

Understanding Chinese Qigong in the context of Western culture

从西方文化角度理解中国气功

Estel Vilar

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Gestió Cultural, Barcelona 08035, Spain

Abstract

This article tries to present various perspectives on the value that Qigong brings to the Western world, responding to medical, creative and spiritual needs, and proposes a cultural approach to its dissemination that can encompass all its facets. In the current growth of China's soft power and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, there is a clear opportunity for the development of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and Qigong abroad that shall bear fruit in the near future, gradually shifting the role of China in the world stage: from a manufactured products supplier to a major influence in culture, lifestyle and thought.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Medicine; Physical and Breathing Exercises; Qigong; Exercise; Cultural Globalization; Tai Ji; The Belt and Road Initiative

【摘要】 尝试从不同的视角去看待气功给西方带来的价值，以回应医疗、创作与灵性三个层面的价值需求，并提出一种能涵盖气功各方面的文化传播方法。随着中国软实力的日益壮大以及“一带一路”战略的逐渐实施，不久的将来可能会在世界范围内呈现出一个中医与气功开花结果的显著时期，逐渐转变当前中国在世界舞台的角色：从产品供应商转化为文化、生活方式与思想的主要影响者。

【关键词】 中医学；导引；气功；锻炼；文化全球化；太极拳；一带一路倡议

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Qigong and Taijiquan are currently globally widespread well-being practices. They were first introduced to the Western world in the 1940s and their popularity grew ever since. The first English written book about Taijiquan was written in 1961 by an American dancer, Sophia Delza, who studied Wu style Taiji with Ma Yue-liang. Between 1960s and 1970s, some Qigong and Taijiquan masters traveled world to spread the practices. Western people found an alternative approach to body exercise, not narrowed to external physical capacities, and a tool to start re-establishing in Western awareness the experience of the unity between the physical body, the emotions, and the thoughts. As Delza S^[1] puts it in her book *Body and Mind in Harmony* (1961), 'The calmness that comes from harmonious physical activity and mental perception, and the composure that comes from deep feeling and comprehension are the very heart of this exercise.'

There are multiple reasons for which Qigong may have developed in the Western world and shall continue

introduced below divided in three main categories: medical, creative and spiritual.

1 Medical Reasons

The advances in modern medical science and technology have brought high efficacy in dealing with many kinds of ailments, but they have mostly focused on treating the physical symptoms of illnesses, overlooking the complexity of the whole organism balance and its indivisibility with the psychological dimension. Nowadays more and more individuals, including medical professionals, see the need of understanding illness and the human being in a holistic way. Alternative medicines and integrative medicine are developing steadily. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is one of these holistic systems to treat and prevent illness; it is already well known and still growing worldwide. Qigong, as one of the branches of TCM, is specially interesting because it touches most directly a key question in medicine: where does healing come from? Medicaments, herbs, energetic stimulation, and surgery can certainly help the body regain health balance, but it is finally the body that closes the wounds and restores its functions. The capacity to regenerate lies within the patient, who is therefore a key element in healing. In medical Qigong practices, the help to

Author: Estel Vilar, degree in translation and interpreting; master's degree in cultural management; Chinese studies; qigong studies, translator.
E-mail: estelvilar@yahoo.com

to do so; in other words, there are different needs to which the benefits of Qigong may respond to. They are

re-establish a healthy balance comes from the support of the doctor/teacher and the sets of movements or exercises proposed but, finally, it is in the hands of the patient to practice the exercises by himself; regulating body movements, breathing and a quiet mental state: regulating oneself. Only the patient can decide to acknowledge and let go of the blockages in his body and mind hindering good health. This is how in Medical Qigong practice the importance of the role of the patient in healing is so clearly recognized. And that is also why Qigong responds to another need of patients in the Western world: the need to be recognized as active players in their health recovery and acknowledged as such by the medical system.

The great value of Chinese medical Qigong today is that it has been built on the balance of the study of its millenarian culture and modern science; it combines the understanding through both traditional practice and scientific inquiry. The experience of qi, which emerges from relaxing the body and quietening mind, unfolds an expanded proprioception that allows the practitioner to gradually overcome the perceived limitations or blockages. The gentleness of Qigong movements and its diversity of methods make it accessible to a wide range of ages, body types and physical conditions. The scientific spirit of Qigong Science pursues the rational understanding of the phenomena related to this practice, and the systematization of the application of Qigong techniques to specific human needs.

