

Book Review by James MacRitchie

QIGONG FEVER -
Body, Science and Utopia in China

David A. Palmer

It is not often I read the same book twice - the 'too many books, too little time' problem. But with 'Qigong Fever' by David Palmer there was no choice. This book blew all of my fuses, and I am still looking for the 'Re-set' button.

Having written three books on Qigong myself, taught it for over 20 years, and founded the 'National Qigong (Chi Kung) Association * USA', I have tried to find the words to describe and teach these practices, and how it relates to the larger society and our spiritual life. I admit to having a special interest in this book more than most people.

In this context I apparently suffer from Pioneer's Syndrome. I recognize it in myself because I have recently seen it in a number of friends in different fields. It goes something like this:

You became engaged and engrossed in a particular new field of activity (the Arts, Music, Children, Medicine, Tai Chi, Qigong...) because you figured it was socially important to do, and perhaps the most important thing that you could do (teaching classes, opening centers, writing books, putting on conferences, getting laws passed, making it widely known and available...). Over time - perhaps 10, 20, 30 years - you are proven right, because many other people start doing it also. If they hadn't started doing it then you would have just been engaged in some irrelevant, eccentric activity. One of the problems for the Pioneer is that there was little, or often no, precedent, so you had to piece it all together yourself from clues, hints, hunches, fragments, intuition, interviews, research and all.

Then one day someone comes out with a book that describes everything you were working on and developing - and you find out you were right all along.

This recently happened to me a couple of years ago in the field of Acupuncture - after 25 years a book was published which finally

told the story of the style that I practice. It also just happened in Qigong, through David Palmer's book.

He went there, met the people, gathered the information, did the research, put it all together... and for the first time has revealed what actually happened with Qigong in China over the last 60 years. The simplest summary is perhaps contained in his sentence:

"The Qigong movement was born during Mao era, reached its zenith in the post-Mao reform years of Deng Xiaoping, and imploded under Jiang Zemin".

The elaboration of this sentence could be as follows: The practices which became known as 'Qigong' were first 'discovered' by members of the Red Army when they were holed-up in the mountains, avoiding the Republicans. One soldier was sick, and was taught some simple practices by an old teacher he happened to meet. Realizing the power in this he began to teach it to his comrades, and soon it spread through the ranks until it was adopted by the whole army to preserve soldiers health. After the communists gained power in 1947 it became a state-approved policy promoted throughout the country, with clinics and hospitals opening.

There had been many other names for such practices throughout history - such as Daoyin, Tugu Naxin, Inner Alchemy etc, but they were collectively termed Qigong by the communists.

However, within the particular cultural and social context of China at the time it fell through all of the cracks of government oversight and control - the various 'Sectors' of Health, Science, Education, Medicine, Religion etc - because it was described simply as 'fitness and sports', and was off the radar.

Following the disaster of The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the passing of Mao in '76 at age 82, the new leader, Deng Xiaoping assumed absolute power, and the hallmark of his rule was 'modernization'. This lifted the yoke of authoritarian control, and collectivism, and allowed 'free enterprise'. According to Palmer, thousands of Qigong 'Masters' suddenly emerged - many of them self-appointed - and all with their own particular 'Gongfa' or 'method'. And it became apparent that the average Chinese is no more immune to the allure of Fame &

Fortune, than the average Westerner. They sprang up everywhere, in all shapes and sizes. Many were called 'Profiteers' by the authorities.

Qigong got quickly embedded in all aspects of society - medicine and health care, scientific research, the military, politics, religion... It pervaded all aspects of society.

Perhaps most importantly, in many ways it provided and answered the missing pieces of Chinese spiritual life, which was deeply rooted in Taoist and Buddhist tradition, and it provided new views of a future Utopia. Tens of millions of people starting practicing it; some claim 100 million.

The skeptics and anti-Qigong forces emerged from time to time, but were repeatedly quieted by its supporters at all levels of politics and media. Qigong was being practised in the upper echelons of the power elite, and they defended it vigorously.

Eventually government controlled organizations were formed to regulate and control it - but were easily avoided, or coerced by lip service and collusion.

Grand Masters emerged, most well-known amongst them being Yan Xin, Zhang Hong Bao and Li Hong Zi. Each Master developed their own system, method or style, their own 'Gongfa', with its brand-name trade mark. Yan Xin filled sports stadiums with 20,000 people, at which spontaneous healings took place. There were forms such as Zangmigong, Zhanggong, Falungong... These took on aspects of mass movements, corporations, and franchises - there was no control, so there were no limits. Large amounts of money were involved.

A fair comparison in the West would be with the recent New Age movement. It followed the familiar pattern of 'Buy it wholesale, repackage it, and sell it retail'. All kinds of claims were made - some quite modest, others outrageous and unbelievable, claims of Extraordinary Powers such as reading people's minds, walking through walls, transcending time and space.

Other more moderate teachers included Gou Lin, Feng Li Da and Pang He Ming, who researched and taught Medical Qigong forms that were highly effective and spread widely.

Palmer refers to these various styles by the term 'Denominations' - reflecting the way the Christian Church has split into an array of traditions and styles but all around the same central belief - in the case of Qigong, this was 'Cultivation of Qi'.

But it all became too much for the ruling communist party with Falungong. Li Hong Zhi, its originator, saw Qigong as a means to revitalize the old traditions and beliefs - outside of any financial rewards for individual practitioners or members of the organization (except, not surprisingly, himself).

