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*REVIEW ESSAY*

# From Healing to Religiosity

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***Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*** by David A. Palmer. New York: Columbia University Press. 2007. 356 pp. cloth. ISBN 10: 0-231-14066-5.

Qigong has gotten increased attention and interest in the U.S. and around the world, known as part of traditional Chinese medical practice, or a complementary healing approach. However, have you noticed that many qigong practitioners with deep roots in traditional Chinese medicine tend to ask students not to call them ''qigong master,'' and even denied that the forms they practice were qigong? Have you noticed that some skilled qigong healers would not tell strangers their true profession? Have you seen the critique in your grant application for studying qigong that ''the therapy seems to be based on belief''? Have you ever wondered why the Chinese government suppressed the entire mass qigong movement while qigong is said to be such a wonderful cheap healthcare means with so many alleged healing powers? Palmer's new book *Qigong Fever* may help answer these endless questions, and clearing the mysteries or clouds around the qigong phenomena and the qigong movement in modern China.

To help those who are not familiar with the term ''Qigong'', let's briefly review its background before getting more people confused. The cultivation exercise and energy therapies now labeled as ''qigong'' have had at least two thousand years of history in writing with different names. The word ''Qigong'' first appeared in the book *Jing Ming Zong Jiao Lu* ((??) – *Records of the Clear Bright Sect)* by a Taoist priest Xu Xun ((??); 239–374). Thus, from the very beginning, the term ''qigong'' has been associated with religious color and Taoist practice [1]. Although the concept of ''qi'' is considered one of the foundations to the entire traditional Chinese medicine, Qigong did not become a popular term covering all cultivation and energy therapies until recently,

as detailed in Palmer's book. Today, Qigong or ''qigong study in Chinese medicine'' is still a subject or course of study in universities and colleges of Chinese medicine. The official textbook defines qigong as ''a psycho-somatic operational skill or process that adjusts body, breath and mind into oneness.'' ([1], p. 2).

As a professor of anthropology and religious studies at Chinese University of Hong Kong, David Palmer wrote this unique book mainly from the perspective of anthropology and sociology, even though qigong was originally considered a healing exercise or a healthcare aid. This book tells the stories and the context of the birth, expansion, division and contraction of the modern qigong milieu in China, and of the formation, development and collapse or breaking away of denominations from within this milieu. The Chapters of the book include: 1) The birth of modern qigong, 1949–1964; 2) Political networks and the formation of qigong sector; 3) The grandmasters; 4) Qigong scientism; 5) Qigong fever; 6) Controversy and crisis; 7) Control and rationalization, 8) Militant qigong: the emergence of Falungong; 9) Falungong challenges the CCP; and Epilogue: the collapse of the qigong movement. Tracing the complex relationship among the officials, masters, scientists, practitioners and ideologues around qigong, Palmer offers us a special window to look at the dynamic interactions of different sectors or groups in modern China. It is not difficult to reach the conclusion that the ups and downs of the entire qigong movement in modern China has mostly been the result of government interference and political struggles with the aid of qigong masters' personal charismas and interests. A healing art with thousands of years of tradition ended as a massive religious movement that scared government officials, scientists, and the general masses away; regardless, the movement continues outside of China, and the practitioners continue enjoying its benefits every day.

Palmer acknowledged that, ''Treating qigong as a religious phenomenon would be strongly disputed by most qigong groups.'' (p. 23) The raising of qigong as a massive healing movement was consciously promoted by government officials and the scientific community, since the social goals upheld by the qigong movement in the 1970s included ''improving the health of the masses, bringing about a renaissance of traditional Chinese culture, and triggering a Chinese-led scientific revolution which could lead to a paranormal utopia.'' (p. 17) However, when Falungong broke away from the qigong sector, becoming a distinct social movement of its own with a political agenda, all qigong schools or organizations began to promote and defend their own ideology, followers, and influences in a more aggressive way. After all, the training and practice networks founded by hundreds of qigong masters may have formed the greatest collection of grass-root associations, and probably the greatest mass movement in modern China that was not under direct government control. It was the blinded-belief of the mass followers in their masters that created all elements that a religion needs. According to Palmer, the success of the qigong movement proves that a hugely important religious dimension not

