

Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China, by David A. Palmer. Columbia University Press, 2007. 315 pp., \$40.00, ISBN-13: 9780231140669.

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Qigong Fever is the English language abridged, revised, and updated version of David Palmer's 2005 book *La fièvre du qigong. Guérison, religion et politique en Chine, 1949–1999*. It is curious that the French version is subtitled “healing, religion and politics in China” while the English version is “Body, Science and Utopia.” Both subtitles are appropriate, given the contents of the book, so it is unclear what, if any, significance should be read into the change.

Though abridged, the book is still dense and complex. Readers will learn the details of the creation of “scientific” qigong, a modern, sanitized, rationalized reworking of ancient Chinese techniques of embodied spiritual cultivation that were developed in medical clinics during the 1950s. By excising all traces of “superstition” and religion from ancient breath, posture, and movement techniques drawn from previously unconnected, secretive “religious” traditions, Communist Party cadres created a new synthesis of body-centered practices that promised improved health for the nation, while reducing dependence upon expensive western medicine and fostering pride in a sanitized, scientized vision of China's glorious past. The techniques of modern qigong, even when taught in clinical settings, seem to have an inherent spiritual potency, because from the start at least some of the practitioners reported powerful altered states of consciousness.

When millions of ordinary Chinese took up qigong in the 1970s, it was inevitable that some would feel themselves transformed. By the early 1980s, millions of Chinese had been swept up in “qigong fever,” the largest truly spontaneous mass movement in PRC history. The newly unshackled, but still closely monitored, media enthusiastically reported the public demonstrations of increasingly miraculous “extraordinary powers” by a growing number of competing “masters.” Even government bureaucrats and scientists were caught up in the excitement and sought to prove the existence of “external qi,” a tangible energy/force that could be gathered and transmitted by masters and advanced disciples. China was thought to be on the verge of a major, world-changing breakthrough in scientific understanding that held astounding rami-

fications for fields as diverse as medicine, physics, and military technology. Meanwhile, many ordinary Chinese believed that they would soon acquire the superpowers described in ancient texts and glorified in martial arts films.

Palmer does an outstanding job of analyzing the qigong movement's inexorable trajectory from fringe science to utopian mass movement. He presents sufficient social and historical context for the process to make sense and seem almost inevitable.

Of course, politics is an active force in every arena of Chinese life. The rise and fall of qigong is not simply the story of utopian yearnings in a society scarred by the failure of Maoist millennialism and taxed with unmet spiritual and medical needs. It is also the tale of political patronage and power struggles in the highest reaches of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Palmer presents this little known history with energy, enthusiasm, and sophistication. His research is groundbreaking, and he deserves great credit for uncovering and telling this remarkable story in all its complexity. Future scholars of qigong will be in his debt.

Scholars of New Religious Movements will appreciate Palmer's explanation of the causes underlying the PRC's thorough crackdown on Falun Gong. Most western observers have seen the brutal suppression as a misguided attack on religious freedom, the paranoid overreaction of a sclerotic state. As Palmer explains, however, the repression might also be viewed as the culminating logical response of the CCP to the unrelenting pressure exerted by Falun Gong. Though tragic, the repression was partly, if unwittingly, brought on by the victims themselves. Palmer details the ways in which Falun Gong systematically and persistently attempted to undermine the CCP's claims to moral authority, a primary source of political legitimacy throughout Chinese history, and present itself as the rightful spiritual successor to Party rule. While many practitioners of Falun Gong may have been naïve, Li Hongzhi, the founder and master of the group, presumably was not.

If there is a weakness in the book for general readers it is found in the extent and depth of Palmer's unrelenting analysis, an element that makes the book especially valuable for scholars. He is never quite through; there is always one more insight, one more fact, one more angle of explication to explore. Even the appendix—"On the Sources Used for this Study"—is not a list of sources, as one might expect, but a detailed analysis of the role of the media, and the government's varying degrees of interference, in the rise and fall of the qigong craze. It is really yet another chapter in disguise.

Qigong Fever is well written, engaging, and extensively researched. It is a landmark in the study of qigong and an indispensable resource for any-

one attempting to understand Chinese society in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Non-specialists and students will find the prose accessible, despite the complexity of Palmer's analysis.