2 Creative Reasons

The Qigong state is both in psychological and neurological terms very close to the state of 'flow', also known as 'creative flow', a mental state in which the individual is fully present in the task at hand, enjoying and developing an activity effortlessly in an uninterrupted way. The state of 'flow' can be found in link with almost any activity: an athlete running, gardener plucking weeds, a pianist interpreting a musical piece at his best, or in an expert butcher cutting an ox. The description of the state of 'flow' inevitably reminds us of the Chinese notion of Wuwei (nonaction). The question is how do we experience that state and apply it to our daily lives.

Research has found a connection between 'flow' and the state of meditation^[2], both can be understood as a form of concentration in the present moment, not disturbed by critical cognitive thinking. The cultivation of this peaceful state of mind, or Jing (quiet), is also one of the pillars of Qigong practice, which has not only a positive impact on health, but also at promoting a balanced and serene state of mind in our daily lives. The cultivation of this peaceful mental state allows us to undertake our tasks and human relationships in a more efficient and enjoyable way, and thus can have a direct

impact on the quality of anything we do. On one hand, it does so by helping us balance our emotions, increase our patience and tenacity, and relieve fatigue; on the other hand, it unleashes our creativity by giving us access to an immaterial source of fresh ideas. It is therefore no surprise that many companies are more and more often investing in meditation, Taijiquan or Qigong trainings for their employees.

Furthermore, the 'state of qigong' is cultivated among artists from all kinds of disciplines (painting, dance, pottery, etc.) because it fosters creativity and artistic sensitivity by letting the mind rest in the present moment, undisturbed by critical cognitive thinking. This also reminds us of how the practice of Qigong is closely related to traditional Chinese arts such as calligraphy, music and painting, which embody the same principles of relaxation of the body and quietness of the mind in their execution in order to create an art that reflects natural beauty and flow.

To sum up, there is a demand both in Europe and China for training methodologies aimed at increasing qualitative productivity, stress management, creative problem solving and good communication in the work environment, as well as a need from more and more individuals to unfold their artistic potential while refining their specific artistic skills. Qigong techniques can be applied and adapted both to the needs of working teams (office managers, shop attendants, creative workers, etc.), artists (musicians, actors, dancers, etc.) and for personal development in general.

3 Spiritual and Cultural Reasons

Until last century, the Western world was deeply shaped by the Christian tradition, in which the body is too often regarded as sinful or the cause of 'sin', and thus despised or even punished. The word 'sin' in the Bible, referring to the violation of the will of God, originally meant 'error' or 'missing the mark' in the ancient versions Greek and Hebrew^[3-4], but it has gradually been understood as a much more threatening idea, since 'the Wages of Sin is Death' (Romans 6:23)^[5]. Religion has become for many a source of fear and guilt, instead of peace and hope. According to the view of the Gnostic tradition, the human being is some kind of battleground between the good soul (created by a good god) and the evil body (created by an evil god)^[6].

When we look at the most visible symbol of the Christian tradition, the crucifixion, we see the image of Christ dying on the cross to redeem the original sin of humanity. This symbol reinforces the idea of purification through physical punishment. However, the fact that Christ might not have been suffering on the cross and that he finally resurrected, is somehow overlooked in the iconography. In any case, this religious background has left its trace in the culture, in which cultivation

through physical practices and spirituality is very much disconnected. On the contrary, in traditional Chinese thought, spiritual cultivation and physical well-being go hand in hand. From the perspective of Taiji philosophy, the elements of form, energy and spirit of the human being, can be contrasted separate realms, and still constitute with one another an integrated health environment^[7-8].

