qigong worked. Something so powerful needed to be controlled, and the only way it could be controlled was if it were measured, ordered, and understood first. As such, they constructed a fused paradigm of spirituality, political ideology, and science to systematize qigong.

Yet qigong's core, spiritual elements were either killed by systematization or resisted it. Zhonggong exemplified how when every element was demarcated and controlled, qigong

became commodified and disenchanting. The experiences it provoked were decried as “quackery,” “deviant,” or “schizophrenic” because the only tools that could measure them were destined to label them as such. Qigong deviation showed how subversive spiritual experiences were pathologized in this way. At the same time, popular resistance to this need for order drove the rise of Falun Gong. Falun Gong rejected *all* previous attempts at explanation, resorting to total religious transcendence as the only path to understanding. This caused the qigong sector to break apart, with masters, politicians, and scientists at odds where they once cooperated. Thus, qigong’s internal contradictions ripped it apart, with tragic consequences.

If the story of qigong seems like some strange, exotic, “Eastern” phenomenon, it might be worth doing some self-examination, because there are many parallels between China in the 1980s and America in the present. Even before COVID-19, our healthcare system has been under enormous strain due to privatization and the profit motive, just like China’s was in the 1980s. We face high costs, poor outcomes, and a web bureaucracy compared to other industrialized countries. The COVID-19 crisis has brought out these failings. America is not just undergoing a healthcare crisis, but a broader breakdown of community and cultural belonging as well. In the past few decades, deindustrialization and the Opioid Epidemic have devastated much of the country, hollowing out communities in much the same way that China’s withdrawal from state welfare destroyed Work Units. Broadly speaking, chronic instability is a fact of life for many. And culturally, the question of what it means to be “American” is just as pertinent as what it meant to be “Chinese.” Fierce debates over immigration have polarized both the political left and right, and serve as a proxy for thinking about cultural heritage, American identity, and belonging more generally. In the fields of health, spirituality, economics, and culture, many of the same

debates are raging here and now as they did there and then. COVID-19 has only added fuel to the fire.

In response to both the long term problems described above and the immediate crisis of COVID-19, people have turned away from expected sources of help, such as the government or organized religion, and have begun to seek alternative approaches to bodily and spiritual health.

²⁰⁷ Traditional religious affiliation has decreased, but those using meditation, yoga, and even qigong have increased; the number of adults who used meditation for health and wellness tripled between 2012 and 2017.²⁰⁸ Even the singer Lizzo led an online meditation session to deal with the stress of COVID-19, focusing on reimagining one's body as filled with love instead of fear.²⁰⁹ Cultural icons, Instagram "influencers," and athletes provide opinions and ways of thinking that permeate our ideas of science, politics and culture. Often, they're looked to as both models and potential sources of help. Technology has reinforced this trend.

For many people, President Trump is the charismatic, miraculous leader who has emerged to face these threats; he's like Yan, Zhang, and Qian all rolled into one. Like Yan, he reveals new ways of thinking, harkening back to a traditional, uncorrupted American culture as a

²⁰⁷ "Public Trust in Government Remains Near Historic Lows as Partisan Attitudes Shift," Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. (May 3, 2017). <https://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-remains-near-historic-lows-as-partisan-attitudes-shift/>; "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," Pew Research Center, November 3, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

²⁰⁸ Tainya C. Clark et. al, "Use of yoga, meditation, and chiropractors among U.S. adults aged 18 and over," *NCHS Data Brief*, no 325 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2018). <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db325-h.pdf>. And in another parallel to the early history of qigong, Scientists are diving into spiritual practices, producing experiments that have, for example, empirically proven the power of meditation (although these experiments have provoked many critiques from others in their fields). See: Bret Stetka, "Where's the Proof that Mindfulness Meditation Works?" *Scientific American*, October 11, 2017. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/wheres-the-proof-that-mindfulness-meditation-works1/>;

²⁰⁹ Laura Bradly, "Lizzo Leads a COVID-19 'Mass Meditation' on Instagram With One Flute, Many Crystals, and No Fear," *The Daily Beast*, March 2020. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/lizzo-leads-a-covid-19-mass-meditation-on-instagram-with-one-flute-many-crystals-and-no-fear>

fundamental source of strength. Trump cultivated himself according to the traditional American ideal, building a business empire, obtaining numerous women, and finally ascending to political apotheosis in the form of the presidency. As such, he possesses extraordinary powers, able to accomplish incredible feats—building thousand-mile long walls, achieving breakthroughs in foreign affairs, and even finding cures for COVID-19. Trump’s refusal to wear a mask fits into this picture, as there’s no way the *Chinese* virus can affect *his* body. Scientists cannot access transcendent perspective; they cannot understand his mysterious source of power, hidden deep within him. And like Yan’s early form of Qigong, leaders from various fields have united behind Trump and his ideological vision, blending together various discourses in their support. White Evangelical Christian leaders, especially, have united behind Trump.²¹⁰ Many leaders view him as a (admittedly flawed) vessel for God’s will,²¹¹ imbuing Trump with a spiritual authority much like Yan’s. America’s true roots are Christian, and in the face of drastic change, Trump will preserve them.²¹²

