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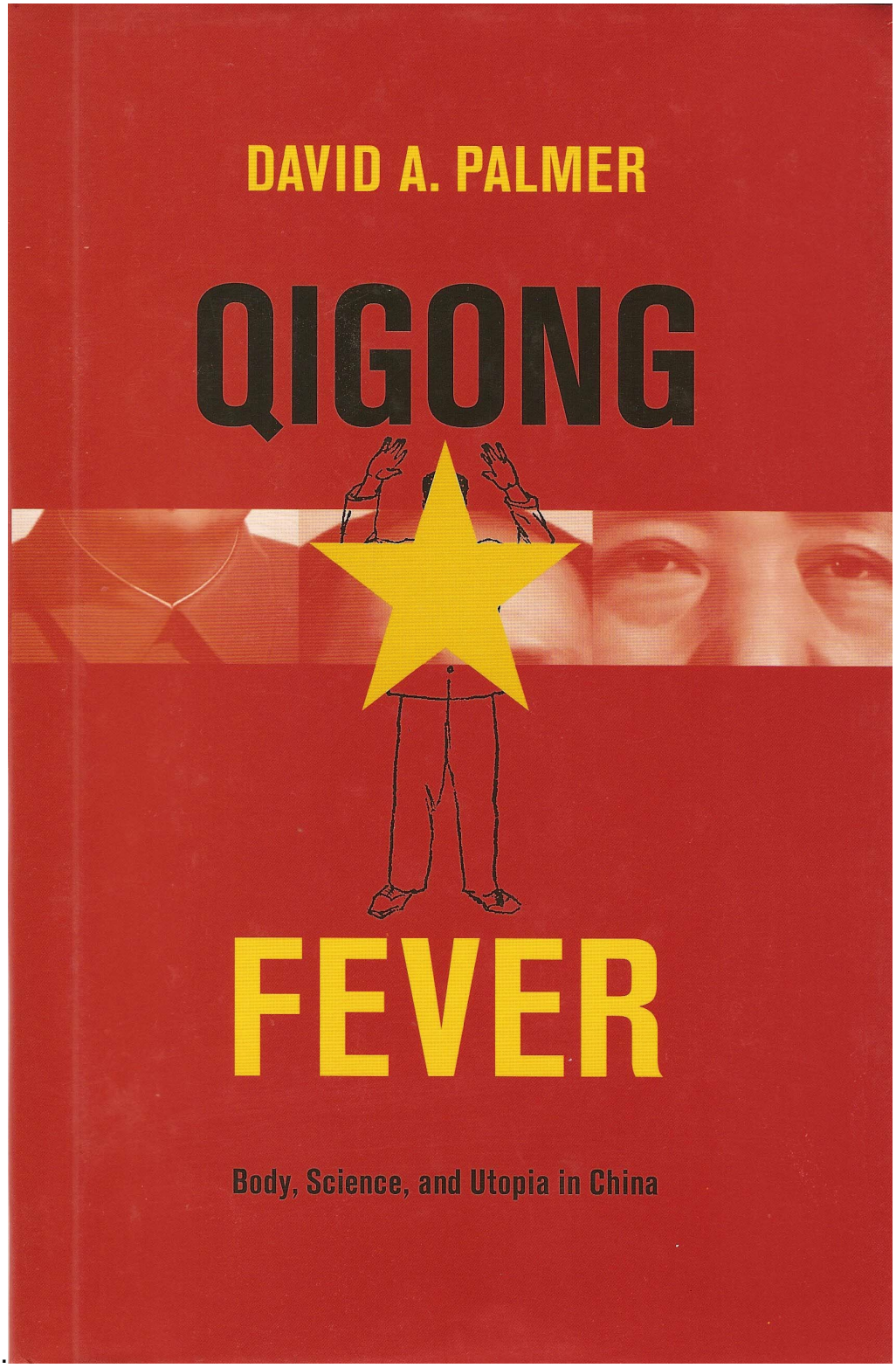

1 *Qigong Fever* is the English version of David Palmer's thesis (supervised by Kristofer Schipper and submitted for oral examination in 2002), which was previously published in French in 2005 by the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. This work relates how Chinese breathing control techniques, or *qigong*, were initially "launched from within socialist state institutions in the 1950s, before becoming the carriers of urban China's most popular form of religious expression in the 1980s, and later a powerful and enduring challenge to the legitimacy of China's political leadership in the late 1990s" (p. 4). In methodological terms, the writer

has based his study on the premise that in order to understand *qigong*, we need to identify its three distinct components, namely "body technologies, many of which originated in ancient times; the modalities of their transmission by specific social organizations; and the ideology carried by the latter" (p. 3).

