

A Review of Lin Zixin's Book "Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience?"

Kevin Chen, Ph.D. MPH
Department of Psychiatry
UMDNJ – New Jersey Medical School

Lin Zixin et al's new book "Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudoscience?" (Prometheus Books, NY, 2000) is among the few Qigong books that tried to conduct some scientific exploration of the Qigong essence. If you are seriously looking for Qigong's scientific background, or planning to conduct some scientific research on Qigong and its applications, this book will definitely be helpful to avoid you from taking all Qigong as granted truth, and from simplifying the research design.

The book consists of five chapters: 1. Traditional Chinese Medicine and Qigong, started with the glorious history of Qigong, it reveals the ancient origin of Qigong, some important methods, facts about Qigong and the benefits of Qigong practice. 2. External Qigong, it basically denies the very existence of external Qigong and criticizes some famous research on external Qigong done in the 1980s. Authors claimed that the essence of Qigong is mind activities or psychological effects. 3. Itinerant Quackery, completely denied the possibility that Qigong may be used to diagnose diseases, and revealed how some street quackery used the name of "Qigong super abilities" to cheat patients. 4. The Debate on Human Extraordinary Ability vs. Qigong (Inner Kung Fu), it discloses some fake Qigong demonstrations and the reality of unsuccessful efforts to examine the human extraordinary ability, and criticizes four famous Chinese Qigongists. 5. Qigong and Ultra Deviation, it explains the major symptoms of so-called "ultra deviation" (Zhou Huo Ru Mo) in Qigong practice, why it occurs, and how to avoid it. It is not hard to see what attitude the authors possess in terms of scientific nature of Qigong.

Unfortunately it is a cruel fact that there are more fake Qigong masters, or self-made grandmasters out there than real honest Qigong masters or practitioners, both in China and in the United States. These fake Qigong masters or instructors tend to bring more harm or disturbance than good or benefit in promoting Qigong and Qigong research. Lin Zixin's book will non-doubt help readers to identify some major quackery in fake Qigong or medical Qigong practitioners who lack of knowledge of Qigong essence.

The book was co-authored by six Chinese scholars, some of them are popular debunkers of pseudoscience, and all of them have publicly criticized the research of external Qigong in China. As one of the many academic perspectives about Qigong research, there is nothing wrong for them to state their perspectives publicly. However, the timing of its publication with some out-of-date research data made readers suspect its political motivation and possible government sponsorship. Some of the authors are supposed to be serious scientists; but the way they presented data, and the conclusions they reached based on very limited observations really lack of objectivity and scientific seriousness. This book was recommended to me by a colleague who is against serious exploration of Qigong effect as a way to discourage me from involvement in Qigong research. I feel obligated to express what I think about the book as both an experienced

researcher and a Qigong practitioner. Given the fact that there have been little serious research being done about Qigong in this country, it is very important to recognize what may be wrong in this book. Followings are some major questions or discrepancies I would like to get readers attentions and have authors to answer them early or late.

1. Contradictions between chapters. It is obvious that different authors wrote the book since they expressed different opinions on the essence of Qi. Chapter 1 revealed some facts about Qigong and Qigong practice, including different body gestures in Qigong, the method of emptying energy into Dantian, minor heaven cycle with Ren meridian and Du meridian, and major heaven cycle with hand three-yin, hand three-yang, foot three-yin and foot three-yang channels, and so on. These are the basic Qigong knowledge you can find in almost any ancient Qigong books. However, in chapter 2, authors tried to emphasize that the essence of Qigong effect is to regulate the mind and psychological suggestions, which completely deny the existence of Qi as a subtle energy within human body. And in chapter 5, it even claimed the symptom of "sense of energy" came from the psychological imaginations or self-suggestion, and should be avoided. The later chapters really contradict with the traditional Qigong theory and practice since all those described in chapter one were repeatedly proved true by our ancient doctors and Qigong practitioners before they were put in the books. My guess is that none of the authors are serious Qigong practitioners themselves.