only survived under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but also was actively fostered by high-ranking party members and the social networks. It was the post-Mao social and cultural environment–characterized by a general population full of religious-like demands who faced a cultural climate devoid of objects to adulate and non-official religious support–that made the massive qigong movement a reality, which was as close to a religion as it could be in modern China.

Palmer clearly pointed out that it is necessary to make a distinction among three dynamic forces in this historical phenomenon: 1) qigong as body technologies, many of which originated in ancient times; 2) the modalities of their transmission by specific social organizations (qigong schools or *qongfa*), and 3) the ideology carried by the latter. ''This book is not a study of the therapeutic efficacy of qigong, nor is it a discussion of the mystical realities that can be explored through qigong practice.'' (p. 7) What made qigong special in modern China was not so much the body techniques themselves, but the meanings qigong practitioners gave to them, the reason they wanted to practice them, and the social relationships created between people who promote, who teach, who learn, who practice, who don't practice, and who oppose qigong. I assume that most people who read this review or read about qigong are actually interested in qigong as body technologies, rather than qigong as a social phenomenon, I would like to discuss a little more in that direction, based on the materials from Palmer's book. Again, these are not the focus of this anthropological book, but what I assume the people who are interested in qigong may want to know more about within the book's subjects.

### *1. Qigong masters*

Many people have asked me how to define a qigong master, or how one can become a qigong master. I knew there was no official definition of ''qigong master'', or degree in master of Qigong (although there is now an academic degree of Master, or even Ph.D., in qigong study), so I was not able to offer them a satisfactory answer until I read Palmer's book. People who have contact with qigong are most interested in qigong masters, because, after all, it was the training and practice networks founded by these qigong masters that have formed the foundation of the modern qigong movement.

Who are those qigong masters? A look at the biographical data indicated that half of the qigong masters (47.5%) had a martial-art origin, where ''master'' has more definite meaning and is widely used in history. One third (34.8%) came from medical tradition, where ''master'' was only used by the students or disciples. Therefore, most qigong masters had almost no link with official religious institutions (Buddhist or Taoist). In general, qigong ''masters'' (shi) tend to be self-labeled without the official recognition, but won their public recognition through personal charisma and the social network. It should be pointed out that the Chinese word ''shi'' can be either ''shifu'' (master) or

"laoshi" (teacher), but most qigong masters tend to use it in the meaning of shifu, or even grandmaster (master's master). The Chinese Society of Qigong Science, the semi-official national organization of qigong education and research did try to regulate qigong masters. They observed and examined thousands of self-labeled qigong masters in its short tenure, and issued certificates to a few hundred of them as the "invited qigong research fellow," but not as "qigong master."

What turned a qigong instructor or healer into a recognized qigong master? According to Palmer's study, a qigong master was made of three important components: the personal charisma, a network of official recognitions and connections (in the qigong circle), and a network of teaching and transmission of his/her method (in the public).

A master's charisma or public recognition was composed of four major ingredients in modern China: the healing powers, virtue (morals), initiation into a tradition (lineage), and status as a person of science. First, since there was no 'orthodox' tradition or standard that could separate the 'true' masters from the 'fake' ones, the demonstration of true healing powers was the only way to prove one's abilities as an authentic master. What is interesting is that few of the healing powers were actually proved or verified through the controlled clinical trials or scientific research, but mostly obtained by public demonstration of extraordinary abilities (similar to the magic show), the qi-emission séances, the charismatic qigong lectures (mostly suggestive effects) and the testimonies of the healed. Second, the virtue or moral characters were recognized by the simplicity of daily life or treating the sick for free. In other words, does the master heal for money or have a true mission of saving others? Third, a true master should be the inheritor of a secret tradition transmitted from antiquity to a tiny number of the elect, which created a link between the current master and the magical powers of the mythical figures of the past sages. Alternatively, if the master did not have such a lineage in the past, he or she may be presented as a person with scientific aura–a 'life scientist' who conducted laboratory experiments showing his/her personal powers of science, which made many masters 'search for collaborators' in the prestigious universities and institutions that could lend their scientific aura. (see Palmer, pp. 98–99). One may not need all four ingredients to become a master since one or two ingredients would be a good start to become a master.