Following Trump is transformational for his followers, allowing them to see an alternative system underlying reality. Like Zhang and Qian, Trump has revealed how traditional, isolated fields of knowledge like science are provisional at best. Proper political ideology can bend its so-called rules into a new, merged system of seeing reality that opens the possibility for societal rebirth. Just like in the qigong movement, there is vocal opposition to these actions from

²¹⁰ In fact, similar confluxes of religion, cultural heritage, charismatic power, and political ideology have been present in the United States since its inception. For an excellent history of these dynamics, which very much mirror those of the qigong movement, see: Francis Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017). (See especially 302-319 for the formation of the “Moral Majority,” in my opinion the precursor of evangelical support for Trump.)

²¹¹ Adam Gabbatt, “Unparalleled Privilege’: Why White Evangelicals See Trump as their Savior,” *The Guardian*, January 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jan/11/donald-trump-evangelical-christians-cyrus-king>.

²¹² Tom Mccarthy, “Faith and Freedoms: Why Evangelicals Profess Unwavering Love for Trump,” *The Guardian*, July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/07/donald-trump-evangelical-supporters>.

those in the political and scientific establishment. But how could they and other “experts” understand COVID-19 when they failed to understand ailments like opioids for so long, their heads buried in the sand as people dealt with them on their own? The spiritual core of Trumpism is too powerful, and connects with people too deeply, to be discredited by these out of touch elites. Trump’s party increasingly supports this view, following his lead in attacking science, the media, and the “establishment.” Trumpism is about *experience*, and after witnessing Trump’s charismatic power, the experience is impossible to deny.

With this newfound power, Trump and his allies have begun the process of reordering the body politic—restoring it to health—according to the new framework this experience provides. Just as it was important for practitioners to first recognize and believe in Yan’s mystery virtue before they could progress, Trump’s authority is built into his new framework for seeing reality. Loyalty is crucial in this regard. As such, Trump has packed the judiciary with ideological supporters. Just like the organizations overseeing qigong groups, judges can decide which laws belong or don’t belong in the social body. Even during the present crisis, they are continuing to appoint judges who understand this new order while leaving vacant spots in the bureaucracy for officials who might challenge it.²¹³ Just like qigong, Trumpism truly is a spiritual mass movement with transformational power on both individual and societal levels. Fusing personal charisma, witnessing, and cultural and religious thought, it can transform the perspectives of individuals as well as the body politic to be in line with a new order. At first glance, it seems a Trump rally is far from the conventional definition of a religious event. But so are power-emitting lectures.

²¹³Alison Durkee, “Mitch McConnell Pressures Judges to Retire so Trump Can Appoint Their Replacements,” *Vanity Fair*, March 2020.
<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/03/mitch-mcconnell-pressures-judges-to-retire-trump>.

If Trumpism rose like qigong, will it fall like it too? Could it implode under the weight of its own contradictions, revealing itself as morally bankrupt? Perhaps COVID-19 is the event that lays these contradictions bare (like the video exposing Zhang Hongbao), precipitating a total collapse of Trump's political support and widespread social upheaval. After all, Trump has never faced such a test before, with so much at stake and so much pressure to perform his miraculous powers. A failure here could lay everything bare. But at the same time, perhaps Trumpism could go further, creating other "masters" after Trump. If it does, what will they look like? They could continue in line with their predecessor, like Zhang Hongbao followed Yan. Or, like Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong, they could break with Trumpism, claiming to have access to an *even higher* truth. How will people respond to either of these scenarios? If Trumpism collapses, his followers will almost certainly carry on, nurtured by the experiences they once had. And if new Trump-like masters emerge, will these people follow their new teachings? Challenge them? Subvert them? With such deep convictions at stake, will there be violence as there was in China? These questions are difficult to answer, a challenge to our imagination. But if qigong teaches us anything, it's that when charisma, ideology, and spirituality merge to create a new reality, anything is possible.

