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# **From epistemology to the method: phenomenology of the body, qi cultivation(qigong) and religious experiences in Chinese worlds**

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## **Abstract**

At the intersections of social anthropology, philosophy, and Asian studies, my article explores the body ecologic through a phenomenological frame in the context of Chinese culture engaging both theory and method.

How can qi cultivation experiences transporting bodies and persons in movement, Within the world and their “life-world”, be interpreted through a phenomenology of perception? Based on ethnographic study data collected mainly in South China (Guangzhou) and in Taiwan (1990s – 2000s), this exploration is situated within qigong experiences (training, cultivating and mastering the qi).

Anchored in martial, religious, and healing arts and their meanings, qigong’s myriad of forms and infinite variations invite journeys into religious Daoist and Buddhist practice, Chinese thought, and politico-religious issues of past and present Chinese society.

The qigong world, paths of knowledge transmission, healing horizons, claimed affiliations, and views of practitioners unveil an ontology and a cosmology grounded in religious (Daoist and Buddhist) lore.

**Keywords:** body ecologic, phenomenology, qi cultivation, religious experience, Chinese world

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### **Qigong (氣功) in post-Mao china as social, politico-religious phenomenon, and intimate experience**

Contacts within and beyond cultures, empirical study of phenomena, situations, and relations with people may resonate and then impregnate the ethnographer's encounters with phenomenological concerns. My own interest was first aroused when I wrote a master's thesis about the Daoist body and the Daoist world, examining their resonance with psychoanalytical theoretical and clinical lines. My interest continued as I conducted a doctoral study on the phenomena and experiences of qigong (Micollier 1995).

Luckily, I was able to continue ethnological studies in the early 1990s while the qigong phenomenon was still booming (Xu 1999; Palmer 2007).

The late 1990s saw a severe clamp down on the qigong movement by Chinese authorities and specifically against the “qigong of the Wheel of Law” (Falungong 法輪功), ending the overall collective, visible, and mediatized movement of qigong groups in China. In the 2000s, a deep restructuring of institutional affiliations and severe persecutions of practitioners led to a quicker and more systematic transnationalization of the qigong world, with a number of practitioners moving out of the country (Micollier 2004). In China, qigong may have been restricted to or transformed into the practice of “nurturing the life” yangsheng (養生) as could be observed in public spaces (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). Yangsheng is among qigong's inherited set of practices from ancient China. From the late 2000s, qigong's fragmented horizon fits also in the “psy-boom” nebulous landscape of various actors, networks, practices, and paths of mental health in China (Yang 2018).

Appealing to all social categories, qigong offered an exceptional range of bodily experiences, healing experiences, and meanings while within the qigong landscape. One could comprehend ongoing transformations, negotiations, and tensions in Chinese society, caught between the cultural heritage and modernization flow, and situated between religion and science (Micollier 1996). Another reason of qigong success was its ability to open up a space for religious practice behind a screen discourse on health or sports.

Qigong was taught and practiced in state institutions, more specifically those of sport and health, and simultaneously in the private sphere with friends, neighbors, and kin in the household. In Taiwan, qigong was fully part of religious experience and subsequently practiced in cults spaces and sites (Micollier 1998). In China, various private and public geographical spaces. Public parks, river shores, waste lands, schools, sports spaces, stadiums, universities, companies, temples, and houses all became temporary places for qigong experience.

Qigong can be translated as “training, cultivating, mastering, art of qi” and qi as “breath, breathing, vapors, influences, vital forces, vitality.” Elaborated sets of qigong practices aim at health preservation, alleviation of pathological states, and the development of the person involving a constellation of martial, therapeutic, religious and social experiences (Micollier 1996).

On the one hand, via various forms and techniques inherited from old practices, qigong immersed into Chinese thought, culture, and experiences. On the other hand, extra-Western biologies and epistemologies, modern healthcare, and science interplayed with the world of qigong because elements of Western biology and medicine were re-appropriated within it. The term qigong was first mentioned in medical sources from early 20th century China: qigong was used in sanatoriums for treatment and care of tuberculosis (Chang 1987). Although it is a by-product of encounters with Western science and health policy, this very experience is also transported into a remote history.

