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关于中国年轻人健康与完美体型的地方调查

**An Investigation of Health and Body Image Ideals  
Among Young Chinese Adults in Xiamen: Impact of Traditional  
Beliefs, Government and Media**

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## 摘要

中国人对身体健康和强壮的需求与日俱增。此外，学术研究和新闻媒体报道都显示，全世界对精神的需求呈日益增长态势。本研究的目的是对现代化和全球化下影响中国年轻人健康和健身需求的各项因素进行评估。本评估中所研究的三个要素为媒体、政府和传统价值对健康的影响，特别是气。本次研究采用定性的方式以及对厦门居民的半结构化的深度访谈来进行。通过不同理论框架来解读研究数据以分析受访人对身体健康的看法及其目前所钟爱的健身活动。本次研究发现，在过去三十年中，政府在健身教育领域的影响呈现下跌趋势，目前年轻人的健身需求受到大众媒体所展现的全球完美体型的影响。研究结果显示，即使年轻人仍然非常熟悉气这个中国的传统概念，但是他们并不希望修炼气功，他们追求的是健康的提升。

**要点：** 中国、全球媒体、体型、健康、气功

## ABSTRACT

A desire for a healthy and strong body is increasing in China. In addition, academic research and news media point to an increase in a global quest for spiritual enhancement. This research was conducted to evaluate the factors shaping the health and physical training preferences among the young adults in China, in the context of modernization and globalization. The three factors investigated through the study are the effects of media, government initiative and traditional beliefs on health, the concept of *qi* in particular. The research was completed using a qualitative approach and through conducting semi-structured in depth interviews with residents in Xiamen. The data were interpreted through different theoretical frameworks in order to analyse respondents' perception of healthy body and their current physical activity preferences. The study found that in the last thirty years, there is a decrease in governments effectiveness in physical education, and the current training trends among youth are shaped through global body image ideals shown through mass media. The research results show that, even though the traditional Chinese idea of *qi* is still well-known among the young population, there is no inclination towards practices to cultivate it, in favour of better health.

Keywords: China, global media, body image, health, qigong

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## INTRODUCTION

### Research Problem

A desire for a healthy and strong body is increasing in China. In an era of globalization, more and more people are interconnected and cultures are evolving; changing form through this interaction. Since the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, China has thus endured a cultural transformation, due to introduction of many new cultures which has reshaped the traditional understanding of health and body in China.

As China owns a wide range of traditional and cultural values, the study also aims to investigate how the relationship to the traditional thought has been affecting the ideas on health in the context of globalization. The ideas on *qi* is traditionally connected to traditional Chinese medicine, which has shaped the beliefs on health for a long time in China. The study investigates the current validity of the thought among the young generation and its application in social life.

Physical activity has been an integral part in history of China. The state in particular, has played an important role in promoting physical exercise; as it was believed strong bodies would build a strong nation. In the last thirty years, however, there is a common belief that, government is not as strict as it used to be when controlling the physical exercise, especially in education institutions. This study therefore, looks at the results of this change in government attitude, as reflected in the opinion of interview respondents.

Gaining rapid acceleration in the last two decades the body image has become the latest “obsession” among the Chinese society. The commercial ideas on how people should look like is effecting the society, the young population in particular. The rise in health and fitness market is one result of commercializing the ideal body, as people has

become more aware of the need for exercise. The expansion of global media in China nevertheless remains as the most effective factor during this period, introducing new values and ideals worth striving for among the population.

Combining the three main factors found in former literature, the study thus attempts to problematize and rethink the elements constructing the ideals on health and body image ideals among young adults in China.

### **Research Purpose and Aims**

Since the end of twentieth century, there is a rising interest in “the body” in the realm of social sciences. This research aims to analyse the perception of body and health in the lives of young Chinese adult in the early twenty-first century, from perspectives of government initiative, global media, and traditional beliefs.

The study aims to portray the gradual decay in the government control regarding the physical education before and after the open-up policy, as a factor for current health situation in China. The study also introduces factors that effected the current body ideals among young population, such as the effect of mass media, globalization and foreign influence. Last but not least, the study investigates the effectiveness of traditional idea of *qi*, and the *qi*-cultivating method of *qigong* in shaping health ideals among the young Chinese.