This spring, as I emerged from *The Local* coffee shop and walked up South Main street to class, I noticed a tiny sign in the window of *Modern Beauty Salon*. I crossed the street to look at it. "*Shen Yun 2020*," (*shenyun wanhui* 神韻晚會), it declared in bold lettering. I had heard of

Shen Yun, that it was an eclectic performance of traditional Chinese opera, acrobatics, dance and music. But I had also heard something else. Excited, I examined the sign more closely— sure enough, it was there, tucked away in the bottom right corner: “sponsored by Ohio Falun Dafa Association.”²¹⁴ This wasn’t the only poster in Oberlin. I found them posted inside *Dave’s Cosmic Subs*, *Manuel’s* barbershop, and *Ben Franklin’s*. Striking up a conversation with the cashier at *Ben Franklin’s*, Krista, I asked her about how she got her stack of flyers. “They just came around and dropped them off,” she said. “They were really adamant about me coming to see them. I wasn’t so sure about it, though. I’ve heard some things about them being a cult. Do you know anything about that?” she asked. I explained. “Oh wow,” she said, “yeah, they come back every year.”

²¹⁴ For Shen Yun’s official website, see: <https://www.shenyunperformingarts.org/spirituality/challenges-we-face/>
For Falun Gong’s, see: <https://en.falundafa.org/>.

Bibliography

- Ashiwa, Yoshiko and David Wank. *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Blum, Susan D. and Lionel M. Jensen. *China Off Center: Mapping the Margins of the Middle Kingdom*. Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.
- Bokenkamp, Stephen R. *Early Daoist Scriptures*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Campany, Robert Ford. *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017.
- Chan, Iris. *Thread of the Silkworm*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.
- Chen, Nancy. *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Chau, Adam Yuet, ed. *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Clarke TC, Barnes PM, Black LI, Stussman BJ, Nahin RL. "Use of yoga, meditation, and chiropractors among U.S. adults aged 18 and over." *NCHS Data Brief*, no 325. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2018.
<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db325-h.pdf>
- Cohen, Paul. *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as History, Experience, and Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Douglas, Mary. *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986.
- Duara, Prasenjit. "Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns Against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1. (1991), 67-83.
- Fang, Xiaoping. *Barefoot Doctors and Western Medicine in China*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2015.
- Farquhar, Judith. "Multiplicity, Point of View, and Responsibility in Traditional Chinese Healing." Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, ed. *Body, Subject, and Power in China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan and Wang Mingming, *Grassroots Charisma: Four Local Leaders in China*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Fitzgerald, Francis. *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

- Fu, Diana. *Mobilizing without the Masses: Control and Contention in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Kelly, David. "Representative Culture: Official and Unofficial Values in Tension." *China Review*, 1991. Accessed January 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23451335.
- Kilgour, David and David Matas. "BLOODY HARVEST: Revised Report into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China." An Independent Investigation Into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China, 31 January 2007. Accessed December 18, 2019. organharvestinvestigation.net.
- Kipnis, Andrew. *From Village to City: Social Transformation in a Chinese County Seat*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016.
- Laozi. *Daodejing*. In: *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume 2. William Theodore DeBary, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Laozi. *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought*. Translated by Arthur Waley. Second Edition. London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1956.
- Lieberthal, Kenneth G. and David M. Lampton. *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Leusink, David. "Anatomy and the Reconfiguration of Life and Death in Republican China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 4 (2017): 1009-1034.
- Li, Hongzhi, *Falun Buddha Fa: Lectures in the United States*. New York: Universe Publishing, 1997.
- Li, Hongzhi. *Zhuan Falun, 3rd edition*. Taipei, Taiwan: Yih Chyun Book Co., Ltd., 2002.
- Li, Peishan. "Genetics in China: The Qingdao Symposium of 1956," *Isis* 79, no. 2. (1988), 227-236.
- Littlejohn, Ronnie L. *Daoism: An Introduction*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009.
- Madsen, Richard. "The Upsurge of Religion in China." *Journal of Democracy*, 21, no. 4 (2010), 58-71.
- MacInnis, Donald. *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1989.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- *Multiple authors. *Research into Human Paranormal Capabilities Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1984). <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00792R000300330001-8.pdf>

