

# Chinese Religions at the Grassroots

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Lecture 7: Qigong Fever: Revitalised traditions and urban religiosity in socialist China

# Qigong (“breath training”)

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- “...these networks and discourses were modern productions, inseparable from the political and social configuration of the People’s Republic of China.” (Palmer 2007, p. 3)
- 1) body technologies, many of which ancient
- 2) modalities of transmission
- 3) ideologies associated with the latter
- 氣功 is a modern term! (search Chinese Text Project)

# Qigong: a Chinese socialist project of modernisation

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- “...these networks and discourses were modern productions, inseparable from the political and social configuration of the People’s Republic of China.” (Palmer 2007, p. 3)
- "To practice *qigong*, then, is not only to practise certain traditional body techniques, but also to participate in the elaboration of meanings and of social relations around the goals and ideals of the *qigong* movement." (p. 8)
- “...alignment of traditional expectations of miraculous powers with the unfolding of the utopian project of modernity“ (Feuchtwang/Wang Mingming)

# Terminology

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- Need for differentiation:
  - *qigong* as body techniques
  - *qigong* as ideological and social organisation of such practices
- 'self-cultivation'
- 'longevity techniques' or 'immortality techniques';
- 'traditional body technologies' (Palmer)
- Movement highly heterogeneous

# Is *qigong* a religion?

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- ❑ - qigong groups stress their scientific and moral superiority over religion
- ❑ - religions such as Buddhism and Daoism do not recognise qigong as a religion
- ❑ - Religious Affairs Bureau not in charge of qigong

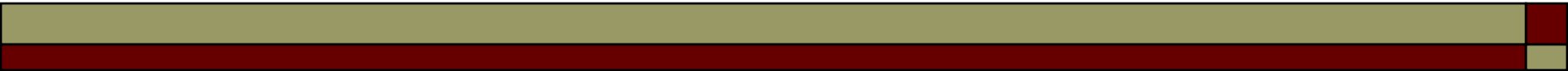
BUT

- ❑ Qigong seems to nurture certain dispositions which might be called religious, such as avoidance of disease, long life, salvation, wisdom etc.
- ❑ --> Shift towards increasing religionisation and return to Chinese sectarian tradition during 1980s
- ❑ label of 'heterodox cult' (*xie jiao*) applied to certain *qigong* groups

## 1950s-60s: Traditional body technologies reformulated and institutionalised

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- ❑ 3rd March 1949: Cadre Huang Yueting proclaims qigong in Southern Hebei. Young party cadre Liu Guizhen had been healed by an old master called Liu Duzhou who taught neiyanggong.
- ❑ extract Chinese body cultivation techniques from their religious, political, and social context; standardisation according to rational schema
- ❑ Change of mantra: 'The Claw of the Golden Dragon Sitting in Meditation in the Chan Chamber' → 'I Practise Sitting Meditation for a Better Health'. (p. 31)
- ❑ → Party gave itself modern instrument of health preservation and health policy.

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- ❑ 1949-54: official recognition and institutionalisation of trad. Chinese medicine; Qigong Training Centre at Tangshan Workers' Sanatorium; 1956: Beidaihe Qigong Sanatorium;
  - ❑ *The Practice of Qigong Therapy* by Liu Guizhen (1957)
  - ❑ 1959-61: Boost for qigong during Great Leap Forward; campaign to study the art of folk healers

# 1965-1979: *Qigong* in the Cultural Revolution

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- ❑ No official support for *qigong*
- ❑ Guo Lin, a cancer patient who treated herself by applying *qigong* practices, starts public *qigong* groups  
→ social activity by amateurs
- ❑ 1978-79: Discovery of 'external qi' by Gu Hansen (female) (Shanghai Institute of Atomic Research)
- ❑ 14 December 1979: Beijing Qigong Research Society
- ❑ Reports about children able to read with their ears

# Discovery of external *qi*

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- March 10, 1978, can be considered as an extraordinary day. This day marks the start of a new age in the history of qigong in China. In collaboration, Gu Hansen of the Center for Atomic Research of the Academy of Sciences at Shanghai, and Lin Houseng, of the Shanghai Institute of Chinese Medicine, using modern scientific devices to make preliminary measurements on the “external qi” displaced during qigong therapy, detected low-frequency, infrared ray modulations. That confirms that the practitioner of qigong emitted electromagnetic waves containing information. It is the first time that the physical nature of “qi” was proven. The publication of the results of the experiment created waves within the country, aroused interest and drew the attention of numerous scientists towards qigong research. Their heroic undertaking had a determining effect on the rise of qigong in contemporary China, allowing it to free itself once and for all of the label of “superstition” and “sorcery” so long attached to it. (Palmer, p. 52-53)

# 1980s: From utopianism to individual empowerment

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- ❑ 'Somatic science'; key to the mysteries of trad. Chinese wisdom without air of religion → modernising discourse;
- ❑ spread of body-centered religiosity under the rubric of health, sports, and science: "Qigong has left religion and folklore to enter the temple of science." (p. 76)
- ❑ September 1981: All-China Qigong Scientific Research Society; national conference in Baoding (Hebei).
- ❑ since 1983: Use of political labels was condemned in scientific research, e.g. "spiritual pollution," "heretical opinions"
- ❑ 1986: Creation of China Qigong Science Research Society (CQRS)
- ❑ Research into extraordinary powers, particularly in children.
- ❑ qigong movement is intricately tied with China's military and industrial complex
- ❑ Qigong Institute
- ❑ [http://www.qigonginstitute.org/main\\_page/main\\_page.php](http://www.qigonginstitute.org/main_page/main_page.php)

# Emerging religious elements

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- Grand master phenomenon
- Typical master
  - country boy or girl
  - grew up under harsh conditions
  - unique qualities: intelligence, cunning, filial piety, precocious miraculous power
- Charisma based on:
  - healing power,
  - virtue
  - initiation
  - status as person of science

# Master Yan Xin

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"Yan Xin entered the room and glanced at the patient; then he asked everyone present to leave and to wait [outside] and closed the door. Before an hour had passed the door opened and Jiang Zili stepped out, walking alone, unaided and without crutches. At once he went outside and walked one kilometre. 'He's a miracle doctor!', everyone exclaimed. How did Dr Yan Xin heal young Jiang's wound? Your reporter took you to young Jiang's home. Jiang, his face beaming, explained: 'Dr Yan stood a few centimeters from me and treated me with qigong. After half an hour I could get out of bed, bend down, jump and move as I wished. I took no medicines.' 'A miracle doctor! A miracle!' In a month and a half of interviews, all gave the same reaction." (*Sichuan Workers' Newspaper*, 1985)

# 1990s: Mass denominations, commercialisation and control

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- Qigong networks give birth to large-scale commercial and cultural groups, autonomous social organisations, large enough to rival the CCP in terms of membership; Falungong offshoot of qigong movement;
- - attempts on the part of both state organs and mass denominations to unify, regulate, manage and co-opt qigong practitioners, masters and groups ..> both become more sophisticated.
- - growing tensions between state and mass denominations (Falun gong, Zhonggong)

Thank you for listening!