In our situated study, how can qi cultivation experiences engaging bodies and persons in movement within the world and their “life-world” be interpreted through a phenomenology of perception from epistemology to the method? Instead of drawing on worldviews of individuals and groups, the anthropologist tentatively offers to the gaze the “life-world” of a people, namely “the unquestioned, practical, historically conditioned, pre-theoretical and familiar world of people’s everyday lives” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 91).

Located between knowledge theories and empirical studies of experiences, how do phenomenologies in anthropology shed light on extra-Western phenomenologies and feed the intercultural dialogue in a process of knowledge co-construction? These research questions open lines onto promising vistas. One line immerses in phenomenology as theory and method in situated contexts opening the doors of qigong practitioners and the ethnographer experiences. Using the frame of a phenomenology of the body, these are defined for our purpose as an insightful case of human growth through qi cultivation, healing, and bodily religious (Daoist and Buddhist) experiences. The discussion focuses on interlaces between empirical experience, consciousness, and the body ecologic in Chinese worlds. From encounters between tenets of Europe and East Asian phenomenology, as well as from qigong, its practitioners, forms, and actors, similar intrinsic kaleidoscopic realities are reflected and made available.

### **Phenomenology as a theory and a method**

Husserl (1970[1936]) first introduced the concept of “life-world” drawing on the concept of “Being-in-the-world” or “toward the world” of Heidegger (1962 [1927]), a metaphoric substitute for terms such as the subject and object, the world and consciousness comprehended together. Merleau-Ponty questions “being toward the world” relying on experience, lived life and sensibility, and praising a knowledge of the world through intuitive, rather than inductive or deductive, decision-making as the active process, and logical operations underpinning scientific reasoning. “Being toward the world” is the only possible path to understand phenomena for the “beings” – inhabitants of the world, whose essence is existence (Heidegger 1979) and whose ontological status and action capability vary along positions, and in contrast to others (Descola 2013). In this context, the only way to understand that phenomenon is a description of “things as they are” (Merleau-Ponty 1962), e.g. in perpetual transformation, observable and felt in particular spatiotemporal conditions. Regarding the knowledge horizon, Merleau-Ponty suggests refraining from using theoretical and methodological pre-constructed models. Knowledge processing is, before everything else, an experience.

#### ***Phenomenological horizons in anthropology and East Asian contexts***

Confirming the vitality of engagement with phenomenology in anthropology, recent works (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Ram, Houston and Jackson eds. 2015; Laplante and Sacrini eds. 2016) aim at understanding better how phenomenological horizons can be heuristically used in social anthropology in terms of theory and method. Ram and Houston (2015: 1) suggest a pragmatic definition of phenomenology and elucidate in a nutshell its generic application in anthropology: “phenomenology is an investigation of how human beings perceive, experience, and comprehend the sociable, materially assembled world that they inherit from infancy and in which they dwell. Framed in this way, phenomenology in anthropology is a theory of perception and experience.”

A number of East Asia scholars, more specifically philosophers, have shown a keen interest in phenomenology from the 1920s: “Even though the Asia-Pacific Region is geographically far away from the birthplace of phenomenology, the development of phenomenology already had its impact on this area as early as the 1920s. Moreover, the Kaizo articles of Husserl were first published in Japanese long before they were published in their original language” (Yu 2010: 1). Husserl had Japanese students in Europe who brought back his writings to Japan.

Nonetheless, today contemporary Chinese scholars refer to phenomenology as a pillar in their work (among them, Yu Chung-chi; Lau Kwok-Ying; Huang Kua-Min; and Jiang Dandan. In Ni, Fang, Lee, and Tani 2015). Key academic institutions in Asia support works engaged in phenomenological approaches. Among these institutions, the Institute of Philosophy and the Center for the Humanities of the National Sun Yat-Sen University (Taiwan), and the Edwin Cheng Foundation Asian Centre for Phenomenology of the Chinese University of Hong Kong are very active in organizing international conferences and other activities. At least ten key organizations in East Asia are identified as developing activities and works in a claimed affiliation with phenomenology. Therefore, phenomenological thought has been re-appropriated and “localized” or “indigenized” over one century in East Asia. This “epistemological turn,” developed in multiple trends, shows an impressive vitality today.