In many Western countries, especially in Europe, and certainly in Spain, Christian religious practice has become less and less popular as the Church has failed to evolve as fast as the ideas and needs of society. Since global exchange has bloomed in the last decades, more and more people have looked towards exotic traditions to find alternative answers to their personal challenges. Most Western people I know have heard about Taijiquan, yoga, acupuncture and Zen culture, and many have become adepts of these foreign practices and arts. The concept of qi itself, has already become pervasive in Western ideas of health and spirituality^[9]. The practice of Qigong has also an important place in the world as a way to experience and develop understanding of the self, life and the world. It nourishes one's spirituality in connection with the mind-body practice experience. The experience of form, energy and thought as one that Qigong promotes, builds an identity that transcends the mere physical body, and a sense of interconnectedness with nature.

In our global world, when one can easily have the chance to look at the sheer diversity and richness of cultures worldwide, we face the need to live with this multiplicity of views and understand that there is no better and worse, but that cultures evolve and nourish each other. Modern Chinese culture itself is a great representative of this historic abundance. In fact, Qigong is a great example of how we can embrace a great diversity of practices from different schools of thought and find common underlying principles in them. The broadness of vision and the capacity of integration of Qigong are admirable. Qigong has a lot to offer to the world not only as a mind-body practice but because of its embracing spirit and its scientific research. We live in an era where spirituality shifts from following dogmas to a personal experience path; the truth we search for may be expressed in infinite forms, but its understanding can only be experienced by the self.

According to Yuval Noah Harari, since the Cognitive Revolution, the Homo Sapiens do not live anymore in a natural way, there are and there have been many ways of life, which represent cultural choices. To him, if we look at the direction of history from the highest viewpoint, scanning the trend across millenia, we can perceive clearly that history is moving towards unity, towards a global empire ruled by a multi-ethnic elite and held together by a common culture and interests^[10].

We might be at the dawn of a change of how humans understand and organize themselves, as Frederic Laloux puts it, shifting into an already emerging stage in human consciousness^[11]. The notion of transcultural hybridisation^[12] and its understanding of culture as inclusive, permeable and with multiple bonds, is certainly key to understand the unfolding of a shared global civilization.

4 A Holistic Development for a Holistic Practice

After seeing these medical, creative and spiritual needs that make Qigong so welcome in the Western world, we can have an idea of the complexity and the possibilities of the future development of Qigong. This practice aims at harmonizing the wholeness of the human being and nourishing its three treasures: Jing (essence), Qi (vital energy), and Shen (spirit); vital essence, vital energy and spirit; so it touches all aspects of human life. We can easily correlate the three treasures in Qigong tradition with the three different types of needs we have mentioned; medicine would be mostly related to physical wellbeing (vital essence), creativity with vital energy, and spirit with spiritual pursuits. In any case, Qigong is not only about health and well-being, nor just about creativity and efficiency at work, neither simply a spiritual path; Qigong is about all of this, and more: it is the product of an extremely rich and ancient cultural heritage in philosophy, medicine, martial arts and modern science, that has evolved into what we call Qigong today. What frame can hold such a discipline in its entire broadness? The notion of 'culture' can, it can embrace all aspects of Qigong and even connect it to its neighboring international disciplines (yoga, Feldenkrais, psychomotricity, etc.) through the notions of inter-, cross-, and trans-culturality. Qigong is not alien to the notion of culture, it itself belongs to Yangsheng (health maintenance) culture, or culture of life cultivation, with the purpose of promoting health and longevity, that sees the human body as an organic whole in close balance with its social and natural environments. Presenting Qigong as a culture does not lack foundation, but it requires new conceptual and institutional structures to develop it as such.

The future development of Qigong abroad as part of the Chinese cultural heritage can be aligned with the medium-term strategic objectives of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)^[4] (2014-2021) of 'protecting, promoting and transmitting heritage' (SO7) and 'fostering creativity and diversity of cultural expressions' (SO8). As the economic power of China as an emerging world leading country that becomes more and more established, its cultural influence shall soon be an evidence. One of the biggest

values of the Belt and Road Initiative from the Chinese government might in fact be the enhancement of China's soft power^[5]. Confucius Institutes may gradually increase in number and in capacity all over the world, and many other Chinese inter-cultural institutions and projects shall appear in the coming years. Traditional Chinese medicine, Yangsheng culture and Qigong are extremely valuable cultural assets that China can share with the world. China has now the experience, the resources and the means to build cultural bridges and share its wealth with the world.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared that there was no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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