

The transmission of Chinese medicine

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1 The secret transmission of knowledge and practice

Qigong, which became very popular under Deng Xiaoping's leadership in the 1980s, has been jokingly referred to as the 'fifth modernisation' (*di wuge xiandaihua*). In many instances *qigong* refers to the reinterpretation of Daoist practices under the impact of modern medicine, but the wide range of practices called *qigong* renders a precise definition of this term impossible. *Qigong* is nowadays known mostly as a meditative practice with life-maintaining and therapeutic effects (Kohn 1989, N. N. Chen 1995), but opera singers, calligraphers, and other artists also use it to enhance their performance skills (Ma 1983:8). One can practise *qigong* alone or in groups; or it can be applied from a *qigong* master to his or her clients, in which case effects can be evoked similar to those of a hypnotist (Sundararajan 1990). Telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and other phenomena that are studied in the West under the rubric of parapsychology are often said to result from the practice of *qigong*. The ability to achieve the latter effects, called 'extraordinary *qigong*' (*teyi qigong*), is said to depend on a person's *xiantian* (constitution), while health status and artistic ability are considered to be improved in anyone through *qigong* meditation.

The word *qigong* has only recently been used in this sense. It occurred earlier in texts on self-cultivation as a technical term with another meaning, supposedly for the first time in a text of the Jin dynasty (AD 265–420) (Despeux 1988:9). Although it was already being used in its modern sense during the Republican period (1911–49),¹ it was only in the struggle for the legitimation of Chinese medicine after the Communist revolution that it became more widely known. The goals of this revival of Chinese medicine and with it the promulgation of *qigong* are reflected in its English translation: instead of a 'self-cultivation practice' it is currently called a 'breathing technique'.

¹ Apparently, Dong Hao acknowledged *qigong* for its therapeutic effects in 1936 (Despeux 1988:10).

The practice of self-cultivation is age-old. The earliest-known written records of ancient traditions of meditation are on bronze inscriptions of the Warring States period (475–221 BC), in the manuscripts excavated from the Mawangdui tombs (168 BC), and in chapters 36–8 of the *Guan zi*, a compilation from the fourth century BC (Harper 1990b). In the literature of the past two thousand years meditation practices of this kind have been referred to by terms such as *yangxing* (to nurture one's Nature), *yangsheng* (to nurture one's life), *daoyin* (to guide and lead (the *qi*)), and *xiushen* (to cultivate oneself). Present day *qigong* practices are in general new versions – often complete transmutations, of former Daoist meditation traditions, sometimes including elements of Buddhist meditation practices. Since *wushu* (unarmed combat) masters were least affected by efforts at modernisation, the meditative practices widespread today under the name of *qigong*, are mainly derived from *wushu* traditions (Wen Linjun, p.c.).² Formerly, I was told, all 'Chinese doctors' (*zhongyi*) engaged in meditative practices for self-cultivation, engaging in what a modern *qigong* healer would call 'soft *qigong*' (*ruan qigong*) as opposed to the *wushu* masters' 'hard *qigong*' (*ying qigong*).³ The former practice strengthened one's Inner *qi* (*neiqi*), the latter one's Outer *qi* (*waiqi*).

The practice of soft *qigong* was in general valued more highly since it enabled one to attain healing and other somewhat supernatural capabilities. *Xiang*, 'having a pleasant smell', like chocolate, orange blossoms, or soap, was one of these faculties. A student I knew at the college had already attained it after two weeks of training: he could make the palm of his hand smell of chocolate – admittedly for seconds only, so that an uncooperative person had difficulty in smelling it. *Fu*, 'levitating', was another, but it was purely a subjective feeling experienced by the meditator (although rumours circulated that it was possible to see *qigong* masters levitate during meditation). *Toushi*, 'having a penetrating vision' (x-ray vision), was a third. Stories were told of *qigong* masters who were able to tell the name, the age, and the work unit of a person on first sight because they could read the person's concealed identity card. Some *qigong* masters were sought out to help find lost objects; others were said to work as spies for the defence ministry in Beijing because they could see through walls.

Training in hard *qigong* strengthened one's Outer *qi* to such an extent that one could become invulnerable to slaps and kicks or capable of

² Certain forms of *wushu* have become known in the West as kungfu and karate (Lu and Needham 1980:302ff.). On the history of *wushu*, see Matsuda (1984) and Xi (1985).

³ 'The term for martial practice, *yinggong* (hard *qigong*), was defined in 1978 . . . Until very recently most people in China associated *qigong* with these martial techniques' (Miura 1989:342).

tolerating great weight or heavy blows to the body (e.g. trucks rolling over a platform supported by one's body or the splitting of bricks balanced on one's head). Moreover, it enabled one to give performances of eating glass and spitting fire. It was said to be easily learnt and results were guaranteed after only a few months' training. It is apparent that *qigong* includes a wide range of meditative practices found in many social contexts, from the secluded chamber of the Neo-Confucian scholar immersing himself in meditative 'self-cultivation' (*xiushen*)⁴ to marketplace performances of wandering jugglers and magicians demonstrating tricks to a crowd of curious gapers.

When the practice of *qigong* became more widely known in the 1950s, it was promoted in the context of public health care: in 1955 the first *qigong* rehabilitation centre was established in Tangshan, and patients suffering from gastro-intestinal disorders were taught Inner Nurture *qigong* (*neiyanggong*). In 1956 a course was set up in Beidaihe to train a first group of professional *qigong* practitioners. In 1957 a rehabilitation centre which monitored *qigong* therapies with scientific methods was established in Shanghai. *Qigong* was thereafter taught in several rehabilitation centres all over the country. It was promoted as a breathing technique particularly effective for the cure of chronic hepatitis, high blood pressure, heart palpitations, tuberculosis, asthma, neurasthenia, diabetes, glaucoma, and toxæmia (Ma 1983:44–6). The new name *qigong* for the old meditation practices emphasised its therapeutic merits, merits that were often proved by biomedical evidence. Health was conceived to result from a form of physical training rather than meditative spirituality.