In this intercultural dialogue dating back to the birth of phenomenology in Europe, the reverse influence from Asia to Europe is poorly documented and barely claimed. For instance, Heidegger’s thought has been connected with Daoism (Pöggeler 1987; Parkes 1987; May 1996; Ma 2008; Zhan 2012), and Heidegger had read the Daode jing (Laozi) and even ordered a translation in German (Hsiao 1987). However, he rarely publicly referred to this Daoist influence on his ideas and work. Specifically, he publicly did so only twice in 1958 (see May preface 1996, vii), though he never mentioned it in his writings (Chen 2005). Precise reference to Daoism cannot be found in Heidegger’s philosophical works.

Among other Japanese scholars, Hirota’s works (2008, 2010, 2014) provide a meaningful appropriation of the philosophy of phenomenology. For instance, there are emphasized resonances among the late Heideggerian notion of “dwelling,” the subject/object deconstructing process and the status of truth, and ideas encountered in Pure Land Buddhism’s (Jingtū zong) theory. Four characteristics of “dwelling,” namely stability, freedom, joy, and proximity, have been discussed by Shinran (Hirota 2014).

Jingtū zong is a lay form of Buddhism born in China (3rd Century A.C.) later disseminated in Korea and Japan (eleventh century A.C.). Shinran’s thought greatly contributed to “localize” Jingtū Buddhism in the context of Japanese culture (Jodo Buddhism), providing another interpretation of original Chinese texts.

### ***Methodological horizons***

Phenomenological seeds enable the ethnographer to grow amazing and unknown plants in the process of framing, reframing, and deframing theoretical canvases from a methodological move based on the description of “things

as they are” and the awareness, or consciousness, of “being toward the world.” Through participant observation in these contexts, the ethnographer develops a sensibility and an intuitive knowledge while deconstructing a methodological and theoretical frame, if one exists, in order to first see “things as they are.” Recognizing it or not, the researcher is often forced to do so during the fieldwork period. In a process of auto-construction, the method is transported, deframed, and (re)shaped by events and experiences in situated contexts. Therefore, describing what is happening (phenomena) and what is lived (experience) subsequently becomes obvious.

Field study cannot be dissociated from data processing and analysis because the method is alive in a process of self-construction and is experienced as the ethnographer’s “lived-body” (Leder 1984). Capturing and building on experience, the ethnographic frame is ever transformed and enriched and the temporal engagement of the research is hence transformed. Anthropological method is hence a “real life method” (Ingold 2014). The anthropologist faces an experience of situational and situated complexity, either observed or observable, and cannot escape from an emergence in situ of the method and from connecting it immediately to the analysis. These engagements are often criticized by other sciences claiming for the relevance of experiment and data collection based on precise pre-constructed protocols. However, a pre-constructed protocol, which does not open onto other horizons in the research process, is experienced by the anthropologist as a locked door on the collection of probable more consistent data through the “opening” and reframing process. These “missing” data may strongly impact the quality of results and the research relevance as a whole.

Intrinsically engaged with phenomenology, the anthropological method reflects reciprocal exchanges between philosophy and anthropology. Though anthropologists and philosophers raise the same issues, the former enrich critical and controversial research issues with results from empirical study data, while the latter feed or produce discussion and debates with various methodological and epistemological perspectives. Rather than the legitimacy of discourses (those either of interlocutors’ or performative), a phenomenological approach reinforces the legitimacy of observing, located at the heart of the ethnographic method through a specific spatial and temporal frame recalling “situated contexts” favored by historians of the present in their round trips between past and present. Phenomenology as a method subsequently tends to minor the relevance of interviews and material items such as documents and objects. Therefore, pillars of the method lie and rely on observing and other tools mediatizing experience rather than the relevance of words from discourses.

My own study data are drawn from longitudinal anthropological research about qigong experiences. They were collected through multisited ethnography (Marcus 1995) in the 1990s and supplemented with additional items using tools from other investigations. Fieldwork was conducted in China (Guangzhou) in 1991, 1992, and 1999; in Taiwan (Taipei) from 1995 to 1997; and in France (Marseilles and Paris) in 1991 and 1994. In the 2000s I gathered data from websites, primarily from online forum discourses of practitioners or sympathizers who commonly sell their services online and are trained by e-learning.

Overall in my work I have directed the gaze on “ordinary,” lay, common forms of qigong: those were cherished by most people and taught by ordinary masters or teachers. The life-world and life stories of these modest teachers enable the voices of lay practitioners to be heard.

