

Thomas Heise, *Qigong in der VR China: Entwicklung, Theorie und Praxis*. Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1999. 272 pp.

### **Ute Engelhardt**

*[Ute Engelhardt teaches at the Institute of East Asian Studies at Munich University. Her current research involves Chinese traditional health techniques as Qigong, the history of dietetics and archaeological findings concerning the history of Chinese Medicine.]*

After publishing a variety of articles on the subject of psychotherapy and psychiatry in China, the doctor and psychiatrist Thomas Heise chose to concentrate his sinological dissertation on the subject of Qigong in the People's Republic of China. It is undoubtedly a controversial subject which is currently being given a great deal of attention in view of the Chinese government's decision in summer 1999 to ban the Falun gong movement.

The author, whose knowledge of Qigong, Taiji and Chinese medicine has been gathered in practice through a series of extended visits to China, has subdivided his work into "one part which traces historical development with regard to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and cultural developments, and another part which concentrates on Qigong practices themselves looking at the different stylistic elements and explaining their affiliations to specific styles, and by focusing on these two complementary aspects to gain, thereby, a clearer understanding of modern Chinese attitudes and the changes that have taken place in recent years" (p. 20). To this end, Heise has divided his book into eight chapters: he begins with a brief and general introduction in which he defines the term Qigong and examines how this practice has been received in the West. The second chapter looks at TCM and how it relates to Qigong, dominated by an assemblage of information about Chinese medicine already amply well-known in the West, while very little attention, if any, is given to the proclaimed purpose of the book to establish a relation between TCM and Qigong.

The third chapter is devoted to "Shamanism and the origins of Qigong." Here, quite rightly, Heise identifies both a superficiality to, and a certain dearth of, references to shamanism in modern Qigong literature. In contrast, he tries to provide "a rather less nebulous picture of early Chinese history until the Han Period (206 BC) and to outline its relation to Qigong" (p. 53). There may well be reason here to question the usefulness in this context of discussing a general relationship between shamanism and Qigong on the basis of (often old) Western secondary literature, and whether it would not have been more useful to examine the shamanic origins of certain individual practices, as Catherine Despeux did,

for example, with *daoyin* exercises ("Guiding and Pulling"),<sup>1</sup> or to study the magico-religious elements in particular texts about early Qigong practices with regard to their roots in shamanism, using the Mawangdui manuscripts,<sup>2</sup> for example.

In Chapter 4 the author turns his attention to TCM and the development of its importance to society; here once again the concrete relationships to Qigong are given rather scant attention. However, in Chapter 5, the author examines in depth the historical development of Qigong between 1949 and 1989. In this interesting overview the author collects impressions from some 300 books on modern Qigong and thus provides a profound insight into the most important literature published on this subject in recent years. After brief introductions to some selected exemplary books from the early years of Qigong in the People's Republic of China, he turns to the context of "Qigong fever" between 1983 and 1989, assigning Qigong exercises to individual styles presented within a comprehensive overview. It is noticeable here that, in allocating the individual Qigong styles, he relies entirely on the judgement of the Chinese authors without analysing the style and its elements more closely himself and assigning them accordingly. As a result, and without doubt or hesitation, he describes for example Li Hongzhi's Falun gong as Buddhist exercises (p. 120), and does not stop for a moment to question this categorisation. The same goes for Chapter 6 in which the Qigong sub-groups are presented. Here, too, Heise relies entirely on modern Chinese sources, which he often cites in detail, with extended translated extracts, without undertaking any analysis or offering a critical alternative division of Qigong styles and groups.

The author's own practical experience gathered in Tiantan Park in Beijing and complemented with interviews with Qigong experts provides the basis for Chapter 7 on the practice of Qigong. Unfortunately, here again description of all the experience gained seems to take preference over any critical evaluation. In the book's closing chapter, Heise provides a summary of the role of Qigong in culture, society and politics.

The book has an elementary index and is extensively illustrated, but the text does not contain any Chinese characters, except in the bibliography.

On the whole, it is an impressive book on account of the quantity of material that it deals with and the careful presentation of this material. This is why it is useful as a comprehensive overview of contemporary Chinese Qigong literature. However, a closer analysis and more critical examination of the existing material might have been desirable. This would probably have meant a restriction in scope, but many of the subjects (e.g. detailed evaluation of the contents and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Despeux, "Gymnastics: the ancient tradition," in Livia Kohn (ed.), *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies Publications, 1989), pp. 224-261.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Manuscripts: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Wellcome Asian Medical Monographs, 1998).

development of various Qigong journals, presented here only in descriptive overview, or much closer analysis of the different Qigong styles, *ibid.*) would have lent themselves well to individual, in-depth study.