Qigong was discredited as 'superstition' (*mixin*) during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) but despite lingering reservations in many circles, it was revived in the late 1970s and the 1980s. In 1988–9 it was no longer limited to improving the health condition of patients in rehabilitation centres but regularly practised by women as well as men; state employees, pensioners, and unemployed youth. *Qigong* was not only practised by individuals at home or in a quiet corner of a park; associations started to flourish which organised 'qigong meetings' (*qigong jiangzuo*) with famous *qigong* masters in sport stadiums and university auditoriums. During these meetings *qigong* masters were believed to provide therapeutic and life-maintaining benefits to their audience by the act of speaking alone. Short-term *qigong* courses for limited numbers of participants were advertised on posters in the streets and in pamphlets circulated in work

⁴ *Xiushen* is generally translated as 'self-cultivation' and strongly associated with Neo-Confucian endeavours. I use the word self-cultivation elsewhere in a wider sense, synonymous with the expression 'longevity techniques' in Kohn (1989).

units. Private *qigong* practices promising a sure and safe cure proliferated in and around the city. In Kunming, the entirety of the regulations of 1987 made *qigong* therapy in a private enterprise possible. In November 1989, however, when the Communist Party tightened its control after the June 4th crackdown in Tiananmen Square, new regulations were set up which allowed only those who passed the exams for 'regular practitioner' (*yishi*) to open private *qigong* practices (interview with the City Health Bureau, December 1989).

Reasons for the revival of *qigong* in the 1980s were, as so often happens in China, attributed to the head of state. Rumour had it that Deng Xiaoping was treated by a *qigong* healer and therefore promoted its revival. This saying paralleled the one that made Mao Zedong's personal experience with Chinese medicine in Yan'an responsible for policies favourable to TCM in the 1950s (Lampton 1977:62). Without denying the importance of a leader's promotion for mass movements in China, additional reasons are needed to explain the recent nationwide popularity of *qigong*.

'*Qigong* indicates a social problem', a young state employee who practised it said during a discussion. The policies of the 1980s that had allowed an economic boom in the private sector and the concession of increased decision-making to state enterprises had given rise to more substantial and visible corruption among government officials. Admittedly, the majority of the urban population – state employees in the work units – simultaneously experienced an improvement in their living standards, but this improvement was minimal compared with the profits of private entrepreneurs and the 'gifts' received by government officials. In Kunming, there was consensus among state employees that soaring inflation had caused a decline of living standards since 1987, and that the prospects for changes in employment and acknowledgement of personal merit were as non-existent as ever. In late 1989, for instance, students were reluctant to spend 0.3 *yuan* fortnightly for a cinema ticket or to buy tangerines on the free market where they were about three times as expensive as apples from the department store. In several work units cadres were forced to forgo immediate payment of one of their monthly salaries as a ten-year loan to the state. In this light, '*qigong* fever' may have indicated a general disillusionment with politics, a 'crisis of faith' resulting in individual withdrawal. It may have been a form of resistance to ongoing processes in society that were more than once described to me as 'chaotic' (*luan*), the term with which political periods like the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) were characterised. Whereas the esoteric quest of mystery seems to have played an important role in the spread of *qigong* in the West, as far as I can tell, it was

insignificant in the PRC. It is, however, possible that through *qigong*, introspection, and the discovery of one's own body and self, new values are brought to the individual.

Nowadays many styles of *qigong* are public while the practice of other *qigong* healers is still veiled in secrecy. I discuss one such secret tradition of *qigong* because secrecy was, and for certain families still is, one of the most important features of Chinese medical knowledge. The mode in which a *qigong* healer transmitted his secret knowledge and practice to his disciple may point to features of Chinese medical knowledge and practice secretly transmitted within a family. Most of my observations of *qigong* were made in a private practice of the *qigong* healer Qiu, thirty-two years old, his wife Jade Blossom, twenty-four years old, an acupuncturist, and her younger brother Qiudi, nineteen years old, who was Qiu's disciple.

The setting

The *qigong* healer Qiu's private practice was in a neighbourhood of petty enterprise in a narrow side street of old houses, sheltered from the traffic. This street began in a very crowded free market in front of the former city gate where a bridge crossed one of Kunming's main canals and ended half a mile north at the drum tower, where there was another free market. Situated outside the former city wall, the houses were low-roofed and poorly built; the street was called 'the street of the poor' (*pinminjie*). Indeed, in the teahouse near Qiu's practice there were all kinds of characters, many of them in old, worn-out Mao suits and a few even in rags. Pedestrians coming from the bus station would pass through this street on their way to the city centre. It was effervescent with small-scale business, and cyclists had to step down from their bikes to join the rhythm of the crowd. Private and collective shops, taverns, and inns flourished, and several 'private enterprises' (*getihu*) offered medical care. From the market bridge to Qiu's consultation room one passed three of them: a bone setter, a Chinese herbalist, and a biomedical doctor specialising in paediatrics. Beyond Qiu's practice on the way to the drum tower, one could count another four: two private pharmacies for Western biomedical drugs, an 'integrated Western-Chinese medical' (*zhongxiyi jiehe*) family practice, and, newly installed in January 1989, a small private hospital with between ten and twenty beds. In the mornings the latest mainland hits pounded out from huge Japanese tape recorders, while old men with water pipes and bird cages by their sides played chess in a corner near the teahouse. But in the evenings, there were the long, drawn-out phrases of an *erhu* (a Chinese

stringed instrument) and the hoarse voice of an old woman which sounded plaintively through the night. It was in this motley community of petty enterprise and households of partly marginalised city inhabitants that Qiu had established his practice of acumoxa, massage, and *qigong*.⁵