I collected a life story and in situ biography of Zhao lǎoshī 老師 and shīfu 師父, an “ordinary” qigong teacher and master mirroring my in-depth ethnographic work with him (Micollier 2013). Lǎoshī means “teacher” and shīfu “master.” From his trainee’s status and relation to Zhao, a student or a disciple, depending on the trainee’s engagement in a specific and personalized training, Zhao is either a teacher or a master. More generally, in the qigong world, the trainee’s and trainer’s status and denominations are defined from a relational standpoint much like the master – disciple nexus (shīfu-tudi, dizi) of knowledge transmission in the context of classical Chinese culture (Micollier 2004, 2013).

To offer glimpses on the method as a process opening on new horizons, I recall below my actual work with Zhao lǎoshī and the transnational journey of his qigong method. I accompanied him in his regular activities for almost a year in the early 1990s. In the morning, he would provide medical consultation at the Chinese medicine hospital in Guangzhou qigong healing and teaching service (Guangzhou zhongyi xueyuan qigong liaofa yanjiu shi 廣州中醫氣功學院療法研究室); in the afternoon he would give private consultations and, in the evening, engage in qigong courses within the framework of social and local organizations. He taught Fanteng gong 翻騰功, literally “training to increase and surpass human revitalizing qualities.” This method aims to contribute to the treatment of cancer and HIV infection. It spread beyond China’s borders in the 2000s and is practiced today at an international scale: one can easily search on the web to track it. This method is described in many European and Asian languages. In the late 2000s, it developed more specifically in Germany where it has many practitioners, as well as in Turkey. The practice is explained by masters who ensure its promotion and who often claim its development as they adapt to the contexts and create variants, as we have seen in the method of Zhao lǎoshī. Videos are available on YouTube and books on Google Books. Zhao’s qigong experiences and

teaching involved both the transmission of inherited knowledge and innovation processes.

### **Framing a phenomenology of the body**

In the context of qigong culture and also mirroring the ethnographer's condition in the field, body languages, sensations, emotions, and feelings of a person in movement and within the world map produces a shared "life-world." Reflected in the writing or not, all these movements invite a reflexive journey. The ethnographer may approach it through bodily experience, participant observation and a sort of immersion, as far as possible, in the Chinese world past and present (Micollier 1995).

The physical and (psycho)physiological context is very important for the practice, as it co-creates a sensorial language moving in a designated actual and imagined space-time. Qigong has the ability to fluidify its attributes and qualities according to practitioners' sensoriality and relationships, which develop from the immersive experience in these spaces. One can see, feel, and "inhabit" qi gong as a gymnastic, a therapy, and a collective or individual ritual, which has the power to move the human being toward well-being, health, and the development of the person, as well as in the domestic space, easily crossing and bridging generations.

Phenomenological concern is implicit or explicit in any work about the body and personhood. Epistemological resonances involving phenomenologies vibrate in accordance with observed phenomena connected with knowledge, practice, ritual, and local healing, which produce movement in the body and the person, and thereby expose them. The interpretation of these phenomena is based on the epistemologies and ontologies of "others." Everyday lives are a chain of immediate experiences, which cannot be experienced but through the senses (Merleau-Ponty 1962). These experiences engage our embodied state in a processual way. Embodiment defined as "the bodily aspects of human beings and subjectivity" (Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 89) is considered as a paradigm for the anthropology of the body; the body being a living entity by and through which we experience the world (Csordas 1990). Moving from the human body, entangled with the world body, to the social body, Csordas heuristically interlaces the notion of embodiment with the Bourdieusian habitus, addressing the issue of minoring the material and socioeconomic determinants of the human condition, and thereby replying to the most common claims against phenomenological approaches as a heuristic in social anthropology.

