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In the 1980s and 1990s, traditional breathing, gymnastic and meditation techniques were highly popular in China, in what was described by media chroniclers as “Qigong fever” (Qigong re). At its peak, the Qigong or “breath training” movement attracted over 100 million practitioners. The Qigong boom declined in the late 1990s and most Qigong organizations were dismantled after the crackdown on Falun Gong.

Prior to 1949, body cultivation techniques were widely practiced in monastic, medical, literati and sectarian circles, but there existed no self-conscious movement aiming to unite all practitioners. Although the term Qigong had appeared in a handful of books in the first half of the 20th century and earlier, the term was seldom used and it had not acquired its modern meaning. It was only after 1949 that Qigong became a generally used term, including in a single category all Chinese gymnastic, meditation, visualisation and breathing techniques, to which, over the years, were added martial, performance, trance, divination, charismatic healing, and talismanic techniques, as well as the study of paranormal phenomena, UFOs, the *Book of Changes*, etc.

Modern Qigong was founded by Party cadre Liu Guizhen in southern Hebei in the late 1940s. After recovering from various illnesses by learning a breathing technique from a traditional master, he reported on the efficacy of the method to his superiors, who charged him with conducting clinical research. He and his colleagues chose the term Qigong to designate the methods. In the 1950’s, Qigong was recognized as a discipline of Chinese medicine and specialized clinics and sanatoria were established in many cities. The practice was denounced as “feudal superstition” and driven underground during the Cultural Revolution. By the end of the 1970s, however, there was a new explosion of

Qigong activities. Already, artist and self-healed cancer victim Guo Lin had been teaching Qigong in Beijing parks since the early 1970s, turning the institutional Qigong of the 1950s into a mass activity practiced in public spaces. Guo Lin's "New Qigong Therapy", hailed as a cure for cancer, and other methods quickly spread to all parts of China. In 1978, Gu Hansen of the Shanghai Nuclear Research Institute announced that he had discovered the material basis of "External Qi" (waiqi), a form of energy which is said to be sent by Qigong masters toward their patients. Gu's experiments were considered by many to be a scientific discovery of historical significance.

While Qigong spread in China's parks and laboratories, the mass media became gripped by the strange phenomenon of children reading with their ears, leading to widespread media debate on "extraordinary functions of the human body" (teyigongneng). Most fascinating was the possibility of a link between Qigong and extraordinary functions: that Qigong exercises could lead to the practitioner acquiring paranormal powers. Qigong came to be seen no longer as a mere branch of Chinese medicine, but as a scientific discipline in its own right, specialized in investigating the powers of External Qi, which could be controlled and projected by the mind. In early 1986, the semi-official China Qigong Science Commission was founded on a triumphant note, as Professor Qian Xuesen proclaimed the new scientific revolution.

A flourishing Qigong subculture emerged, with its associations, its magazines, its conferences, its healing and cultural activities. A space was thus opened within which traditional masters could practice their healing arts and create organized groups under the guise of Qigong. Millions of adepts congregated in parks and public spaces every morning to practice exercise routines disseminated by the groups. The most popular routines in the early 1980s involved entering the trance of "spontaneous movements", a phenomenon comparable to possession states. Throughout the 1980s, Qigong became a legitimized outlet for the resurgence, reconfiguration and "modernization" of religious beliefs and practices. The interplay and interpenetration of these popular networks and official institutions gave form to the new Qigong circles.

A young Qigong master, Yan Xin, raised Qigong fever to a frenzy in early 1987 when researchers at Qinghua University publicized results of experiments showing that

his External Qi had changed the molecular structure of water at a distance of 2000 km. Yan Xin began a series of public lectures in large auditoriums and sports stadiums across the country. Entitled 'Force Field Experimental Lectures' (daigong baogao), they drew audiences of up to 20,000, lasted up to ten hours without interruption, and became the scene of trance reactions and miraculous healings.

However, opposition to Qigong grew within the scientific community. The media reported cases of Qigong quackery and of practitioners unable to come out of trance, starving themselves to death while fasting, or displaying psychotic behaviour. Many researchers claimed that External Qi was merely psychological suggestion. Anti-Qigong articles appeared in the press throughout 1995, attacking it as pseudo-science, superstition, and a dangerous cult. The Qigong movement began to flounder.

During this period, one Qigong master, Li Hongzhi, began to distance himself from Qigong, claiming that his method of Falun Gong* was not a Qigong method but the highest Law of the universe. His teachings went beyond health concerns to a rejection of the corrupt moral order, attracting millions of disillusioned practitioners of other Qigong methods. An increasingly characteristic feature of Falun Gong was its militant defense against any form of criticism through systematic protests against media and government agencies, culminating in the 10,000 person protest around the Party headquarters in Beijing on April 25, 1999. This led to the state's crackdown on Falun Gong, which was followed by the banning or dismantling of most other large Qigong organizations.

Suggested Readings:

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