2 In the first chapter, the author shows how *qigong* developed in official medical institutions from 1949 to 1964. A young party cadre called Liu Guizhen used the practice of *neiyanggong* to cure himself of an ulcer in 1947. This cure marked the beginning of the integration of *qigong* into official traditional medicine at a time when it was being revised and institutionalised in the context of developing a national health system. Palmer emphasises that the choice of the term *qigong* by Communist Party cadres in 1949 was a reflection of their desire to uproot such practices from their religious context and employ them in the project of building a modern state. In the process of being co-opted into this national drive, the practices themselves underwent a change in their mode of transmission: the relationship of master to disciple was modernised into that of doctor and patient. In China prior to 1949 it would have been unthinkable to study such bodily techniques outside their various ritualised martial, medical, religious, or ancestral contexts, so there was no set term to define a single community within which a unified network of practitioners could forge an identity. After being labelled superstitions in 1962, these practices fell into disuse until they were forbidden outright in1964, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.

3 In Chapters Two and Three, the author argues that in the 1980s, *qigong* provided a utopian political space that became a means for advancing individual empowerment, freedom, and subjective capabilities within a market of physical health and spiritual development. In effect these practices enabled the Chinese to rediscover their bodies and their subjective capacities after years of collectivism, industrial socialism, and control over their self-expression, leading to the "somatisation of suffering." For David Palmer, *qigong* at that time was still a way of reconciling tradition with the future through the construction of a collective memory and an identity that transcended certain post-Maoist nihilist trends. Guo Lin, a woman who had been cured of uterine cancer through practicing *qigong*, became especially influential in the open spaces of the cities, i.e., outside official institutions, through spreading knowledge of the breathing methods that she had developed while climbing the sacred mountains.

4 During the 1980s, then, *qigong* permeated the population through local groups, hierarchically organised into national and international networks. That is why there was a difference between this transmission by way of such "mass movements" and the traditional transmission from a master to a restricted number of disciples who shared their daily lives together. The author argues that these movements, or "denominations," which supposedly involved over 20 percent of China's urban population, were often organised around masters who drew their "charisma" from a network of political affiliations, from a reinvented tradition, and from this large mass of disciples and believers. Their practices -- which were sometimes linked to state-sponsored campaigns concerning public health, sport, science, and national defence -- took place in the gaps left open by the state apparatus, while being nonetheless under the patronage of highly placed government officials. In David Palmer's view, the development of *qigong* was based on a combination of ritual and institutional State support, as well as the dynamism and spontaneity of the local groups.

5 Chapter Four shows how *qigong* in the 1980s assumed a highly technological form, which was incorporated into the scientistic movement supporting the ideas of national development at the time. Having become a "bodily science" that contained the mysteries of a reinvented traditional China, it contributed towards the affirmation of the special identity, and even the superiority, of Chinese medicine, and in time this led to a quasi-scientific revolution inspired by utopian visions of the paranormal. Experiments by Gu Hansen (of the Shanghai Institute of Atomic Research) focused on the "external *qi*" as a "flow of particles" that could be measured by electronic detection. Similarly, research conducted by Qian Xuesen (of the National Defence Committee for Science and Technology) aimed at demonstrating the possibility of obtaining data on paranormal states, and of proceeding to establish *qigong* as a science that would allow the renewal of Marxism. For his part, Master Yan Xin (whose powers were put to the test at

Tsinghua University) conceived the idea that *qigong* was the true science underlying Chinese civilisation. But other scientists such as Yu Guangyuan (at the Institute of Natural Dialectics) opposed research into the paranormal, and during the 1990s their position was to emerge victorious.

6 In Chapter Five the author shows that in the second half of the 1980s, some traditional practices and symbols were (re)incorporated into the originally secular *qigong* concept, providing a means of religious expression outside the regulations and sites specified by the bureau of religious affairs. In this context he advances his notion of a "fever" as a "form of collective effervescence typical of post-totalitarian China." This fever was manifested in the proliferation of self-proclaimed masters and specialised journals, and in the numbers of people following traditional soothsaying, martial arts, and medical practices bearing the *qigong* label to promote their activities. Certain particularly flamboyant masters organised "power inducing lectures" during which thousands of participants "entered into a trance."