In their programmatic mapping designed for further research in the anthropology of the body, Scheper-Hugues and Lock (1987) identify the body

as one and as multiple bodies, which can be unfolded into individual, social, and political bodies bounded together by emotions. Using “embodiment” as an actual and efficient process, Lock (1993) unbounds and weaves threads of prerogatives in a gradual move towards the erasing of limits of discourses. Discourses of and on the body are highlighted together with insights from the melody of biologies, cultures, and experiences intertwining (Lock 2001). The body is in perpetual becoming and constitutes a tangible interface between human and non-human entities, as well as time (Latour 2004). Such theoretical orientation helps in understanding the crucial experience of the body: flows of entities, traveling in and out through an interstitial and porous envelope, which produce movements in and out of the body. This multifaceted body acts in return on these various entities creating a body in perpetual becoming while being moved through a perpetual process of co-constitution with the environment. Understanding bodily experiences as displaced and reframed by other entities, either human or non-human, is facilitated by Latour’s conceptual lens, which closely bounds time and body. Finally, while adding to the body mapping, the quality of “agency” alive in all beings, relations between the human and non-human are better understood as interactions and interrelations rather than a mere co-presence in the world (Descola 2013).

Mapping forms and paths of experiencing the world and “being toward the world,” a number of anthropological studies have explicitly contributed to exploring phenomenologies in the context of culture. Here, I focus more specifically on a few significant works grounded in the context of East Asian cultures. Inspired by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty while working in the context of Chinese culture, Ots (1990, 1991) favors the term “lived-body” (Leder 1984), rather than “embodiment” to properly understand “the body in human experience” (Merleau-Ponty 1962). However, the horizons of the “lived-body” and “embodiment” are not excluding each other in our phenomenological journey. Ots aims at raising awareness about the body as an inhabited, intelligent, and intentional entity. A modern cultural interpretation of the “natural” body blurred such knowledgeable views about the body (Heidegger 1979: 99 – 100). From premodern Europe, prior to the modern emergence of the body – mind dichotomy, a unique Scandinavian and Germanic term, *leib*, semantically gathers in one “life-person-body” (Ots 1990: 53, 55). In a work focusing on wind, life, and health, Low and Hsu (2007) explicitly referred to Merleau-Ponty’s approach; Hsu captured the “wind,” an historical etiological entity in the Chinese context, drawing on Ingold’s views on environment (Ingold 2000), himself genealogically inspired by the phenomenology of perception of Merleau-Ponty (1962).

At this juncture, I shall mention that while insisting in this article on the monist and holistic views in classical Chinese thought, the body – mind dichotomy is also assessed as an ancient notion in early China’s historical sources (Slingerland 2013). Therefore, this dichotomic view of the human being is not specific to European modern historical culture and the strong influence of Cartesian thought within it, as commonly claimed in the scholarly literature.

### **Bodily and sensory experiences: qi cultivation (qigong), healing and development of the person**

The term *shentǐ* (身體), as a noun used in common Chinese, means “person.” In its verbal forms, it means either “to experience something personally” or “to put oneself in the position of someone else,” focusing either on the experience of the person or the movement toward the other (Micollier 1999: 25). These meanings suggest to mobilize and cultivate empathy. The notion of the “body-person” (Elvin 1989) evokes the body and the person in movement, although it remains difficult to find a lone word conveying both meanings in translation.

In the following, I shall focus more specifically on the qualities and meanings of *qì* as crucial entities in the body and on their agentivity through their powerful transforming abilities. According to Zhao’s teachings, three essential qualities of *qì* are connected with three body regions: the primordial *qì* (*yuanqì* 元氣) is used to heal the body parts situated below the vital center (*dantian* 丹田); the celestial *qì* (*houqì* 候氣, *tianqì* 天氣) targets the central part of the body at the level of the vital center; the authentic *qì* (*zhengqì* 正氣) is efficacious in taking care of the uppermost part.

Opening an ecological window, *qì* evocation reveals tight bounding and binding points with the environment and a movement involving sensoriality. Ancient uses and meanings of *qì*, including “breath, breathing, air, vapors, influences, emanations, clouds,” situate them living in the worlds of physics, geography, and meteorology. *Qì* circulates within the body in correspondence with cosmic influences. Unschuld (1985: 72) translates them as “finest matter influences or emanations,” taking into account the etymological and philological significance while encompassing the meaning of *qì* in the context of contemporary culture. *Qì* is a key determinant in the conceptualization of life and a basic concept in Chinese medicine theory. Current and common meanings of *qì* can be extrapolated as follows: (1) *qì* in connection with fate and so intrinsically a lifegiver (for instance *yunqì* 運氣, “*qì* in movement” usually translated “fate, fortune”; “you should accept the *qì* inside you, you should accept things as they are” (*neizhong de qì lai, meiyǒu banfǎ*

yinggai shì yīng); (2) qì as vitality, force, dynamism; (3) qì as emotions; (4) qì as vibrations emanating from a person, or impression given by someone; this latter meaning being the most common (Micollier 1999: 24).

