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Qigong (also spelled Qi Gong and Chi-kung)

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A Chinese tradition of mind-body training combining breath control, slow-motion gymnastics and meditation, the term combines the Chinese characters *qi* (lit. “breath”, can also mean “vital breath” or “cosmic energy”) and *gong* (lit. “effort”, often understood as “discipline”, “virtuosity”, “spiritual power”). Techniques now known as *qigong* are mentioned in ancient Chinese texts from the 6th century BC and earlier, including the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and became integral components of Chinese medicine, martial arts and religion, notably Daoism and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. A wide range of breathing, gymnastic, meditation and visualization techniques, joined in an infinitely extensible array of combinations, could be used for the healing of illnesses, for nurturing health and longevity, or for spiritual transcendence and immortality.

The use of the term *qigong* as a single category covering all such techniques can be traced to the mid 20th century, and is the result of modernizing attempts to secularize useful Chinese traditions by extracting them from religion and superstition, and re-organize them into a scientific system. This project was carried out in the 1950’s by the health authorities of the newly established Peoples’ Republic of China. *Qigong* was applied in modern clinical settings, and disseminated on a wide scale following the model of mass calisthenics. Banned during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), *qigong* reappeared in the late 1970’s. Reports of healing through “external *qi*” (emission of *qi* without physical contact between a healer and a patient) caused a sensation in the Chinese press, while thousands of charismatic *qigong* healers attracted followings in the millions, and *qigong* became almost synonymous in popular discourse with paranormal phenomena and psychic powers. Some of China’s leading scientists and senior Communist Party leaders supported the movement and facilitated its expansion. In the 1980’s and 1990’s, a time when most forms of religion had been destroyed or strictly controlled in mainland China for decades, *qigong* became the main legal outlet for a rediscovery of China’s spiritual traditions, and a mass movement within which hundreds of popular groups appeared. Many of these were full-fledged new religious movements (NRMs) with sophisticated China-wide or even global organizations – the largest of which, with tens of millions of practitioners, were Zhong Gong, founded by Zhang Hongbao in 1987, and Falun Gong, founded by Li Hongzhi in 1992. By the mid 1990’s, the Chinese authorities, sensitive to accusations of quackery and pseudo-science being leveled at *qigong* by critics, and concerned about the growing influence of charismatic *qigong* masters, attempted to impose stricter regulations on *qigong*. Li Hongzhi immigrated to the US in 1996 and Zhang Hongbao went into hiding (he reappeared on the American island of Guam in 2000, and died in a car accident in Arizona in 2006). Most *qigong* groups declined or adopted a low profile. But Falun Gong, which, in addition to *qigong* exercises, had strongly moralistic teachings and a messianic, apocalyptic eschatology, continued to grow rapidly. Rejecting state regulations and criticisms from the official media, Falun Gong practitioners often staged protests and sit-ins. After ten thousand followers surrounded Zhongnanhai (the headquarters of the Chinese Communist leadership) in a silent protest on April 25, 1999,

the government banned Falun Gong as an “evil cult” on 22 July 1999. Although other forms of *qigong* remained legal, in practice, most other popular groups were dismantled, and only five sets of exercises, derived from the medical *daoyin* tradition, were authorized. *Qigong* ceased to exist as a mass movement in China, although the techniques continued to be practiced, under different names, in other contexts such as Daoism or Chinese medical health cultivation.

Most of the leading *qigong* masters of the 1980’s and 1990’s emigrated to North America, Europe and Australia, contributing to the spread of *qigong* in Western countries. One of the first to introduce *qigong* to a Western audience, in 1979 as “Taoist esoteric yoga”, was Mantak Chia (b. 1944), a Chinese born in Thailand, who had settled in New York. His disciple Michael Winn became one of the leading advocates of *qigong* in the United States. In Western countries, *qigong* found a welcoming niche in the diverse milieu of New Age spirituality, alternative healing and Chinese medicine/martial arts/Tai chi and Daoism.

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