2. Insufficient evidence to deny the existence of external Qi. A significant point of view the book tried to make is that, when they tried to conduct some similar research of external Qigong as published in the academic journal, they failed to find any effect after taking away the possible suggestibility; therefore, all the "so-called" external Qigong effects were just effects of general suggestions in psychology. I would like to point out three different perspectives in this issue. (1) There are more fake Qigong masters or instructors out there than real Qigong masters, the fact that these authors did not find any true Qigong effects in their studies is far from enough to completely deny the very existence of external Qigong proved by other studies, or to be used against the real findings by other scientists with different Qigong masters. The fact that they did not publish their studies of no Qigong effect, while the articles they tried to criticize were published in famous academic journals, suggested us that their studies might not be well designed or conducted by scientific methods after all. (2) There are hundreds of published articles by serious scientists in China that reported how Qigong could be measured by high-energy physics equipment, how it affected the tumor growth in animals, or on the human tissue cells in vitro, which are impossible to be devoted to any psychological suggestions. The studies they tried to criticize were all more than ten years old, while there were much more studies published in the last ten years that reported the existence of external Qigong that authors failed to cite in their book. This fact reminds us that the authors were just using some out of date information to support their hypotheses, and they intentionally chose to completely ignoring the new literature published in the past ten years (Lin 1995; Lu 1997). (3) I assume that none of these authors were seriously practicing Qigong themselves since most serious Qigong practitioners might have experienced the same process of Qi striking through the three gateways in Du meridian, brain blowing-out by Qi energy, and three times of sun shining in front of the forehead. These experiences or phenomenon were recorded in the history by many Qigong practitioners repeatedly. If any one of them experienced this kind of painful physiological response to the Qi flow in the body, they would not be so subjective assertion in denying the very existence of Qi as the human subtle energy.

3. Who had a more scientific attitude in Qigong research -- the authors of this book or those who were involved in research of Qigong? All cautious research scientists in Qigong field understand that the study of external Qigong was different from any other scientific studies of materials, equipment or therapies. Since Qigong research deals with human subjects all the time, the results of the study may be highly related to the Qigong practitioner's mood, psychological and physical status, environmental settings, and many other external elements. Study of Qigong must be established at the base of long-term equal collaboration with the Qigong practitioners. We should not draw any definite conclusion simply based on one or two studies, but carefully observe the general trend and look into statistical significance in the repeated studies. It is well known that many scientists in China did not believe in Qigong at the beginning, and some of them got involved in the study of external Qi because they did not believe that there was such a thing called Qi in the human body and considered most observed effects of Qigong therapy to be purely psychological. They tried to use their scientific equipment and sophisticated methods to prove their points, but they soon found that their assumptions were wrong in the first place, and gradually became Qigong believers after completing their scientific studies. Many scientists started scientific exploration of Qigong after they benefited from Qigong therapy themselves. These scientists usually did not get much funding or support from their institutions, but persisted their scientific exploration of Qigong on their own for many years, professor Lu Zhuyin of Qinghua University, Dr. Feng Lida of Navy General Hospital, Professor Chu Deyin of Beijing University, and Professor Lin Yagu of Shanghai Academy of Chinese Medicine, to name a few, are all this kind of serious scientists. They really did not need any false data to make them look bad, and they actually conducted the research under great pressure from other skeptic scientists. Professor Lu and Dr. Feng published separate books about their scientific findings in Qigong and Qigong therapy, which has been highly appraised by other scientists in China (Feng, 1994; Lu 1997). Unfortunately, authors of this book, based on one study that failed to repeat the findings of Dr. Feng on that bacteria could either be killed or proliferated by external Qigong emitted by a Qigong master with variation of will in his mind, stated that they "can only conclude that the experiment controller had processed the bacteria or altered the experimental result." This is really very irresponsible statement since I read Dr. Feng's book, and know that she repeated her studies many times, and I also know many other literatures that reported the similar findings. The authors of this book denied the repeated findings with one failure study under different condition or laboratory, and even launched personal attack to a serious scientist like Dr. Feng, which again made me question their political motivation and real scientific attitude. I really don't believe they are serious in scientific research, and they simply do not understand the basic rule of scientific research of Qigong at all. It is a fact that Dr. Feng and Prof. Lu were very famous scientists in China, they really do not need make up data to support their perspective. On the other hand, most of book authors' criticisms were never published in academic journal, but came from newspapers or popular magazines that we know were under the government control; while most articles they tried to criticize were formal publications in scientific journals. In addition, I was told by different scientists that these criticisms of external Qigong usually refused accepting the invitation of serious scientists to ask them personally observe the experiments that prove the existence of external Qigong. Most of their arguments and criticisms are simply based on what they believed is possible or true, but not on what had really happened in the research laboratories.