7 Chapter Six deals with the controversies and crises that shook the *qigong* world from the autumn of 1986 until 1996, when the government attempted to regain control over the same mass movements that it had fomented, and which were now escaping its grip. In the 1990s both government agencies and masters of the leading "denominations" sought to organise their domains in order to control and extend their networks. However, some of these denominations, such as Zhong Gong and the notorious Falun Gong, nurtured more ambitious projects and began to clash with the *qigong* organisations licensed by the state and the Communist Party. The invisible webs that these organisations had spun within the Party and the administration gave them *de facto* independence from state control. In Chapter Seven, the author provides a detailed analysis of the organisation of two of the *qigong* denominations, the vast Zhong Gong network and the regional organisation of Zangmi Gong.

8 Chapters Eight and Nine are devoted to a thorough analysis of Falun Gong and its millenarianism. The author believes that its challenge to the Communist Party in 1999 -- when 10,000 followers gathered for a "peaceful" demonstration outside the Zhongnanhai compound -- arose from a break back in the mid-1990s between Falun Gong and the *qigong* organisations licensed by the state. Once this disruption of the correct political rituals occurred -- and the author considers these to have been typically Chinese in relying upon the mutual interdependence between the officials and those under their governance -- the source of legitimacy and morality became polarised around the master Li Hongzhi. The government's subsequent campaign for the dissolution of Falun Gong picked up on the old theme, often repeated during Imperial times, of the struggle against "deviant teaching" (*xiejiao*). At the beginning of the twenty-first century it culminated in the dispersal of the larger part of the *qigong* movement.

9 In his final chapter, David Palmer situates *qigong* within the long-term perspective of Chinese religions, and especially the sectarian movements that have marked their historical trajectory since the end of the Han dynasty. These "sects" have always been distinct from the three great institutional traditions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) and from communal ceremonies, although they are also characterised by voluntary membership, the practices of health and self cultivation, and messianic teachings. Throughout history this "sectarian" label has covered an eclectic conglomeration of groups organised into flexible networks that were sometimes considered heterodox or even harmful, and were therefore condemned by the authorities. In times of repression, their modes of transmission became secret in order to enable the rebuilding of their organisations. These "sects" developed particularly strongly from the Song dynasty onwards, when Taoism and Buddhism fell from grace in favour of neo-Confucianism. They later drew some attention to themselves under the Qing dynasty on account of their anti-Manchu nationalism. Under the Republic, such groups developed rapidly in response to the destruction of traditional culture and local community cults, only to be eradicated after 1949 by the Communist Party.

10 Thus, a sociological analysis of *qigong* uncovers a pattern of interaction between the state and "popular" movements that is intrinsic to Chinese culture. Taking this long history into account allows David Palmer to demonstrate that the contemporary *qigong* phenomenon

has been linked from the outset to the politics of the People's Republic, and should not be seen as a passing or pseudo-scientific cultural epiphenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s. The Communist government's control over the social forms for expressing religious beliefs (by setting up official state religious associations and suppressing local community cults) brought about a deregulation of the representative means and institutions of the imperial epoch. This perspective enables Palmer to locate *qigong* at a juncture between traditional expectations of miraculous powers (which, we should remember, were considered merely secondary events in the Buddhist and Taoist outlook) and the development of the modernising utopian project and its cult of science.

11 This English edition is clearly distinguished from the earlier *Fièvre du qigong* by the way the writer steps back to clarify and extend his earlier arguments. But also, as a sign of American influence, the work is more condensed, and the use of subtitles and talking points takes over from the circumspect and pedagogical presentation of the material characteristic of the French edition (especially its rigorous in-depth analysis of publications by Chinese experts). I propose to focus my discussion of this extremely rich work on the author's use of Max Weber's concept of "charisma" in the Chinese context,[1] along with the links he establishes between modern *qigong* and traditional Chinese religious beliefs and practices.