According to Palmer, the personal charisma by itself was not sufficient to become a master. To become a publicly recognized master, the master had to get support from both official/media networks and a large public or follower network. While the number of followers became part of the master-making process, the mass media also played a capital role in the 'deification' of certain masters. Therefore, those true qigong cultivators living in remote mountain areas could not be called qigong master (they are called Buddhist or Taoist monks) until they came out of the mountains, got reported by the media, and gained a substantial following.

Unfortunately, although most qigong or cultivation exercises were created as self-care and preventive-care methods for human health and spirituality, the modern qigong movement, even including the scientific community, and most practitioners have put extraordinary weight on those so-called ''masters'' with a great deal of charisma, all of which laid the ground for those masters to turn a healing tool into a social movement with religious tendency. Most practitioners trusted the master more than themselves, and they would not start qigong practice until they found a master. Please note, when people searched for the true qigong masters with these charismas and networks in mind, they tended to forget one fundamental quality that a true qigong cultivator should really possess–the attitude or lifestyle of ''empty mind without any desire or attachment'', which is supposed to be what make a true master of qi cultivation and body technologies. In other words, when a qigong master showed off his/her powers to attract followers, charged a lump sum for teaching or service, or defended his/her name or forms by challenging the skeptics, they have already quietly departed from the true quality of qigong cultivation.

*2. Qigong body techniques and extraordinary power*

It may be a little confusing that so many extraordinary powers were discussed in the context of qigong movement. How are qigong body techniques connected with the extraordinary powers that are usually the subjects of parapsychological research? In general, most of those with extraordinary powers reported in Chinese media were not qigong practitioners, or at least their powers were not the results of the qigong practice. However, it was the reports or claims that practice of qigong body technologies could reveal or stimulate the potential extraordinary human powers that made the two go together. Although both studies of qigong and extraordinary powers were classified as human life science at some point in the modern China history, the two are very different in terms of origin of powers, research purpose, methodology, and association with established institutions. While most people with extraordinary powers seemed to be born with the power, most qigong masters claimed they obtained their powers through training and qigong cultivation. The study of extraordinary powers was conducted mostly in prestigious universities and military institutions, while studies of qigong phenomena could be found almost everywhere.

The study of extraordinary powers in China could have its own developmental path even without the mass qigong movement. However, the findings that qigong practice could stimulate or stabilize extraordinary human capability (such as ''eyeless'' vision, X-ray vision, or psychokinetic power) suddenly provided researchers with more subjects and more alternative hypotheses to test. These findings about qigong and the reports of it in the media also attracted many ordinary folks who wanted to gain such extraordinary powers in the regular qigong practice, which in turn promoted the mass qigong movement. Unfortunately, those who practiced qigong for the purpose of gaining extra

powers usually ended up harming themselves (easily got into deviation status–*zouhuo rumo* [see below]–when practicing qigong with strong intention) as well as harm to the qigong movement itself.

In some sense Palmer seemed to mix the two phenomena together in the book and used many examples of people with extraordinary powers to explain qigong scientism or the process of scientists' involvement in the qigong movement.

