

BOOK REVIEWS

Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience? by Lin Zixin, Yu Li, Guo Zhengyi, Shen Zhenyu, Zhang Honglin, and Zhang Tongling. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999. 155 pp. \$25.00. ISBN 1-57392-232-3.

Qigong is increasingly gaining notoriety and popularity in the US. The arrest of members of Falun Gong, a form of Qigong, is frequently in the news. Flyers advertising Qigong classes, including Falun Gong, are found at various public places. The practitioners of Qigong were invited to a TV station in the Greater Washington DC area where I live to discuss and demonstrate it on TV. Generally viewed as a method of meditation similar to Yoga outside China, Qigong means much more to the Chinese public.

Developed from ancient medical practices, Qigong shared the same origin as witchcraft but later headed in a different direction. The earliest depiction of Chinese Qigong was found in the remains of Yueh Du district of Qinghai Province that dates back at least 5000 years. Numerous references to Qigong have been found in books of traditional Chinese Medicine since 221 BC. Throughout history, Qigong flourished and many schools of Qigong practices developed. During the Cultural Revolution, Qigong, with its close ties to Taoism and Buddhism, was suppressed. Like many things that were suppressed during that tumultuous period in Chinese history, Qigong has gained its second life as China is now leaning towards democracy. At the same time, the claimed health benefits of Qigong practice have gained increasing recognition by the public, and the popularity of Qigong has exploded. Despite the fact that the scientific community has been conducting multidisciplinary research on the subject since the 1950s, the realm of Qigong and its physiological and pathological cause and effect are still not well defined or understood. It probably is the popularity and vagueness of Qigong that make it a target of the con artist.

Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience? is a very enjoyable, self-containing and easy-to-read book. The credentials of the authors lend tremendous credibility: Lin Zixin, a former editor-in-chief of China's *Science and Technology*; Yu Li, a popular debunker of pseudoscience with the Chinese Ministry of Internal Trade; Guo Zhengyi, deputy director and Shen Zhenyu, research director of China's Popular Science Institute; Zhang Honglin, director of the Qigong research department of China's Academy of Traditional Medicine; and Zhang Tongling, professor of psychiatry at Beijing Medical University. The book comes with an introduction about the important place that Qigong held in the evolution of Chinese civilization and in the psyche of Chinese society. A brief history of Qigong and its relation to traditional Chinese medicine is followed by the author's definition of Qigong and its practice. To prepare the readers for the subsequent debate on quackery and Qigong, the authors detail

how Qigong is practiced with 30 pages of text and 23 illustrations. The authors maintain that all Qigong practices can be summarized into three principles: regulating the body by practicing form; regulating breath to cultivate “Qi” or energy; and regulating the mind by practicing concentration. As such, the authors believe that the effect of Qigong is personal, and the essential nature of Qigong is a course of adjusting mental and psychological activity. All other claims of Qigong are either a misrepresentation of the facts or complete quackery. The goal of the book is to expose the falsehood of the pseudo-Qigong and quackery.

There are numerous self-proclaimed masters of special types of Qigong who can break tombstones with their head (Tough Qigong), eat burning charcoal, stand on balloons (Light Qigong or weightlessness), etc. Some of these performances resemble those of magicians or “psychics” in the West. Reading how these tricks are exposed one by one is quite an enlightening and entertaining experience. The authors’ experiments and discussion on External Qigong typifies the care they took in conducting the tests. External Qigong refers to the fact that some Qigong masters claim that they can treat patients with what is claimed to be Qi emitted by the master. The authors’ explanation of such effects is psychological suggestion. They demonstrated this by severing lines of communication by blindfolding the patient to prevent him from seeing when Qigong is performed. When this is done, the effect of External Qigong disappears. They also showed that therapeutic effects similar to those of Qigong can be achieved by psychological suggestion.

The authors are obviously very knowledgeable in Qigong, traditional Chinese medicine and related subjects such as human extraordinary abilities. In general, the authors take an objective stand towards the subject of investigation. Good experimental design and reproducibility are emphasized in their evaluation of the evidence. Numerous experiments supporting the presence of External Qigong are scrutinized and dismissed based on either a poor experimental design, a lack of control or a lack of reproducibility.

The book has a fairly extensive coverage on the change of Qigong from a mental/psychological exercise to a special human ability phenomenon in China since the 1970s. It is suggested that the research and debate of Qigong parallel those of psychic investigations in the West. The readers can glimpse the attitudes of Chinese society towards the special function aspect of Qigong through the brief biography of four super-Qigongists in recent years. In this respect, the book may serve as a resource book on the modern Qigong movement in China. A small weakness of the book is that it lacks complete information on some of the literature cited therein.

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