Social networks and private enterprise

Officially Qiu had the status of a *qigong* practitioner; on our first encounter, he showed me the document that certified it. In 1988 he was 'bound by contract' (*chengbao*) to his former work unit, the Third City Hospital, where he had been employed for five years as a *qigong* healer, but in 1989, after his wife had passed the examinations for opening a private 'acumoxa' (*zhenjiu*) practice, he gave up this contract and she applied to one of the city's 'district health bureaus' (*qu weishengju*) for official recognition. The contract had guaranteed them employment by their work unit if their enterprise failed, but it had obliged them to pay 200 *yuan* monthly whereas the monthly taxes to the city district health authorities were only 10–20 *yuan*.⁶

Qiu also had permission from the same district health bureau to sell 'Chinese medical drugs' (*zhongyao*), but in his medical practice he generally used 'herbal drugs' (*caoyao*). He bought dried plants in large quantities at a low price from itinerant 'herbalists' (*caoyi*) which he and his disciple ground in their entirety (with stems, leaves, and often also their roots) into a powder that was prescribed to his clients in portions, small enough to be thrown into the mouth and ingested with a sip of water. He also had some 'ready made Chinese medical drugs' (*zhongchengyao*) against 'common colds' (*ganmao*), 'stomach aches' (*futeng*), and 'coughs' (*kesou*), but mostly stocked 'invigorating drugs' (*buyao*) like extracts of ginseng (*renshen*) or royal jelly (*wangjiang*). He did not risk buying drugs that he could not use himself for fear that he would not sell them. His inventory of Western biomedical drugs was minimal; it comprised pain killers, aspirin, and some antibiotics for primary health care.

Family practices of specialists like Qiu played an important role in health care at the grassroots level. Those seeking specialist proficiency

⁵ By 1992 the southern parts of this neighbourhood were transformed by the construction of the Yuantong bridge; the northern parts, including the drum tower, were demolished in 1996 because of road construction works.

⁶ Exchange rates for the *yuan* fluctuated considerably in 1988/9. Its value is best assessed in light of the monthly salary of work unit members like the TCM teachers, which varied between 76 and 135 *yuan*. See table 5.1.

such as Qiu's *qigong* therapy were prepared to pay large sums for their treatment. The healer's family's livelihood was thus ensured by his speciality. However, as Qiu's inventory of drugs reveals, he had other clients as well. They usually came from the neighbourhood with a cut finger, a fever, or a headache. Although the Red Cross Hospital was only a ten minutes' walk away, they generally sought Qiu's assistance. His *qigong* practice thus fulfilled important functions of primary health care.

No private enterprise in the PRC can survive with official recognition alone. Beneficial non-official contacts are indispensable. Friends and colleagues need to be fostered as 'good connections' (*hao guanxi*). Qiu had many visitors. He was a pleasant person, a good healer, and most of all, known in certain circles as one of the most powerful *qigong* masters in town. Some of his visitors were former patients who had become friends with their healer in the course of their convalescence; others were members of the *Qigong* Association of Kunming City and still others were would-be *qigong* practitioners who hoped to be initiated into Qiu's secrets. One of the visitors, for instance, came almost daily throughout a period of several months. He was often invited to stay for supper, as demanded by Chinese hospitality, but Jade Blossom thoroughly disliked him, suspecting that he was trying to get her husband's secret knowledge. Qiu, instead of being annoyed with him, got angry with her: 'She doesn't understand how our society functions' (*ta bu dong shehui*). It was good to have many friends and even better to attract them with admiration for the secret.

Apart from such visitors, a wealthy entrepreneur for whom Qiu had worked as a carpenter in his youth made Qiu known in Buddhist circles. In 1988 Qiu was summoned to heal a renowned monk belonging to an important temple about thirty miles outside of Kunming – he was proud to tell me that he had been taken there in the temple authority's new minibus. In 1989, when he took part in a Buddhist festivity at another temple, it was again this friend who introduced him to the temple's oldest monk. The first time Qiu had been asked to cure a cancer, but he was called for only a few days before the monk's death; the second time, he was asked to treat a common headache, and apparently did so to the monk's satisfaction.

When pressed, Qiu said he was a Daoist and a Buddhist, but he did not attach much importance to it. He did not have much reason to call himself a Buddhist; he participated in Buddhist festivities very erratically and seemed to do so more for social reasons than out of religious conviction. By contrast, his mother was a devoted Buddhist who had kept her domestic shrine even during the Cultural Revolution. She went regularly to the nearby temple (for her half-hour walk), sometimes

alone, sometimes with other women from the neighbourhood. She stuck to the habit that dishes at meals were vegetarian on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month.⁷ It was probably in order to maintain this dietary practice that the days were counted according to the lunar calendar in Qiu's family.⁸

Qiu also cultivated contacts with herbalists, one of whom was a neighbour who had no private practice but a few private patients. Lao Yi, a retired worker, claimed to have learnt Chinese medicine on his own, by reading books only.⁹ Since he was a widower, he often stayed for lunch with Qiu's family. Qiu was mainly interested in this old man's knowledge of the herbal drugs, their habitats, and their locations in the environs of the city. In the summer and autumn of 1989 the two undertook at least five outings into the nearby hills, usually to gather a specific species for one of Qiu's or Lao Yi's patients. Qiu was eager to learn to recognise and collect medicinal plants so that he would not have to depend on the herbalists for them.

Informal 'contacts' (*guanxi*) – Qiu's friends and colleagues, his Buddhist connection, and his contact with herbalists – were indispensable for running his business. Later, I discovered that he also had two 'bond brothers' (*xiongdi*) when I asked him about a tattoo of a sword on his left arm. The three had become bond brothers shortly after the death of Qiu's master in 1978. Their brotherhood meant pledging to support each other in hardship and to keep their master's knowledge secret. Perhaps it was coincidence, perhaps a reflection of a more general pattern, that these bond brothers and former close friends later became vicious rivals.

Brotherhood and dangers of knowledge

One of Qiu's bond brothers, Luo, had twice tried to kill Qiu, Jade Blossom told me on their way home from a dinner that Qiu had given

⁷ Qiu said that his mother was vegetarian, which did not mean that she ate vegetarian daily but only on those two days of a month. For a similar pattern of vegetarian diets among sect members, see Naquin (1976:47).