### *3. Scientific studies of qigong phenomenon*

According to Palmer, scientists saw qigong as more than a simple renaissance of ancient tradition, or the scientific proof and mastery of paranormal force. They saw it as the opening of the possibility of a new holistic cosmology that could encompass both the wisdom of the past and the discoveries of the future. We can easily see that scientists' involvement in examination of qigong effects or qigong credentials in the 1970s–80s played an important role in promoting qigong movement and granting qigong masters and qigong exercise a scientific aura.

It was probably related to his view that extraordinary power was what led scientists to research qigong, Palmer described a basic discourse of qigong scientism that links qigong with extraordinary powers through science and Chinese tradition, and then ultimately to Chinese power in the world and the scientific revolution (p. 105). If that was really what was in some Chinese scientists' minds, it should have been no more than any Western parapsychologists who attempt contributing something to the science and human knowledge of life science through their unique research. What Palmer did not see or did not mention in this section are the following facts about scientific studies of qigong: 1) There had never been substantial government funding or support for systematic or scientific exploration of qigong phenomena; most famous studies of qigong were initiated by scientists or qigong practitioners themselves (except for the Qigong Institute in Shanghai University of Chinese Medicine, which has 60 positions paid by government salary), since mainstream scientists considered that qigong research deviated from their career. 2) Some scientists got involved in qigong study because they did not believe in the qi phenomena at the beginning and attempted to use their scientific knowledge and state-of-the-art equipment to prove their point that there was no such thing as qi. But the results surprised them. 3) No scientist had become famous or made a career out of qigong research; instead, many of them lost the opportunities of normal promotion or publication because of their commitment to exploration of qigong effects. 4) There had not been a systematic approach or roadmap for how to conduct scientific research of qigong, and there existed a general lack of repeatability of others' studies in the field. Although there were thousands of scientists involved with thousands of published reports, there was no scientific journal devoted to qigong study. Therefore, the true sense of qigong science did

not really exist in Chinese history; and the fever of qigong research was always relative in comparison with the lower tone of skeptics and opposition forces.

The government did hold two conferences to evaluate the data and to verify the very existence of extraordinary human powers, including the studies of external qi phenomena. Neither of the conferences was conclusive since the skeptics could not completely deny the findings from some of the well-designed studies, while the believers could not convince the skeptics about the true existence of these extraordinary powers, as they could not reliably repeat these results in the intended replication studies. These conferences had some negative impact on the development of scientific research in the field. Although there had been many published and convincing reports of both external qigong and extraordinary powers [2], when government decided to shut down all qigong schools and associations while confronting political (religious) forces like Falungong, the data of scientific studies were not good or strong enough to stop such a political decision.

*4. The body technologies and qigong deviation*

Palmer stated that there have always been two challenges or crises in the development or promotion of qigong–the quackery and deviations, which tend to tarnish the image of qigong. The qigong sector in China acknowledged such a crisis in the 1980s, finding that there were more ''fake'' qigong instructors or ''masters'' without appropriate credentials or traceable lineage history than those with such credentials or lineage. If qigong were all about self-healing and self-care methods as the government originally tried to promote it, this should not have become a problem since a self-healing movement would not put much emphasis on the ''masters.'' It was the potential power of these body technologies and the profound religious orientation among the practitioners that made ''qigong master'' a profitable profession with both fame and wealth, and attracted various quackeries. However, what really made the mass of practitioners start keeping their distance from qigong masters and qigong practice was the fear of the widely reported qigong deviations, or *zouhuo rumo*. According to Palmer, ''*zouhuo rumo* is a state in which qigong practice triggers uncontrollable effects, either physiological as in 'becoming inflamed'–headaches, nausea or pain in various parts of the body ... or mental, as loss of mental faculties, incoherent speech, severe emotional distress or behaviors harmful to oneself or others.'' (p. 158). Victims of *zouhuo rumo* were so many and so demanding that some psychiatrists had to open special clinics to handle these patients. Eventually, these qigong-related mental disorders made it into the Chinese version of DSM-IV as a ''culture-bound syndrome,'' defined as ''an acute, time-limited episode characterized by dissociate, paranoid, or other psychotic or non-psychotic symptoms that may occur after participation in the Chinese folk health enhancing practice of qigong (exercise of vital energy).'' (p. 159) The phenomena or stories described by Palmer in the book were all true.