Falungong grew to the point where it rivaled the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in numbers of members, which it then challenged when 10,000 Falungong practitioners surrounded the leaders compound at Zhongnanhai, near Tiananmen Square in 1999, and lost. Premier Jiang Zemin saw this as the most dangerous challenge to communist rule since the Democracy Movement in 1989. He was correct. Indeed, throughout China's history a number of challenges were made by Qigong inspired movements, and in one instance The Incense Army overthrew the Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty in the mid 14th century. Other 'Qigong' groups through history had intriguing names such as 'Complete Illumination', 'The Eight Trigrams Sect', 'The Society United in Goodness', 'The Way of Pervasive Unity' and 'The Heavenly Virtue Sect'.

The response from the CCP authorities in 1999 was repression, at times brutal. Hospitals and clinics were shut down. Collective practice was banned. Qigong was virtually eliminated.

Most Masters stopped their activities, took a low profile, went underground or emigrated to the West.

There were only 4 forms of Qigong allowed, all Dao Yin styles taken from the classical medical tradition: The Eight Pieces of Brocade (Baduanjin), The Six-Character Formula (Liuzijue), The Five Animal Frolics (Wuqinxi) and The Muscle and Tendon Training (Yijinjing). The authorities must have thought these were all safe to do, as they are focused on physical health and do not go into the more advanced higher realms of practise.

Qigong has now been allowed again in a variety of styles, including clinical treatment, but nowhere near the explosion of diversity of the previous decades. The Fever subsided.

Now Falungong operates mainly outside of mainland China, but it is still challenging the Communist Government from abroad at

every opportunity. Recently they hacked into prime-time television in Hong Kong and showed a program on the virtues of Falugong, and criticizing the government. No-one has yet figured out how they did it. I understand that Li Hong Zhi, like Yan Xin, now lives in the United States. Zhang Hong Bao disappeared.

What struck me most strongly about the book was the sheer magnitude, scale and scope of Qigong in China in the last half of the 20th Century. It became a "craze", then a "fever". It included every aspect and dimension at all levels - from personal practice for physical fitness to immortality training, from individuals to mass choreographed groups, from scientific research to the re-awakening of Taoist and Buddhist tradition.

This book tells the whole story in exacting academic detail - at times a bit too much academics (but there again the book is published in the US by Columbia University Press). I get the feeling the author thought 'why use one word when six will do?'. He defines his terms often narrowly. It has the feel of an academic thesis, where nothing should be left out, and everything should be covered, in case the examining committee found fault.

It was surprising to find no references to any of the more popular contemporary Qigong teachers or organizations in the West - it was as if there has not been a Qigong Revolution in the West too, or at least that David Palmer is unaware that such organizations as the National Qigong (Chi Kung) Association USA [www.nqa.org], which has hundreds of members and recently celebrated its 10th Anniversary, even exist. But as he admits, this book is the work of a social scientist, a sociologist - not a philosopher or psychologist or practitioner.

I have one major point of contention, maybe even dispute. Palmer presents, as a primary thesis, that Qigong, especially with Falungong, filled the void and deep need for what he calls 'Religiosity' - it fulfilled the profound need for religion, which had all but disappeared under the dry dialectical materialism of socialism, Marxism and Scientism. Palmer seems either oblivious to, or deliberately ignores, the common Western terms 'Spirit' and 'Soul'. The word 'Spirit' appears once, in a passing reference to "spiritual therapy". I have personally wrestled for the last 30 years with understanding the inter-relationship between West and East in this regard (Spirit and Soul are, after all, considered by many in the West to be two of the most important words in our vocabulary, and perhaps our highest and

deepest aspects). My conclusion to date is that while the Qigong tradition is based on the Energy System - the Eight Extraordinary Meridians, the 12 Organ/Officials, the Cauldrons, the Three Tan Tien/Elixir Fields etc... these are not translatable into Western terms because there is no comparison to translate them into. In the West we simply do not have anything like this, there is no equivalent to the Energy System in mainstream thought, not in medicine, science, religion or philosophy. In the West we default into the vague, undefined terms Soul and Spirit, which are often defined by each other. In fact, I propose that The Energy System is 'The Missing Piece' of Western Civilization.

After 30+ years of trying reconcile this - including full-time professional practise in Classical Acupuncture and Chi Kung, personal conversations with Taoist priests and climbing the 2,000 steps (in the pouring rain) to ask the Abbot of the original Taoist Monastery at Qing Cheng Shan - my conclusion is that the only words to use are the original Chinese terms of Po, Shen, Hun, Yi and Zhi, which are the higher level vibrational frequency of the lungs, heart, liver, spleen and kidneys (then there is also the Jing, Ming, Xin, Ling etc, but that is another story). The challenge, and task, is to use these terms to attempt to describe and understand what these experiences might possibly be and feel like - and the way that we get there is by practicing.

After all, isn't that the reason we do Qigong - to increase the volume, and heighten the frequency of our energy - and thereby cultivate ourselves? In this regard I think Palmer misses a central and primary point.

However, David Palmer's book is a 'must read' for anybody seriously engaged in, or even just curious about, understanding Qigong in China, and therefore understanding the West. Otherwise it would be like someone in a small town in central China reading a 2 inch story in the back pages of a local newspaper about the new musical revolution in the West by groups with strange names like The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, The Grateful Dead and performers called Bob Marley, Eric Clapton and Sting, and thereby trying to understand Rock'n'Roll.

So if you really want to know what happened with Qigong in China over the last 60 years, do yourself a favor - get this eye opening mind-expanding book, clear your schedule, and read it a couple of times.

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