⁸ The Gregorian calendar (*yangli*) is used by the administration and city inhabitants and the lunar calendar (*yinli*) mainly in the countryside. In some county towns the market days fall on the first, fifth, eleventh, fifteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-fifth of the Gregorian calendar month, a pattern supposedly related to the lunar calendar.

⁹ Qiu spoke of Lao Yi as a *caoyi*, but Lao Yi called himself for reasons of prestige a *zhongyi*. In biographies of Chinese doctors, it is a *topos* to have learnt medicine mainly by reading books, without (*Shi ji* 105 (Sima 1959:2785)) or with the guidance of a master (*Shi ji* 105 (Sima 1959:2796)). This belief in an independent learning from texts, without any mentor's guidance, stands in stark contrast to the principles of the secret transmission of knowledge.

in honour of Luo and his family. Shortly after their master's death, Luo had entrusted to Qiu a particularly powerful *gongfa* (method/efficacy of *qigong*) that consisted of a minimal diet and walking for several hours at night. Qiu, walking off his legs, had become thinner and thinner until one of his older friends, aware of Qiu's grief over his master's death, had made enquiries into the matter and brought him back to his senses. Several years later, Jade Blossom continued, when Qiu was known citywide and asked to go for scientific trials on *qigong* to Beijing, Luo confidentially recommended that he take drugs which instantly induced stomach cramps and put Qiu into a coma. Only immediate intervention at a biomedical hospital had saved him from lethal poisoning by his bond brother. Hesitating to believe this, I looked at Qiu who had been accompanying us silently: he did not say anything but nodded.

Qiu was reluctant to speak ill of Luo who was his master's son. He called him *erge*, second older brother, and tried to treat him like one. Most of Qiu's friends avoided Luo, and therefore he could not invite him to his wedding banquet, but he felt obliged to invite him and his master's entire family to a separate dinner three weeks later. Despite the alleged murder attempts, Qiu showed respect for his master's son, and on *qingming* day,¹⁰ when Qiu planned to visit the grave of his master with his disciple, and I, the foreigner, wanted to join them, he did not fail to invite his master's son to join us.

The other bond brother, Long, was, unlike Qiu and Luo, tall and well-built; most impressive in stature. His father was a high government official and this had probably determined most of the circumstances of Long's life. In 1978 Luo had taught Long his late father's meditation practices and even lent him his father's notebooks, probably with the purpose of establishing a connection with an influential person. In 1982 Long had managed to be called with Qiu to Beijing for trials of *qigong*. In 1988 he had set up a private *qigong* hospital. It was an impressive enterprise, installed in a building of seven storeys which advertised itself by the expensive but prestigious means of television spots. Long had employed a staff of more than ten *qigong* healers as well as Western biomedical and TCM doctors. Thanks to his father, he enjoyed enough credibility to take out enormous bankloans. But when these had proved insufficient, he had approached his bond brother Qiu, so I was told, offering him the position of vice-director and asking for financial support. Qiu had refused participation but claimed to have advanced three thousand *yuan* because of their brotherhood. Less than six months later the hospital went bankrupt. His bond brother changed his address and

¹⁰ The fifth day of the fourth lunar month, the day of the commemoration of the dead.

rumour went that he had left the province. It was clear that Qiu would never see a penny of that money again.

The amount of money and life-threatening rivalry involved make the above stories sound fabulous. The dramatic scale of Luo's deception and Long's fraud reflect the prestige and power attributed to *qigong*, and the danger of envy. Danger was, moreover, believed to be inherent in the practice of *qigong* meditation itself. Stories were told of students who had gone mad because they had tried to learn *qigong* by consulting books only. They had put *qi* out of place (for instance, into the arm instead of the Cinnabar Field (*dantian*)), and *qi* permanently out of place resulted in dementia or even in death. Guidance by a master was indispensable, misguidance fatal. With this belief in the need of a master for learning *qigong*, control over knowledge was secured by those who possessed it.

Family bonds and the ethics of knowledge

Qiu had been weak and sickly in his early childhood. His grandfather, who was a Chinese herbal doctor, had sent the five-year-old boy once a week to an old friend in the suburbs who was a *wushu* master. Later he had had him learn medicine and meditation from his neighbour who was a 'senior Chinese doctor' (*laozhongyi*). Qiu told me that his grandfather had not taught his father medicine because he had not thought much of that son's character.¹¹ For similar reasons his master, Luo, had been reluctant to teach his second son, Qiu explained, but since that son was weedy and weak, the father felt obliged to provide the son a means of livelihood and equip him with his knowledge. *Qigong* meditation not only strengthened the bodies of these physically weak children; the knowledge of *qigong* gave them power and social prestige.

Episodes of Qiu's life pointed to a strong sense of 'filial piety' (*xiao*). His mother told me once at supper that as a child Qiu had refused to eat for several days. He was a toddler, she said, but strong-minded, he had wanted his mother to listen to his advice. Her husband's income had been insufficient to nourish their six children, and therefore she had worked for one *yuan* per day for a neighbour who was a vegetable merchant. Seeing her exploited, 'I always told her not to work for him', Qiu said and continued: 'I left primary school after only five years because I wanted to protect the family.' 'Because your school records

¹¹ Qiu's father was a 'worker' (*gongren*) of a nearby factory who was in early retirement and spent most of his days sitting in and around Qiu's practice. He never recovered from his nervous breakdown during the Cultural Revolution; the paternal authority tended to be with Qiu's elder brothers rather than with him.

were not good enough', his wife chided. 'That was the only way to get out', Qiu insisted. In his early twenties he had been offered work with an overseas Chinese in Singapore. He maintained that he had not accepted the offer because he wanted to look after his parents. During my fieldwork he lived in his parents' home and gave them one hundred *yuan* per month, since his father's pension was only forty *yuan*. Jade Blossom often complained about this, although it was, according to Qiu, less than a tenth of their income.