I personally know many people who stopped practicing qigong because they were afraid of *zouhuo rumo*. However, I feel the point was misleading in some ways.

First, *zouhuo rumo* is a true potential phenomenon in qigong practice, especially susceptible to those who become overly involved in the practice of qigong without a qualified instructor. These qigong-related ''disorders'' are far beyond anything we know in a hypnotized state, and could not be explained by known medical or psychological theories as the result of so-called self-hypnosis. Therefore, the phenomena of *zouhuo rumo* may imply unknown powers of qi and yi (intention or consciousness) from qigong practice, and should alert those who consider qigong therapy just a psychological or suggestive method to re-evaluate their theory or assumption [3].

Second, as I discussed previously [4], the majority of the *zouhuo rumo* phenomena in qigong practice are actually the normal progressions of qigong cultivation. If the practitioners knew the possible occurrence of these physiological and mental responses during a deep qigong state in advance, and knew how to handle them from the instructor, there should be no danger or risk at all for them to continue their qigong practice and benefit from the mind-body response to the vital energy field. The most common phenomena that are labeled as ''*zouhuo rumo*'' include the reappearance or greater severity of old symptoms (due to qi striking against the diseased locations), uncontrolled body movement (due to body response to the qi flow inside and outside in a relaxing and tranquil state), and hallucinations (due to mind traveling across higher dimensions of the world in a deep meditation state). Those practitioners with strong intention (obtaining extraordinary powers, or reaching a higher level of spirituality) are more likely to experience these phenomena than others, and hurt themselves seriously during these periods if they do not have the appropriate guidance from a knowledgeable instructor. I personally experienced all three of the so-called ''deviations'' and have always considered them to represent significant progress in my qigong cultivation.

Third, it is urgent to make the so-called ''deviation'' phenomena common knowledge for both qigong instructors and healthcare professionals so that it will no longer hurt the promotion of qigong as a self-care healing method. Even if the instructors have never experienced these phenomena, some basic knowledge of the potential risk and the appropriate strategies to handle such response will greatly help students to get rid of fear and anxiety before they start qigong practice.

It seems that the Chinese government tries to continue promoting qigong without promoting qigong masters and the possible *zouhuo rumo* phenomena. In the four newly modified classic qigong forms that Chinese government is promoting–Five Animal Frolics, Six-healing Sounds, Eight-section Brocade, and Yijing Jing qigong, there is no qigong master behind them and no component of mind or intention. These qigong forms have the breathing and body gesture components only, so it is almost impossible to have *zouhuo rumo* phenomena. However, without the most important component of regulating mind and without

the goal of cultivating mind, these qigong forms are more like physical exercises than qigong cultivations. This is probably part of the effort that government tries to let people continue benefiting from Qigong practice but not have any 'side effect'. When there is nothing related to mind activity, there will be no risk for blind belief or deviation. However, the healing benefits of Qigong will also be seriously diminished since Qigong is about mind-body-breathing integration that helps practitioners to reach an inner harmony with the purpose of guiding people to enjoy life with less desire, less stress, less physical and mental illness.

Qigong ''fever'' is rising in the U.S. and around the world after being knocked down in China. As if it was in the 1950s in China, both consumers and healthcare professionals are seeing the great potential of qigong as a self-care and affordable healing solution to the healthcare crisis in today's society. However if scientific research cannot catch up with the needed evidence to answer some fundamental questions, and provide data and evidence, especially the cost-effective data, for the healthcare system and consumers, this fever may gradually fade away by the fear of qigong deviations and the continuous political complications. Palmer's book is timely in helping us to see that risk and possibility.

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