Moreover qì is defined by qualities and localizations. In Chinese medicine basic theory, more than thirty qualities of qì can produce good or bad effects on the human body. Most have the ability to transform themselves into pathogenic agents affecting humans. Nevertheless, the benevolent quality of qì is also located in the human body and constitutes the basis for health, well-being, and longevity. The body has the potential to fight against pathogenic influences. Other constituents such as the essence (jīng 精) are defined as “treasures” (bǎo 寶). The interactions between qì and jīng weave a complex network of exchanges: according to the first part of the Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi neijing suwen, Veith 1966), the fundamental classic of Chinese medicine, qì transforms itself into jīng and jīng feeds itself with qì. This reciprocal transformation of qì into jīng sheds light on their therapeutic complementarity. Shen embraces the organizational, transformable, and ever-lasting influence of individual impregnation. The body is conceived of as a reservoir of life and participates in the transformations of the world. Even though the life hosted in the body may generate disease, worries, and the exhaustion of the senses, the body nonetheless mediates the development and improvement of the person. The analogical horizon opens in the body and the world through the presence of multiple qì. The human and the world reciprocally reflect each other, with body parts mirroring cosmic entities (adapted from Chapter Seven of the Chinese classical book *Huainanzi* 1968 in Le Blanc 1985):

Table 1.- The body and the world: analogical correspondences

BODY	WORLD
Head	Sky
Feet	Earth
Human being (four limbs)	One year (4x3 months)
366 articulations	366 days
Eyes + ears	Sun + moon
Blood + <i>qi</i>	Wind + rain
9 Body orifices	9 Doors of the earth, 9 Celestial strata
5 Receptacles	5 Phases of transformation

Qi is inscribed and lives in a geographical space: both the body and the world are situated in a spatial, temporal and relational continuum screened with analogical lenses.

The character qi 氣 includes a pictogram showing “rising vapor” situated above of that of “rice” or “millet.” The whole character means “vapors emanating from rice (or millet or food)” (Engelhardt 1987). Another version of the character quoted in the etymological dictionary Shuowen (Xu 1992) (approximately AD 100) combines the two components described above with a third one meaning “food” (shí 食), confirming the common historical reading “vapours emanating from the food.” The pictogram qi is used in the second and third century literature in a broader range of meaning of “what fills in the body,” “what life means,” “breathing,” “vapors,” “clouds in the sky,” or even “wind” (Unschuld 1985: 72). From the Early Han dynasty (third century BC), a constituent made of “finest and dispersed vapors” is called qi and imagined as floating in the air and circulating in the body together with blood.

These semantic uses resonate with a phenomenological reading through the evocation of perpetual flows of entities and between entities, and of the vaporous constituent disseminating in the world and impregnating it in a continual movement; so much so that a harmonious relation is bounded between the human and qi of all natural phenomena. Qi, feng 風 (wind), and jing 精 (essence, sperm/vaginal secretions) have the ability to transform into one another. In a perpetual movement disseminated everywhere in the world, influences (qi) as constituents of life and the environment are also affluent inside organisms, moving in a fundamental circulation and in a porous world, where lines and limits are vanishing. Qi, as all entities, demonstrates agency.

From emotions in movement through qigong experience and semantic fields of lay daily use of the term, qi acts as the dynamic agent demonstrating emotions and qualities of the person, as a spring for life, an agent of destiny (ming 命), and a constituent of the person and of the world (Micollier 1999: 24). In Chinese medicine basic theory, nine qi are in an analogical relation with nine pathological states produced by excessive manifestations of the seven emotional states. As already mentioned, although qi may always transform itself in a pathological agent, it is almost never essentially pathogenic. However, the clinical reality of emotions reveals key divergences with the ancient theory of omnipresent correspondences (Ots 1990: 56).

Qigong experiences are situated between consciousness and knowledge. They offer to the gaze flows of living qi in movement; these qi are influenced, acting, and agentive entities. While describing their experiences, qigong practitioners clearly evoke actions and influences of qi, yin yang principles and the Five Phases (wǔxing).