An 'upright mind' (*zhengxin*) and a clear conscience were repeatedly cited as preconditions for finding the concentration to meditate. Purity of mind was paralleled by purification through washing the entire body, cleansing the meditation room, respecting food taboos, and abstaining from sexual intercourse. The meditation was to take place regularly at a precise time of the day, during the *zi* hours around midnight (11 p.m. – 1 a.m.). The seating during meditation, the altar, and the taboos had features common to both Daoist and Buddhist traditions, but Qiu's incantations were exclusively Daoist, and with much veneration he kept hidden a portrait of Taishang Laojun.¹² The incantations contained verses of harmful magic, although Qiu and all the other *qigong* masters I met maintained that any kind of harm or disturbance directed at another person would damage one's *gongfa*. According to a story circulating at the time in Kunming, the nationally known *qigong* master Yan Xin once undertook to cure a patient suffering from 'oedema' (*shuizhong*) in her legs. During the following two hours his two disciples repeatedly had the urge to urinate, and as a result the patient's swelling was reduced. 'They were his disciples', was the comment. If the master had inflicted the disturbance he had caused in his disciples on another person, his *gongfa* would have ceased. He could disturb his disciples in this way only because master and disciple were very close. *Qigong* masters were believed to be extremely powerful, and if they refused to perform certain manipulations, it was often on ethical grounds.

Guarding the secrecy of his knowledge was a virtue Qiu admitted to have lacked. In his youth he had made the mistake of teaching his friends. One of his earlier lovers, for instance, had managed to learn from him many aspects of his secret knowledge, and when she left him, she set up her own practice somewhere in town. Her competition was no threat to him, and the broken relationship did not seem to disturb him as much as the regret that he had spilled out so much of the secret knowledge that his beloved master had chosen to give only to him.

¹² The highest divinity of Daoist folk religion, Laozi. He was first made the head of the Daoist pantheon and later dubbed Taishang Laojun (Day 1969:135). See also Kohn (1989:134, 154, 155, 167).

Young and inexperienced as he had been in his twenties, he had also made a fool of himself by teaching someone who claimed to be his friend the ‘ten precious movements’ that formed the beginning of each meditation session. That ‘friend’ had later written an introductory book on *qigong* containing the sequence of movements that Qiu had taught him.¹³

Discipleship: imitation and repetition

After Qiu and Jade Blossom had signed the civil marriage contract,¹⁴ she asked to be initiated into his esoteric knowledge as evidence of his love. A few months later, shortly before their public wedding, she became pregnant, making the practice of *qigong* too strenuous for her, and in any case forbidden. Her younger brother, who had just graduated from middle school and was unemployed, came from her home province to stay with her, however, and Qiu, in recognition of his affinal ties, was obliged to teach him.

Jade Blossom’s younger brother Qiudi was very silent, if not by nature, by his social status and age. He was a newcomer to the extended family, which included Qiu’s parents and one of his elder brothers who was not employed by a work unit. As a disciple, Qiudi was expected to assist his master in every aspect of his life. In addition, as the youngest adult member in the household, he was also expected to be helpful and dutiful to his sister’s in-laws. He washed the dishes, cleaned the consulting room in the evenings, and did most of the very strenuous labour of grinding the medicinal herbs into powder; he was sent here and there for his sister and her husband. And if something went wrong it was his fault.¹⁵ He was treated in such a way not out of malice, but as a matter of habit. Nobody felt that it was necessary to justify it. Qiudi had been in training for several months when I became friendly with Qiu’s family, and given my interest in *qigong*, frequently asked him about his latest progress. Qiu and especially Jade Blossom constantly scolded him for being lazy. During an outing of the three on National Day (October 1), Qiu urged his disciple to take his training more seriously. Jade Blossom confided this to me on a shopping trip during one of the

¹³ Almost all the movements in a slightly different sequence are recorded in Wang Zuyuan’s ((1834)1956:47–58) *Illustrated Exegesis on Inner Alchemy (Nei gong tu shuo)*: the twelve illustrations of the *Canon for Supple Sinews (Yi jin jing)*.

¹⁴ Civil marriage contracts are signed without general publicity. In the late 1980s they were easily and frequently dissolved. A marriage is, in general, acknowledged only after the wedding banquet (Croll 1981:110).

¹⁵ On the hardly bearable conditions of an apprentice, see Cooper (1980:23–33).

following days. It seemed as if the anthropologist's interest in *qigong* had enlivened theirs and possibly intensified Qiudi's training.

To become a healer, it was most important to cultivate one's Inner *qi* and practice soft *qigong*, Jade Blossom explained. She wanted her brother to become a healer, but since he was a strong young man Qiu had insisted that he undergo the severe training of hard *qigong*. Whereas the practice of soft *qigong* consisted mainly in 'meditation in tranquillity' (*jingong*) as opposed to 'meditation by movement' (*donggong*),¹⁶ hard *qigong* practices included hitting sacks filled with gravel, tree trunks, and stone walls with one's bare hands, and beating oneself with a sackful of gravel. Apart from that, they included long series of quick movements that could only be performed when the body was in excellent condition.

In autumn 1988, Qiudi was temporarily working in a collective that sold and repaired simple electronic equipment. In the evening after supper and early in the morning he would regularly go for meditation to the nearby park. Qiudi had already been taught the 'ten precious movements', now he was to proceed to meditation in tranquillity. This consisted mainly of several hours of conscious but natural breathing while seated with crossed legs, soles up, after a few introductory incantations and movements. It was probable that one night a bright Light (*guang*) – red, white, or blue-green – would suddenly appear. Novices were taught that it was important not to be frightened by this and to continue to breathe regularly.