4. About extraordinary human ability. It is true that many extraordinary human abilities or para-natural capabilities studied by some research were very hard to believe with current scientific rules or knowledge -- that is why it is important to study them so to understand them. However, it is not true to say that these phenomena were not proved by scientific verification or by serious scientists. I have just read an article by Professor Chen Sholiang at the College of Life Science from Peking University in *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science*, which recalled the study of human extraordinary abilities for twenties years (Chen & Mo, 1999). Prof. Chen's findings of children's abilities to percept information on the paper without eye were based on hundreds of repeated tests on hundred different subjects, and published repeatedly in academic journals. In addition, Professor Lin Shuhui of the Capital Teacher's University, with the advanced low-light video technology, recorded the phenomena of moving objects by intention without touching them; professor Shen Jingchuan of Chinese Geology University reported his repeated verification on how extraordinary human energy could make the cooked peanut growing with new sprout in minutes (Shen & Sun 1998), which has been verified by many other scientists as well (Li et al. 1999; Bai et al. 2000); and professors Wang Xiubi and Song Kongzhi of the Institute for Space Medicine used high-speed camera recorded the moment when object going through a covered bottle under the influence of human intention, which won them the second prize of scientific advancement by the National Commission of Science and Technology in Defense in 1986 (Song, 1999). These findings have been confirmed or verified by some well-known scientists in person, including the famous Academy Member prof. Qian Xueshen and prof. Zhuang Xiangchang, who have openly called scientific attention to these extraordinary human capabilities, and assured that the new human somatic science was not "pseudoscience." Unfortunately, authors of this book ignore these significant findings, and were interested in their own studies of street quackery only. They usually did not participated in the serious experiments, or refused to observe such an experiment, but criticized these studies based on their old pattern of thinking or traditional theories. These only prove that they are really not serious scholars or scientists on this issue.

5. Qigong and Ultra Deviation. Can Qigong practice cause madness or mental deviation? The fact is that, through the history of Qigong practice, there were indeed a few out of million practitioners who did not get any benefits but have gone on to manifest some form of distress or deviation. From a psychiatric perspective, their symptoms have no difference from mental disorders as defined in the DSM book. However, most cases of *Qigong*-induce mental disorders or ultra deviation ("Zou huo ru mo") occurred among those who practiced *Qigong* under meritless *Qigong* instructors or without any supervision at all. There were simply no reports of deviations under the guidance of a knowledgeable *Qigong* master. After a closer examination of those *Qigong*-induced mental disorders, we find that many *Qigong*-induced deviations or "disorders" have simply been a "false report".

According to the analysis of knowledgeable *Qigong* masters and my own experience, there are three major types of so-called *Qigong*-induced "mental disorders" that we may see in clinic: (1) Somatic responses to Qi practice. Many mental disturbances or deviations are not a sign of madness, but rather a normal reaction during the *Qigong* healing stage when potential diseases appear and old diseases reemerge due to the strengthened Qi striking against the blocked locations. A subsequent condition of intense pressure is experienced when the real Qi (vital energy) in our body tries to push through the three major gateways on the Du meridian. This ac-