Experiencing is at the core of the ethnographic method involving participant observation and in-depth description dear to Geertz (1973). The method in the world of Chinese cultural heritage refers to the Dao “path, way” of qi cultivation and the development of the person (xiushen), a work on the inner self, while gazing at remote horizons and aiming at the transformation and elevation of the person: qigong leads to the development of the person with a gradual mastering of the art of qi. The ultimate experience aims at reaching a superior realm (gaoji jingjie 高級境界) with “special, exceptional, extraordinary abilities” (teshu gongneng 特殊功能) such as clairvoyance, telepathic communication, receiving cosmic information, controlling energetic flows in levitating, miraculous curing powers, and so forth (Micollier 1995: 270). For instance, Zhao lǎoshī was teaching and curing through telepathy, and could stop the course of X and gamma rays. However of course, he also taught at the Chinese Medicine Institute and gave consultation and care in the service of qigong research, treatment, and care in a more conventional way. In the qigong world, the body of the practitioner is transfigured and movements open onto perpetual transformation. Qigong is an array of sensorial participative experiences difficult to define, which cannot be captured with pre-constructed models. Its practice reveals a complex landscape of know-how and knowledge movements interlaced with movements of the world. Bodily, sensorial, and spiritually complete experience opening up horizons of the person in the world, qigong is about inner life experience, sometimes an ecstatic experience connected with the charismatic experience of the master. Qigong states of mind (qigong tai 氣功態) modify the consciousness of the body, a body inhabited and a habitant of this very body, a way of “being toward the world.” Through body movements, one can perceive fluid links and interactions with the immediate surroundings. These processes ontologically illuminate a co-constitution body environment. Experiencing this in successive sequences is part of daily practice, producing gradual transformations of the person in movement. Fluid movements of expanding and constricting, and emotions connected with intermediary mental operations, are situated in between liberating and controlling them (Micollier 1999). Practitioners in movement toward a better being, in this situation patients in consultation, have indeed to let the flow of their emotions go beyond the barrier of an inhibiting behavior. Then the vistas of care, eventually of curing in a movement of reciprocal exchanges between the master and his beneficent qi and the qi of the patient, open up and expand. In the healing movement, the world is located where the relationship of two persons (a therapeutic relationship) is born and grows. Engaged in this method of healing at a distance, two “body-persons,” the patient and the healer, mediate the “body-world” and the world mediates exchanges between all beings, human and other than human, in a flow of reciprocal influences.

The master's beneficent q<sub>i</sub> and talent are transmitted by thought (to use the thought to project the talent and emit the q<sub>i</sub>, yong yinian fagong, faq<sub>i</sub>) operating in a precisely delimited spatial and temporal framework and received by the patient (shouq<sub>i</sub>). This reciprocal exchange and the flow and journey of q<sub>i</sub> constitute the matrix in this basic healing experience of qigong. Q<sub>i</sub> has the "skill" (borrowed from Ingold 2000's perspective) to travel far away when correctly emitted and guided by a talented master. A localization to circumscribe a place (ding difang), a direction (ding fangxiang), or a time (ding shijian) needs to be arranged for facilitating interactions between the two persons. For instance, a telepathic technique works only when precise conditions are fulfilled: concentration is needed while conforming to the conditions of space and time previously delineated. This method is an individual and relational experience involving the sensibility previously developed. Practitioners use telepathy either in the context of a high-level training, aiming at the development of potentialities of the mind or in the context of an "at a distance" therapy. Patients come to see the master once, to start a therapy; later the follow-up is usually pursued at a distance. Health depends on the quality as well as on the intensity of q<sub>i</sub> sensations:

*How are q<sub>i</sub> sensations produced? A person may experience tangible variations in daily life. You may perceive yourself either as bright and deep (shenming 深明) or as clumsy and stupid. While practicing qigong, sensations producing conflicting feelings may be experienced. Later you may hopefully experience fulfilling sensations again. (Zhao lǎoshi)*