Descriptions of a Light or Glow were given to me by most of those who practised *qigong* seriously. An often-described sensation was a warm golden Glow that travelled on the Minor Cosmic Circulation (*xiao zhoutian*), and this description is also found in the rapidly expanding popular literature. A warm sensation was first felt in the region of the Cinnabar Field (*dantian*) just beneath the navel.¹⁷ That Glow was easily transmitted from there to the lower back area of the Gate Pass (*lüguan*).¹⁸ The next step was to make the Glow circulate. This was difficult, for while one could easily let the Glow wander along certain sections of the spine it would usually halt in between them, in passages called the

¹⁶ The term *jingong* can be found in *Zhuang zi* 26 (Miura 1989:345); *donggong* is a form of *qigong* that has, for ideological reasons, been promoted in the PRC (p. 334).

¹⁷ Compare with Yang Xuancao's comments on a phrase in *Nan jing* 66 (translated by Unschuld 1986b:567): 'As to the moving *qi* beneath the navel and between the kidneys, it is the *dantian*', followed by a long discussion of its features. See also footnote 20.

¹⁸ In the literature known as the *weilüguan*, rendered as the Caudal Narrow Pass by Despeux (1994:81). The *locus classicus* is *Zhuang zi* 17: the *weilü* is associated with the place at which the waters of the sea are continuously discharged.

Three Passes (*sanguan*).¹⁹ Once the Glow had reached the top of one's head it would wander downward to the area in which it had originated, the Cinnabar Field. 'The Minor Cosmic Circulation is connected' (*xiaozhoutian tong*) was the expression for this sensation. Some beginners could not bring the Glow to circulation at all and gave up *qigong*, but most arrived at it after several meditation sessions. Once the Minor Cosmic Circulation had been connected, the Glow would easily continue to circulate. The meditator was rewarded with a feeling of relaxation, lightness, and weightlessness that was 'very delightful' (*hen shufu*). This direct emotional reward after persistent repetition of the same movement needs to be stressed.

'There are as many ways of practising *qigong* as there are masters', Qiu replied when I asked his opinion on the experiences described above. His *gongfa* did not make reference to the Minor Cosmic Circulation; he spoke of a Light which originated between his eyebrows at the *yintang*.²⁰ His disciple Qiudi experienced this Light in front of his forehead too. 'He saw the Red Light (*ta jian hongguangle*)', Jade Blossom told me proudly and I took it that this expression indicated a stage comparable to connecting the Minor Cosmic Circulation. It was clear that Qiudi had made an important step in his training. The problem now was to manipulate this Light for healing purposes.

Qiudi started working as a healer under Qiu's guidance in mid-October. The client with whom they worked was a woman in her fifties who suffered severe shoulder pain. Ma was an unusual patient because of her high social status (she was a physics teacher who had graduated from Beijing University), her vivacious cooperation (talkative, encouraging, and readily influenced), and her health-seeking behaviour (marked by persistence in seeking relief from her symptoms). When the pain in her shoulder had started with sudden onset four months earlier, she had gone to Kunming's most prestigious hospital, the People's Provincial Hospital, like many state-educated and state-employed cadres turning first to Western biomedicine. The doctor she had consulted there, however, had sent her to the acumoxa department of the hospital. She was treated for two or three weeks at a cost of a treatment cycle of ten consultations of two *yuan* each, without tangible improvement. By then she had heard that acupuncturists working in TCM hospitals had better training, but the treatment she subsequently received at the City

¹⁹ For a brief account of the Three Passes (*sanguan*), see Despeux (1994:80–7).

²⁰ The *dantian* (Cinnabar Field) is occasionally referred to as upper, middle, and lower *dantian*, located between the eyebrows (corresponding acu-point *yintang*), between the nipples (corresponding acu-point: *danzhong*), and in the area which is about the breadth of a hand below the navel. Qiu said no more (but see Despeux 1994:74–80).

TCM Hospital had not proved much more successful. The pain continued to keep her from sleeping at night. The masseurs of an itinerant medical service group stationed near the hospital had promised her a definite cure, and for thirty-two *yuan*, paid in advance, she had been guaranteed daily treatment until the pain was gone. That treatment had worsened the pain so that she could hardly lift her arm. She had then turned to *qigong*.

The director of the private *qigong* hospital she had attended, Qiu's bond brother, had recommended Qiu to her. When Qiu heard that his bond brother had refused to commit himself to her healing, he expressed doubt about being able to make her well. She was, however, anxious to receive his treatment and pointed out that he had just cured a client before her eyes in a single session. 'Everyone is different', he replied; 'you have to be "predestined" (*yuanfen*) for *qigong*.' When he eventually agreed to try, he proposed to deliver, in addition to acumoxa, 'cupping' (*huoguan*), fire massage,²¹ and *qigong* treatment, so-called 'remote-effect-*qigong*' (*yuan qigong*) – simultaneous meditation in tranquillity by sender and receiver – in their homes on opposite sides of the city. This meant that Qiudi's way of learning to become a healer consisted first of remote-effect-*qigong* sessions; then, after a week, of delivering several *qigong* sessions together with his master; and after two weeks, of performing his first *qigong* healing session entirely on his own.

On Monday 17 October, Ma, accompanied by her husband, came for her first treatment. Jade Blossom delivered acumoxa and cupping treatment, each of about twenty minutes duration, Qiu then administered a half-hour of fire massage, which was extremely painful for the client. Lastly he gave a concentrated *qigong* session of half an hour. Thereafter, he asked Ma to raise her arm, and to the surprise of everyone she did, up to 45 degrees.

Two days later, during the Wednesday treatment after the first remote-effect-*qigong* session, Ma declared that the pain had increased so much that she could not sleep. Qiu's wife was concerned. Firstly, her husband had been unable to lift his shoulder during the remote-effect-*qigong* session the night before, and she knew that he could develop such empathy for his patients that he would take on their ailments during the process of healing, particularly if the problem was very difficult to solve.

²¹ In fire massage the bottom of a jar is covered with a medicinal alcohol which is saturated with several herbal drugs. With a piece of burning cotton stuck onto scissors, the alcohol is lit and applied to the patient's painful areas with the left hand. The right hand, with which he performs massage, suffocates the flame and rubs the alcohol into the skin. This method, which I observed to alleviate pain and reduce swelling, was generally not practised in government hospitals. Qiu commented: 'It is very hard work.'