This is conducted through a combination of interviews with young adult residents of Xiamen, participant observation, and a review of academic literature. The empirical findings are then analysed through a theoretical framework consisting of Gerbner’s *Cultivation theory* and Festinger’s *Social Comparison theory* with the aim of making these theories visible in the context of the research.

## **Research Questions**

The study is guided through the main question: “What are the common ideals on health and body image among the young Chinese adults?”

To enrich the study with deeper analysis I ask further questions;

1. How important it is to cultivate the *qi* for a healthy body for young generation?
2. Is there a decrease in government influence on shaping ideals on body and health?
3. How does media shape the opinion on body image?

## **Thesis contribution**

Even though research on the subject of body image in China has been carried out, I have not found previous studies that investigated the relationship of health and body ideals among the young Chinese in reference to traditional beliefs on *qi*. Previous research on body has been done in northern cities like Beijing, in schools, universities and specifically among women. Situated in Fujian province, Xiamen could be considered one of the areas in China to show tendency toward religious and traditional beliefs compared to Northern China. This is another reason why I chose this particular topic in this environment.

In this thesis I try to highlight the pattern of the decreasing levels of physical activity in work life of young adults, which is on the other hand commensurate with an inclination to become more active. The ideology to stay strong and healthy is highly popular among the respondents. However, the influence of government on the health ideals created among young population was not strong. In addition, the study tries to portray the extent to which (whether) traditional/spiritual practices are expected and practiced among the young Chinese adults in connection to health improvement. It is revealed that the beliefs on traditional concepts are still existent, yet not actively

pursued to be cultivated.

## **Demarcations**

The scope of this study is limited to interviews conducted with a small number of Chinese residents in Xiamen City, in a limited time. Therefore, I do not claim this thesis to be representative for all residents of Xiamen, nor do I claim it to be valid for all of the country. I believe the results could vary, if the study were conducted in another city. Furthermore, it should be noted that a similar study on the same topic might produce different results if evaluated using different theories.

## **Disposition**

The *introduction* chapter introduces the reader the research problem, the purpose of the research and the research questions. The thesis contribution, demarcations and also disposition is presented within this chapter. The *first* chapter presents the literature review and historical background including the traditional Chinese ideas on *qi* and *qigong*, government initiative on physical education, and the period of globalization as well as effectiveness of global media which contextualizes the realm of this study. The *second* chapter familiarizes the reader with the theoretical framework of the study. The *third* chapter explains the methodology used for the study, including the ethical considerations and the validity of the study. The *fourth* chapter consists of the study findings and analysis, which includes data from the interviews, and their analysis within the theoretical framework. In the *conclusion* and final chapter, the results are briefly summarized and possible further investigation suggestions are presented.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 The Concept of *Qi* and Practice of *Qigong* in Traditional Chinese Thought

In order to illustrate the understanding of health in the Chinese traditional thought, this section tries to introduce the relevant concept of *qi* and practice of *qigong*. The section aims to provide the reader with introduction of their historical background, and earlier academic research leading to their current status quo within Chinese society.

Even though the literal meaning of the word *qi* translates as air or breath, when it comes to meaning, the idea could be understood as vital energy or as a form of life source. Traditionally *qi* is believed to be a dynamic, all pervasive, and all-transforming force animating everything in the universe. It is also possible to define it as the energy flow inside the body, which regulates life, just like blood; the only difference being the *qi* is invisible to the eye. *Qi* is one of the most important and widely interpreted concepts in Chinese intellectual history. It is a central element in the founding base of the Traditional Chinese Medicine, next to cosmic yin and yang, which are defined as “the greatest of *qi*” according to Zhuangzi.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the Huangdi Neijing “The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine” (dates to second century BC) is one of the first sources to talk about the *qi* as an energy circulating the human body and that it was a primary organizing principle and element of the body.<sup>2</sup> Most traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) techniques such as acupuncture, cupping, moxibustion, massage, and herbal remedies are utilized to animate the *qi*, which may be stagnant or pathological.<sup>3</sup> As Judith Farquhar points out, Chinese medicine's method of analysing the factors of illness "focuses almost exclusively on the war between heteropathic and orthopathic *qi*,

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<sup>1</sup> Zhuang Zi, 25:67/82

<sup>2</sup> Deng, Yu; Zhu Shuanli; Deng Hai. “Generalized Quanta Wave with Qi on Traditional Chinese Medicine”. *Journal of Mathematical Medicine (in Chinese)* 15 (2002): 369–371.