- *Multiple authors. *Collected Works on Qigong Science*. Hu Hangchang and Wu Qihui, eds. Beijing: Beijing University of Science and Engineering Press (1989).
<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00792R000200270001-6.pdf>
- *Multiple authors. *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science* 1, no. 1 (1990).
<https://archive.org/details/CIA-RDP96-00792R000200040001-1/page/n1/mode/2up>
- *Multiple authors. *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science* 1, no. 2 (1991).
<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00792R000400290002-1.pdf>
- Nowak, Manfred. "Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Addendum 19." New York: United Nations Human Rights Council, February 2008. Accessed December 18, 2019.
<http://www.falunhr.org/reports/UN2008/Torture-UN-08.pdf>
- Ownby, David. *Falun Gong and the Future of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Palmer, David. *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Palmer, David. "Embodying Utopia: Charisma in the Post-Mao Qigong Craze." *Nova Religio* 12, no. 2. (2008), 69-89.
- Penny, Benjamin. *The Religion of Falun Gong*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Poon, Shuk-Wah. "Embodying Maoism: The Swimming Craze, the Mao Cult, and Body Politics in Communist China, 1950s–1970s." *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 5. (2019), 1450-1485.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. New York: Penguin Group, 2002.
- Rocca, Jean-Louis . *The Making of the Chinese Middle Class*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Xu Jian. "Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese Qigong." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 4 (1999), 961-991.
- Rosen, Stanley. "The Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Society: Popular Attitudes Toward Party Membership and the Party's Image." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 24 (1990), 51-92.
- Schipper, Kristofer. *The Taoist Body*. Trans: Karen C. Duval. Berkley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.
- Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

- Spence, Jonathan. *The Search for Modern China (second edition)*. New York: Norton, 2013.
- Starks, Tricia. *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.
- Stetka, Bret. "Where's the Proof that Mindfulness Meditation Works?" *Scientific American*. October 11, 2017.
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/wheres-the-proof-that-mindfulness-meditation-works1/>
- Tong, James. "An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong: Structure, Communications, Financing." *The China Quarterly*, no. 171 (2002): 636-60. Accessed March 28, 2020.
www.jstor.org/stable/4618774.
- Unschuld, Paul. *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas*, Second Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Uretsky, Elanah. *Occupational Hazards: Sex, Business, and HIV in Post-Mao China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Woronov, Terry. *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Wozniak, Jo Ann et al. *Yan Xin Qigong and the Contemporary Sciences*. Champlain, NY: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Yan Xin International Qigong Association, n.d., 1991.
- Yan Xin, *Secrets and Benefits of Internal Qigong Cultivation: Lectures by Qigong Master Yan Xin*. Hui Lin et. al., eds. Malvern, Pennsylvania: Amber Leaf Press, 1997.
<http://yanxinqigong.net/aboutdryan/>.
- Yan Xin. "Yan Xin Qigong," YouTube video. 1:00:38. Jingui Golden Shield Qigong Austin, October 11, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHug6h3KyCE&t=259s>.
- Yang, Fenggang. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012.
- Yang, Jie. *Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Yang, Rae. *Spider Eaters*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- Yu, Anthony C. *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives*. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2005.
- "About Dr. Yan Xin." Yan Xin Qigong. International Yan Xin Qigong Association, 2002.
<http://yanxinqigong.net/aboutdryan/>.

Nine Criticisms of the Chinese Communist Party. New York: Epoch Times Editorial Department, 2004. (*Jiuping Falun Gong, Dajiyuan Xilie Shelun (niuyue, dajiyuan bianjibu, 2004)* (九评共产党, 大纪元系列社论 (纽约: 大纪元编辑部, 2004.))

“Public Trust in Government Remains Near Historic Lows as Partisan Attitudes Shift.” Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. May 3, 2017.
<https://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-remains-near-historic-lows-as-partisan-attitudes-shift/>

“UniRank.” Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Accessed October 28, 2019. <https://www.4icu.org/reviews/725.htm#>.

“U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.” Pew Research Center. November 3, 2015.
<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>

* Sources indicated with an asterisk are from CIA translations. Citation material for these sources is somewhat unclear, so I would encourage the reader to use the links and look at the documents themselves.

Appendices

Reference Page

Politicians/Scientists

Mao Zedong: Revolutionary and leader of the Chinese Communist Party. After defeating the Nationalists in 1949, held total power in the government. Initiated the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), an attempt to rapidly industrialize China that failed and resulted in mass starvation. Also led the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a totalitarian, mass-style campaign of violence and terror that sought to wipe out China's past, "rightist" thought, and anything else that undermined the CCP, replacing it with Mao Zedong Thought. Died in 1976.

Deng Xiaoping: Became paramount leader after Mao, ousting Gang of Four (Maoist faction). Moderated party, introduced market mechanisms and new technocratic elements of governance.

Zhang Zhenhuan: General and head of many departments regulating and researching qigong. Main advocate for qigong within the CCP.

Qian Xuesen: Famous scientist who designed nuclear missiles for China after expulsion from the United States. Using his weight as a cultural icon like Einstein, he advocated for qigong. High ranking member of CCP (rises to Central Committee, the equivalent of the American presidential cabinet).