Secondly, the x-ray that Qiu had asked Ma to have at a hospital showed physical damage: the sixth neck vertebra was dislocated. When Ma's husband came to accompany his wife home, he started chatting with Qiu, and it was then that Qiu learnt that his bond brother had recommended him. Sensing complications, he declared that he would give her just seven days of treatment, and if there was no improvement she would have to return to his bond brother for treatment. 'She'll come back', he told me later, 'but it's better to let her go than to try to keep her with me.' Obviously he wanted her to be completely committed. During the following hour of her acumoxa and cupping treatment, he told stories of his and others' successes in healing or in predicting death. Before she left he told her what his intentions were for the next remote-effect-*qigong* session; he wanted her to have the sensation of a feeling of 'distension' (*zhang*) in the head.

On the following evening, Qiu, Jade Blossom, and Qiudi cycled to Ma's home and delivered a *qigong* session during the *zi* hour, when 'yin is deepest' (*yin zui shen*) and *qigong* most efficient. Jade Blossom told me on the following day that the session had been unsuccessful because Ma had not been able to calm down. The only sensation she had had was a prickling in her hands.

The next session was scheduled for Saturday evening after dinner, the treatment of other evening clients being postponed. On this evening, the three healers and the clients were strikingly cordial to each other. While Ma was being acupunctured she expressed her enthusiasm for *qigong*. Qiu now showed her and her husband the photo album of his trip to Beijing, his favourite piece of evidence of his *qigong* powers. He had been twenty-four at that time, a *qigong* healer employed by a hospital of Kunming city. He had had the capability of penetrating vision and after having proved himself in research trials set up by Yunnan University, he had been to Beijing for further trials which he claimed had been arranged by the national secret police. But after being exposed to the stress of the trials in the metropolis, the highly sensitive person from the provinces had lost his extraordinary capability of penetrating vision. He nevertheless remained a capable healer as was evident from the wealth of cases he successfully treated.

Excitement pervaded in the group as the healing session began. Ma sat on the bed with crossed legs, Qiudi behind her, and Qiu in front of her, facing the two of them. Qiu murmured incantations and made a few introductory gestures for meditation, thus imposing silence upon the participants in the room, who were all told to shut their eyes. The necessary concentration was not achieved; in the adjacent room a heated dispute was taking place, and once that had subsided the noise from the

street was distracting. At last, after about half an hour, when a heavy lorry came rattling down the street, Qiu gave up: 'That's it. It didn't work.'

The following minutes were critical for us to agree on what had happened. I opened my eyes, feeling numb. Qiudi was soaked in sweat. Ma was numb, too, her eyes were swimming. Her husband, however, sat straight and smiling, he had obviously been peeking at the session. When Qiu sprang off the stool and put on his shoes, Jade Blossom broke the silence, complaining of a headache. Indeed, the air in the room was stale and sticky. Qiudi opened the door, lit a cigarette, and offered me one while Qiu and Jade Blossom worked on Ma's arm. They pressed with both hands against her shoulder and told her to lift her arm rhythmically. It was obvious that she could lift the arm higher than before, but in a few minutes she was tired. Now all of us started to talk about our sensations during the concentration phase. 'He doesn't know how to heal yet, but after half a year of training he has already seen the Light', said Qiudi's sister. 'How big is a Light?' Ma's husband asked. Qiudi held his hands in front of his chest as if he were holding a basketball. 'I would have caught his Light and led it up the arm to the area of the shoulder', Qiu's explanation was followed by a silence. His interpretation was instantly accepted as correct. I asked Qiu how it had been for him. 'Half, half', he replied. Qiu maintained that he had achieved the state of seeing a Light, in spite of the noise, but he had not seen Qiudi's Light. He explained that one person alone was not powerful enough to cure the shoulder. Since the two had to join forces, he had stopped emitting the Light and waited for Qiudi's which, however, had not appeared. If it worked, Qiu explained, *qigong* could make a patient lift his or her arm. Oh, yes, Ma agreed, she had seen such *qigong* performances on television. She was the most excited of all. She had experienced a sensation which she had already had once before but much more clearly this time. It had felt like an insect crawling, first twice above her eyebrow then downwards to a corner of her nose. Thereafter, a prickling feeling had ascended her arm towards the shoulder but then descended again towards her fingers, where it had originated. 'Look, I can even lift my arm to a horizontal position', she exclaimed. But Qiu corrected her; she was twisting her body. Ma then suggested settling her account, since she had now been under treatment for almost a week. Jade Blossom advanced slowly toward the desk. She glanced at Qiu who was carefully buttoning his coat in silence. 'We're friends', she said. So Ma proposed that we all spend Sunday together, but because I was unavailable, the invitation was postponed.

The session that Qiu and Qiudi delivered on Sunday evening at Ma's home was successful. 'Ma sleeps well now and has no pain in the

shoulder', Jade Blossom told me the next day; Qiudi had seen the Red Light (*hongguang*) and even bones of the shoulder in it.

On Wednesday evening the party met again, this time in a pavilion in the nearby park. The pavilion was open and airy and the air a bit chilly. Only a few visitors were still strolling in the dusk. It was silent except for the regular sneezes of nearby *qigong* exercisers. Qiudi looked more self-assured; he had obviously received further instructions. After a period of concentration, he started moving his open palms up and down behind Ma's back without touching her. Then Qiu took Ma's hand and put his palms on hers. It looked as if he meant to transmit his *qi* to her. After the concentration phase, Qiu and Qiudi pressed her arm and made her lift it rhythmically, which she did for five to ten minutes.