<sup>3</sup> Chen, Nancy. *Breathing Spaces Qigong, Psychiatry and Healing in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 13

the relations between climate or other environmental excesses (e.g., of heat, damp, wind) and physiological heat, damp, or sluggishness."<sup>4</sup>

The idea of *qi* as the vital energy/life source exists among other cultures within Asia as well. The Japanese call it *ki*, Korean call it *gi*, whereas the concept is named as *prana* in the Indian, Hindu culture. All of which share in common that this energy is what gives the humans the life and when *qi* is slow, blocked or stagnated there would be consequences on health. In Chinese historical thinking the *qi* is described as a life source that has the power to pervade through anything. It is therefore believed not only to regulate life for the human beings but also animals and other living things. Furthermore, since it has potential to permeate in the surroundings, the ancient Chinese used specific arrangements for spaces that helped the *qi* flow better in a certain area, and have a better balance which is believed to affect the energy levels of the occupants, also known as *feng shui*.

The idea that *qi* could be cultivated appeared first in philosophical texts and soon applied to physical realm. Famous Chinese philosopher Mencius has asserted that a well-nurtured willpower could control the *qi*, furthermore that it could be able to extend beyond the body. Thus, the belief that the flow of the *qi* could be guided through physical exercises was found in Chinese thought, which was believed to provide good health and longevity. The eagerness to cultivate *qi* has given rise to many practices. One of the most important and historically influential of many was the practice of *qigong* (气功).

*Qigong* is a health practice that involves breathing, mental imagery, and sometimes movement. In a broader sense, we could define *qigong* as a form of holistic healing and self-cultivation that reformulated traditional breathing and meditation techniques in the post-Mao reform period.<sup>5</sup> During this period there were many kinds of *qigong*, which would vary in form and styles. Nancy Chen asserts that in China, *qigong* is linked to a wide spectrum of practices ranging from self-cultivation,

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<sup>4</sup> Farquhar, Judith. Multiplicity, Point of View, and Responsibility in Traditional Chinese Healing. In *Body, Subject and Power in China*, edited by Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 84

<sup>5</sup> Chen, Nancy. *Breathing Spaces Qigong, Psychiatry and Healing in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 1

meditation, medical healing, and breathing to martial arts, each with specific history and genealogy.<sup>6</sup> *Qi* stands for the concept discussed above, namely the vital energy whereas *gong* refers to skill or the ability to strengthen and make use of the vital energy that circulates in the body. Even though the earliest record of *qigong* is said to be from the Zhou dynasty (1100 B.C.-770 B.C.) the historic claims that *qigong* has over five thousand years of history are still speculative. It is not explicit rather the ancient writings constitute the origins of *qigong* or simply a form of physical exercise routine, combined with breathing techniques.

In Mainland China after 1949, metaphysical knowledge around *qi* practice was suspiciously regarded. Since China's encounter with modernity, the emphasis on rational thinking and anti-traditionalism, as evidenced particularly in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), have meant disfavour for superstitious and occult practices. During this period the country was all for science and against traditional rituals. Many traditional practices were declared to be pseudo-science. Nevertheless *qigong* found a secure space for itself in Chinese traditional medicine.<sup>7</sup> After the Cultural Revolution, the first batch of *qigong* masters who came out to teach *qigong*, were all medical doctors. This was in fact how *qigong* found to reach the masses. "During the following thirty years many traditional methods were tested, revised, incorporated into *qigong* and thus made accessible to ordinary people in the name of medicine."<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Government Influence on Physical Education

One of the aims of this research is to investigate, whether or not there is a decrease in government initiative on physical education in the last thirty years in China. Thus, questioning the effects of government, on shaping individual ideals for health and body among the young population. Therefore, this section introduces the physical education policies of the government started from 1951 and their historical progress

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<sup>6</sup> Chen, Nancy. *Breathing Spaces Qigong, Psychiatry and Healing in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 6

<sup>7</sup> Xu, Jian. "Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese Qigong." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 4 (1999): 975

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* p.975



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