Qigong Masters:

Yan Xin: Qigong master/doctor who worked with CCP in the mid-80s. Allied with Zhang, became a celebrity Master and miracle worker before falling from grace in the 90s.

Zhang Baosheng: Qigong master who Zhang Zhenhuan engaged in early 80s to perform in front of and heal Party members.

Zhang Hongbao: Founder of Zhonggong, the largest qigong organization in the late 80s.

Li Hongzhi: Founder of Falun Gong, a large qigong organization throughout the 90s.

Periods:

Maoist: 1949-1976

Cultural revolution: 1966-1976

Reform Era: 1977-2008²¹⁵

²¹⁵ The Beijing Summer Olympics are often referred to as the end of China's Reform period, and the beginning of a new, confident era for the country. Xi Jinping's ascension to the presidency, and his anti-corruption campaign that solidified his power in 2012-2013, could also be used to periodize a shift.

Timeline

1950s: First modern²¹⁶ use of the term qigong by the People’s Liberation Army. Qigong is used in military training, and Traditional Chinese Medicine (*Zhongyi* 中医) (TCM) is praised by Mao as “the treasure of the nation.”

1950s-1970s: “Barefoot Doctors” program brings Western medicine to the countryside, largely displacing TCM (despite official rhetoric).

1976: Mao Zedong dies; Cultural Revolution Ends.

1978-1979: Deng Xiaoping takes power and begins a more moderate period of governance. “Reform and Opening Up” begins.

July 1979: A team of scientists, led by Lü Bingkui, claim “qi has a material basis and objectively exists.” Masters demonstrate their “extraordinary powers” (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能) to Party members in Beijing. The first research council, set up by Zhang Zhenhuan to investigate its military applications, follows in December.

1981: Lü and other scientists found the All-China Qigong Research Society (ACQRS), bringing together masters, scientists, and Party members for research into qigong. *Nature* magazine, China’s premier journal for science and technology, publishes its findings.

March 1982: Publication of “Document 19,” outlining tolerance of “acceptable” religious practices and setting them apart from “superstition” and “folk religion.” Qigong is not included.

April 1982: In response to infighting about qigong, the CCP arrives at “Three Nos” Policy: no publication, controversy, or criticism about qigong, but Zhang Zhenhuan and Qian win enough political support to continue to publish.

1984: Zhang Baosheng, a qigong healer, visits Zhongnanhai complex (where high ranking members of the CCP live) to heal Party members.

1985-1986: Yan Xin rises to fame. His school of qigong remains popular throughout the 80s.

1986-1987: Zhang Zhenhuan consolidates much of qigong research into the China Qigong Research Society (CQRS). He and Qian Xuesen found the China Somatic Science Society (CSSS) specifically to research extraordinary powers.

1987: Zhang Hongbao founds Zhonggong, which explodes in popularity through the late 80s and into the early 90s.

June 1989: Tiananmen Square.

1990: Qigong movement subject to increasing criticism. A skeptical journalist produces a video exposé of Yan Xin and Zhang Hongbao’s powers; however, the state blocks its publication due

²¹⁶ Naturally the term “modernity” is widely contested, and the seeds of modernity were sown during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), but for the purposes of this essay and Daoist cultivation techniques, most pre-Republican developments are relatively inconsequential. For broader discussion of periods and modernity, see: Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China (second edition)* (New York: Norton, 2013). I use Spence’s work frequently in sections where more background would be useful.

to Zhang Zhenhuan's intervention. CQRS begins licensing groups and masters. Yan fails in "power-emitting" lecture and flees to the United States.

1990s: Underground publications begin to circulate, criticizing state intervention in qigong.

1992: Li Hongzhi founds Falun Gong. He visits and works with CQRS and receives an official designation as "master." Falun Gong replaces Zhonggong as one of the most popular qigong schools.

1994: Zhang Zhenhuan dies.

1995: Exposé released. Zhonggong and Falun Gong lose accreditation (Li claims Falun Gong willingly left CCP). State support for extraordinary powers research ceases.

1996-1999: Prolonged conflict between state regulation and qigong groups.

1997-1998: Li becomes a US citizen and moves to New York, beginning international proliferation of qigong.

1999: Falun Gong practitioners surround Zhongnanhai complex in peaceful protest about a negative article published in the *Sichuan Daily*. The government arrests, murders, and harvests the organs of many Falun Gong practitioners to sell in the international organ trade black market. End of unlicensed qigong in China.

2006: Zhang Hongbao dies in mysterious traffic incident in Arizona.

I have adhered to the honor code on this assignment.