There was no doubt that *qigong* had worked this time. Qiu was the first to say so. He had seen a White Light (*baiguang*). Ma said that she had felt heat running from the left to the right shoulder and that her hands were unusually warm; she let me confirm this by touching them. She even declared that she had also seen a White Light. The White Light was not as effective as the Red one, Qiu explained; he had tried to let the Light penetrate the blockage in the shoulder five times, but had succeeded only once. Ma nodded; she had felt the prickling feeling ascending and descending her arm before she had the heat sensations between the shoulders. When I asked Qiu how big the Light had been he drew a huge circle in the air with outstretched arms; when I asked Qiudi, he said it had been a ball similar in appearance to the flickering on a television screen. Qiu did not seem to appreciate systematic enquiries and interrupted me; the treatment had worked for everyone, and that was important. He always emphasised that he did not know why, but it obviously worked. Qiudi was by now, at least, convinced of the effects of his *qigong* and his own *gongfa*.

Two days later Qiudi looked excited and happy. The night before he had seen the 'eight trigrams' (*bagua*) very clearly, and during the morning meditation he had also seen Taishang Laojun. Qiu was surprised that his disciple had made such rapid progress but showed familiarity with the symptoms. He asked Qiudi whether the images had threatened him or simply vanished. When Qiudi reported that the latter was the case, he said: 'If ever they threaten you, do not be afraid, they may become bigger and bigger, but you need not fear them. When they come, tell them to go; when they swell, tell them to shrink.' He assured Qiudi that his spiritual force would be stronger than these images. He was to beware of wild animals, but if he were to see a little man he was to report it to Qiu.

On Sunday, the four of us went to Ma's home. She served us many delicious dishes and after lunch took us to the nearby park. Towards evening she was expecting to receive treatment. For the past three days she had taken Qiu's herbal drug potions three times a day. She had also meditated during the *zi* hours in order to receive treatment by remote-effect-*qigong*. Qiu said that he was tired and told his disciple to treat her in the adjacent room. Forty minutes passed in silence. Eventually Qiu interrupted their session by knocking on the door. He found Ma bursting with enthusiasm. She had had the same sensations as on Wednesday in the park, and this time this was due to Qiudi's *gongfa* alone. Everyone was surprised and delighted. This meant that Qiudi had a very powerful *gongfa*. Later I asked Qiu what the patient was expected to feel during such a successful session. She should feel pain, he answered; if it did not hurt her, it was just like having a rest or falling asleep.

Qiudi slowly opened his eyes, looking a bit dazed. He was expected to say something, but he did not. Instead, his sister immediately started speaking on his behalf: 'He can't express what he experienced. He does not understand it himself, he doesn't know any anatomy.' Later she added that if she could 'emit Red Light' (*fa hongguang*), given her knowledge of anatomy, she would have been able to cure Ma in a few days. Qiu, too, began to offer explanations. It was as if Jade Blossom and Qiu did not want to give Qiudi a chance to put his experiences into words. I tried to get him to speak for himself, but he just repeated what his sister had said: 'It's so difficult to put your experience into words.'

Qiu showed with a gesture of his hand that a blockage – a tight passage – had been opened up so that the *qi* could flow through it. Qiudi had murmured something about going all the way up the arm and from one shoulder to the other. This made Jade Blossom wonder whether there was no blockage in the spine, which would contradict the biomedical information derived from the x-ray. Indeed, Qiu and Jade Blossom had closely inspected the spine and shoulder before Qiudi began the *qigong* session. They had searched for a rash on the surface of the skin, induced by their drug treatment, which would reflect an inner blockage, but had found none.

On the way back I approached Qiudi again, but when he started to talk – 'the Red Glow, well, with that Red Light, I go up the arm' – we were interrupted again. This episode clearly showed what earlier episodes had indicated: the disciple was not asked to express his experience; instead his experience 'difficult to put into words' as it was, was described and labelled by his master. He spoke of his disciple's experiences as if he had had the experience himself. Long before Qiudi had

seen the Light, his master had talked about it. Then, after the concentration phase, still overwhelmed by his own new experience, the disciple was told what it was; the master labelled it for him.

Ma did not come again except to pay her bill: about two hundred *yuan*, covered by her work unit's health insurance. During the following year she and her husband occasionally passed by. Her shoulder still hurt, and she could not lift it much higher, but she put up with it and said she had not consulted other healers.

The next step in Qiudi's training was to meditate for forty-nine days, every night during the *zi* hours and two hours early in the mornings, in a private room. From now on he was to eat vegetarian food, sleep regularly, and abstain from sex and alcohol. Moreover, he was to learn a series of Daoist incantations for the cure of the different illnesses by heart.

In mid-December Qiu left for a meeting of the National *Qigong* Association in Beijing, and Jade Blossom went to see her parents in her home village near Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. Qiu joined her in early February to spend the Chinese New Year there. Qiudi stayed in Kunming and transformed the consulting room into his meditation room. During the day, he continued to work in the collective, but night and morning he meditated. I visited him once in January. Fumes of incense filled the room, a meditation mat was on the floor, a picture of Guanyin²² on the wall in front of the mat, flanked by incense sticks. Qiudi looked much thinner; his hands were wounded and swollen and he told me that his whole body was 'sore and painful' (*suanteng*). Obviously, he was practising hard *qigong* too. His notebook, which was on the table, was tiny but filled with drawings of Daoist *fu* (signs)²³ and incantations copied from various books. As well as that, he seemed to have taken the urgings of his sister seriously; an anatomy booklet lay on the bed.

When Qiu and Jade Blossom resumed their practice at the end of February, Qiudi started to work regularly with them and gave up his job at the collective. Qiu taught him the particular incantations and gestures of *qigong* for curing some illnesses, but he was only rarely told to perform *qigong*. Usually he had to deliver the massage treatment, the most strenuous work. The few times I saw Qiudi deliver *qigong* was for curing chronic illnesses or serious diseases which did not promise success for the healer.

²² An autochthonous female deity of the earth and fertility which was merged with the male bodhisattva Avalokitaresh after Buddhism spread in China (Needham 1956:407). Nowadays Guanyin is venerated as a *pusa* (bodhisattva) in Buddhist temples. She is very popular and still fulfils the functions of a fertility deity.

²³ A Daoist charm, see Schipper (1982:287).