

Livia Kohn, *Chinese Healing Exercises: The Tradition of Daoyin*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, ix + 268 pp.

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The Chinese tradition of empowering and healing exercise is ages old and is particularly well documented from Han times on, thanks to tomb finds. Livia Kohn seeks to trace the history of these exercises, starting from the most ancient indication and the tomb texts, down to the present, and to relate what was once and is currently practiced with empowering and healing exercise as it exists outside of China and in terms of modern physiological theory. Her book is in six chapters, the first focusing on the early medical manuscripts, then moving on to a consideration in chapter 2 of some early practitioners. Next comes a consideration of a major transmitted text associated with the tradition, the *Daoyin jing* 導引經, "The Exercise Classic," then, in chapter 4, she discusses the association of *daoyin* 導引 and the search for immortality. Finally, in chapters 5 and 6, she considers the precursors to modern *qigong* 氣功 and looks at *daoyin* 導引 as practiced today.

Her book is carefully documented in terms of both the traditional and the modern literature, some of it scientific, and is particularly strong in its constant cross references to what is being done today and, for that matter, outside China. She also makes a concerted effort to relate her material to current *qigong* and related practice, and also to the teachings of various modern practitioners. In many cases Kohn has come into contact with such individuals herself and can speak of what they do first hand.

But Kohn's personal connection with modern *daoyin* and *qigong* is also, from the perspective of this reviewer, reflective of the major weaknesses of the text. Practitioners of what is now called Traditional Chinese Medicine, although there is little that is traditional about it and the system practiced

has many foreign elements and major parts have been formulated with foreigners in mind, usually claim that what they are doing relates back to the distant past and modern practice is a direct linear and conceptual descendant of practice that is very ancient indeed, thus its validity. But, alas, this needs to be proven and has not been in a convincing way (in fact, a good deal of the historical scholarship on Chinese medicine contradicts this assertion). The same is true of modern *daoyin* and *qigong*, which come, like Traditional Chinese Medicine, with their own mythologies, some of which have little to do with reality or history.

Thus while Kohn may be correct in the ways that she seeks to link modern and much older practice, the underlying connection that is assumed may just not be there. That is to say, this connection has to be proven between pre-Han and modern practice, or even recent practice (Ming and later), for example.

The problem is that the Chinese medical past, and this includes empowering and healing exercise, has undergone repeated reformulation, something which has affected even our reading of the tomb manuscripts which ought to provide entirely independent bases for entirely independent evaluations. To some extent, they have done this, but these same tomb manuscripts, which are fragmentary and highly difficult to read (and not as straightforward as Kohn's introduction of them in chapter 1 would have us believe), that is, not 100% certain as to what they contain, have now become a part of Chinese medicine mythology as well. Are they really what Kohn and others seem to suggest that they are, the earliest representatives of the claimed uninterrupted tradition giving rise to what we practice today, or do they represent some traditions that continue, but others that have not continued, and may have been confined to the times that produced them? This is uncertain.

The facts of the matter are that Chinese medicine is not a continuous tradition as it has come down to us. Most of the "ancient" texts have been reworked repeatedly, not to say rewritten (today's *Shanghan lun* 傷寒論, "Discourses on Cold Harm," is a prime example), and the versions that we have today, that is of the transmitted literature, date back little farther than Song, which produced the standard editions of the medical classes still available at the time so that we see Chinese medicine very much through a Song set of rose-colored glasses. Even the Taoist texts such as the *daoyin jing* have checkered histories and it is difficult to rely on any of them as unvarnished ancient doctrine and method.

In short, this reviewer has doubts about Kohn's basic methodology and approaches. That said it is undeniable that she has written a well-structured, if at times highly uncritical, narrative. An effort has been made in the book to provide a scholarly background to her discussions, yet

Kohn's book is not a balanced and reliable survey of the past. It is useful but still very much part of the popular literature on Chinese medicine, even if better documented than most books of this genre.