counts for the somatic stresses like swelling at the cerebellum, loud echoes in the ear, swelling and pain in the neck, shoulders, and arms. These are supposed to be good signs of *Qigong* progress, rather than a mental disorder. (2) Out-of-control or spontaneous movement and/or emotional expression (sudden laughing or crying). This occurs sometimes among those involved practitioners whose poor health conditions lead to this kind Qi-related movement but lack the appropriate guidance or supervision. They are either not closing a practice properly, or getting into a deep *Qigong* state, which probably needs continuous practice over the course from a few more hours to a few days. However, if the inept practitioners stop practicing and search for medical help, the situation may last much longer. Those without the guidance of a knowledgeable *Qigong* instructor may be inclined to reach the false conclusion that these disturbances were prelude to madness or deviation. The unfortunate end result may be that the person who most requires more *Qigong* practice would discontinue it, and seek unnecessary medical help for no better reason than fear and worry. (3) Hallucination and *Qigong* psychosis. It is quite common for the advanced *Qigong* practitioner to experience some hallucination or illusion during *Qigong* practice, such as photism or phonism. Occasionally the practitioner could even foresee what may happen in the future. As long as the practitioners do not believe what they see or hear, or sustain these hallucinations, and continue their practice, these hallucinations will eventually go away. There is no danger to become disoriented as long as you know this will happen. It is normal from the perspective of *Qigong* practice, but will definitely be considered a mental disorder by those who lack knowledge of *Qigong*. This may be one of the reasons why *Qigong* was traditionally passed down in a private and secret manner. It is true that incorrect practice with misunderstanding of *Qigong* hallucination, or practice with strong intention or inappropriate purposes (such as intention to communicate with higher being, develop supernatural ability, or reach self-completion as some sham *Qigong* claimed), may lead to various forms of psychosis, or even schizophrenia or other types of abnormal behaviors.

In addition, there are those who practice *Qigong* with less honorable motives, namely, notoriety and wealth. Some of these people seek what may be called a quick-fix, i.e. immediate recovery and instant success. Some of them practiced *Qigong* for the purpose of reclaiming the supernatural power or communicating with the spiritual world. Needless to say, these wholly contradict the basic principles of *Qigong* practice, "a life of simplicity and empty mind without desires". These ambitious and wrong-headed practitioners wish to distinguish themselves by mastering certain techniques such as "seeing with the third eye," levitation, moving objects by intention, and ability to foresee the future. Those who seek such power and misuse it will soon find themselves exhausted of all inborn energy, deviated from normal Qi flow, and will themselves become "mentally disturbed." All these unwholesome actions defy the laws of Nature and the Way ("Dao"), should not be understood as a falsity of *Qigong* practice.

In short, *Qigong*, as a traditional Chinese healing technique and health practice, has nothing to do with pseudoscience, but needs serious scientific exploration. The official Chinese government policy about research on *Qigong* and parapsychological phenomenon has long been known as "three No's" – no debate, no criticism, and no promotion, but allow a small group of scientists to conduct exploratory research, which was why we have so many published research in this area. The way in which the book authors presented their perspectives with insufficient evidence and their obvious bias against *Qigong* research remind us that we need more serious scientific attitude than them in *Qigong* research.

REFERENCES

- Bai F, Sun CL, Liu ZY, et al. 2000. "Seeds induced to germinate rapidly by mentally projected 'Qi energy' are apparently genetically altered." *American Journal of Chinese Medicine*. 28(1): 3-8.
- Chen SL, Mo HY, 1999. "The generalizability and inductivity of human ESP functions." *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science*. 9(3):105-108; 9(4):147-152.
- Chu DY, He WG, Zhou YF & Chen BC, 1998. "The effect of Chinese Qigong on the conformation of biomolecule." *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science*. 8(4): 155-159.
- Feng LD, 1994. *Modern Qigong Science*. Beijing: Economic Science Publisher.
- Li SC et al. 1999. "A study of germination of dead peanut under the control of human consciousness." *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science*, 9(2): 52-54.
- Lin ZP, 1995. *Understanding of True Qi Cultivation and Sublimation*. Beijing: Chinese Publisher of Constructive Materials.
- Lin ZX, Yu L, Guo ZY, Shen ZY, Zhang HL & Zhang TL, 2000. *Qigong: Chinese Medicine or Pseudo-science?* Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Lu ZY, 1997. *Scientific Qigong Exploration: The Wonders and Mysteries of Qi*. Malvern PA: Amber Leaf Press.
- Shen JC and Sun CL, 1998. "The experiments and thinking on the directional effects of human consciousness on plant growth." *Chinese Journal of Somatic Science*, 8(1): 51-60.
- Song KZ, 1999. "The existence and significance of parapsychological function." *Journal of International Society of Life Information Sciences*, 17(1): 198-206.

Note: A short version of the review was published at

Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 2002, 8(5): 687-688.