12 Max Weber developed the notion of "charisma" from a macroscopic point of view, and within his broader reflections on the nature of authority. This conceptual tool has proven useful for throwing light on large-scale organisational structures and their power relations with the state, and that is the way in which David Palmer uses it in the case of modern *qigong*, which is his chosen object for study. On the other hand, his approach backgrounds the practices as they are actually lived by the individuals and communities who give them a specific local existence. In fact, the master who occupies the central position within the new vast networks of practitioners can easily be seen as a "charismatic" individual amidst a crowd of fascinated devotees who do not have direct access to him. These devotees no longer receive that essential part of the transmission that depends on personal relations between people engaged in shared daily practice and community life. Moreover the master is not just an individual who draws his legitimacy and charismatic appeal from collective acceptance; he is also one whose mastery of ritual techniques derives from a private transmission and long-term repetitive practice. That is why it seems to me reductive to approach the question of religion through the concept of authority; however important it is, it ought to be subsumed under the broader question of how techniques are transmitted and practiced within a community based on a ritual parenthood. In this light, we have to wonder whether the modern form of *qigong* is indeed a phenomenon with a genuinely religious origin, since it was invented by the Communists, and only (re)acquired a religious character in a subsequent development, i.e., in the context of the liberalisation of the 1980s, when the population re-appropriated certain cultural practices under the *qigong* label.

13 Max Weber defines charismatic authority by opposing it to traditional authority (as well as to the rational-legal form). Whereas the latter depended upon channels of transmission, the former was held to rely on a personal form of power arising directly from an emotional response. In other words, the charismatic master was seen as an *individual* who was by definition in *rebellion* against a traditional *dominant* order. Yet historically, actual sectarian movements in China have been in nearly every case peaceful, locally based organisations[2] that provided liturgical alternatives to those of the state, the ancestral cults, and the major religious traditions. Most of the rituals inherited from Imperial China function to regenerate the community in accordance with regular cycles, and aim at achieving emotional harmony by bringing canonical representations into actual reality. In general, then, the ritual master is accorded a certain authority, like the other local dignitaries with whom he interacts, while drawing on an established canon to prevent people's emotions from spilling over into open rebellion. At the same time, as David Palmer puts it, although the *qigong* movements have reinvented the former techniques and representations, they consist of individuals organised into vast hierarchical networks, who give an overwhelming importance to certain modern conceptions of health and ritual, and who are in control of the modern means of "remote" communication to spread their message. That is what distinguishes these networks from the

traditional local communities where cults were born, and from which they then gradually spread outwards through direct human contact.

14 The prefabricated domination/rebellion dialectic, which seems to me ill-suited to the study of Chinese religious beliefs and practices as such, nonetheless proves very effective for grasping the importance of *qigong* as a modern mass movement, and for illuminating some of the pathological symptoms, such as "fevers," that have marked the historical trajectory of modern China. Do we have to conform to the detached posture of contemporary governments and media, which only take an interest in "religious" issues when faced with an exotic ritual or a threatening social situation? This posture actually obscures the fundamental social process behind such moments of emotional and colourful outward expression. During the Song dynasty, for example, whenever the state considered certain groups to be heterodox, it gave recognition to some regional cult networks, and thereby gained some control over them through a policy of bestowing official titles on local and regional divinities on the basis of petitions drawn up by their representatives.[3] The great merit of David Palmer's work is to resituate such strikingly characteristic events as the scientific somatic research projects into the paranormal and the suppression of Falun Gong by the Chinese authorities into the general context of *qigong*, and then to ask an important question concerning the relationship of this contemporary social phenomenon to the ritual, medical, and religious autochthonous traditions.

15 *Qigong Fever* provides original and profound insights into Chinese social and political history over the last 60 years. In this respect, it provides definitive reading, not only for anyone interested in Chinese bodily techniques and rituals but also for those who wish to understand the particular kind of "civil society" that Chinese society has been generating and transmitting for a long time at the heart of its local communities.

16 Translated by Jonathan Hall

Notes

1 David Palmer further extends his use of "charisma" in his contribution to a recent issue of the review *Nova Religio*.

2 On this matter see the works of Daniel L. Overmeyer, "Alternatives: Popular Religious Sects in Chinese Society," *Modern China*, vol. VII, no. 2, 1981, pp. 153-190; and *Precious volumes: An introduction to Chinese sectarian scriptures from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, Cambridge, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999.

3 See in particular Valerie Hansen, *Changing gods in medieval China*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990.

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