A healing session first aims at developing patient – practitioner sensibility to q<sub>i</sub> sensations. Q<sub>i</sub> emitting of the master-teacher is directly connected in a relational exchange to the reception of the q<sub>i</sub> by the patient. Any practitioner should be aware and expand the sensibility of following the nature of the body as a key principle of q<sub>i</sub> practice (Micollier 1995: 238). Although qigong practice produces a constellation of q<sub>i</sub> sensations, these sensations are experienced and mediated differently. One may recommend to all to follow the nature of their body, the flow of life within. This sensibility should be developed with words and thought (yi): "Think about what I talk about. . .in one hand utter words; in the other hand use the thought." For instance, submitted to q<sub>i</sub> influence, most people react through emotional expression and body movements; they may laugh, weep, jump, move, in short let their body relax and express itself" (Micollier 1995: 239). Q<sub>i</sub> emitting moves flow, which are captured with the senses and thus embodied. At this juncture, I shall tentatively unravel threads of qigong and Daoist experiences, and those of qigong and Buddhist experiences, while

simultaneously engaging with weaving a tight cloth between experience and consciousness.

### **Interlacing experience and consciousness: bounding qi cultivation, daoist and buddhist body and worlds**

Daoist heritage resonates in qigong experiences. Inner rituals reveal interlacement with Daoist experiences: the creation of a “qigong space” and visualizing reminding of inner alchemy. A collective session where master Liao, another teacher-master whose experience intertwined with mine thanks to the trajectories of the biographical method, solicits movements of the body and the person opening in receiving the qi: “Let us relax. When you feel to scream, scream; when you feel to weep, weep; to dance, dance; to move, move (let your body, your emotions, your world live). Let you experience that” (Micollier 1999: 26).

Practitioners in movement toward a better being, in this situation patients in consultation, have indeed to let the flow of their emotions go beyond the barrier of an inhibiting behavior. Then the vistas of care, eventually of curing in a movement of reciprocal exchanges between the master and his beneficent qi and the qi of the patient, open up and expand.

Qigong forms in their diversity and among them the forms of medical qigong, those that I studied more specifically, refer and borrow from Daoist cosmology, theory, and practice. This is also the case of Chinese medicine with which medical qigong are intertwined. Located at the heart of Chinese culture, Daoism is rooted in an ancient form of shamanism, though not exclusively, and is born in China in contrast to Buddhism for instance, which made its journey from India (actual Nepal) to China in the first century A.C. As mentioned earlier, Daoism as a method and a theory reveals an ontology bounding tightly the body, the human being, and the world: a cosmology (myths of foundation), a method (aiming at knowing the intangible, incommensurable through the path “Dao” referring to Dao practice as a process of transformation), and a theory (a philosophy involving an analogical rationale). Chinese thought immerses into an analogical ontological world, and even more specifically a paradigmatic one of this type of ontology because it sharply unveils a crucial site of any analogical ontology, namely the difficulty of practically distinguishing among the components of existing entities, those connected with interiority from those connected with exteriority (Descola 2013).

Bodily experience is an integral part of religious experience. In the context of Chinese culture, individual practices and the liturgy as a collective experience are connected with the regulation of the relation between the

individual and their environment: visualizing techniques and inner rituals trace a continuum between the interior and the exterior. The body is then a protective envelope mediating perpetual exchanges between humans and their environment. In continuity with surroundings, the body immerses into the phenomenal reality. The lived body of the Daoist traces a blurred and extensible limit to the point of vanishing because the body has the ability to encompass but also to become the world itself; in a reciprocal movement, a dynamic process is connecting the human (the microcosm) and the environment, the universe, the world (macrocosm). Daoist thought is based on notions of relativity, impermanence, and the ability of transformation of any entity. Dynamic and vital relations between beings, human and other-than-human and their interrelations, correspondences weaving and networks intertwining grow through this relational “ever processing.” Present in most world cultures, these views reflecting interlacing microcosm and macrocosm are developed and claimed in an extreme way through elaborate and systematic doctrinal tools involving both theory and practice. Body conception, perception and experience are the best example of these. Weavings and the threads which with they are made become more important than the beings and entities themselves.

The Daoist body is a pregnant woman’s body, the all-encompassing body, the only one enabled to realize the transformation, the Dao 道 ultimate work (Schipper 1982: 173). Roles and meanings of the pregnant woman’s body are delineated in Daoist ritual practice.

The human being is born as soon as he is conceived; the child’s age is calculated from the fertilization process. Life inside the matrix resonates with the future life in the outside world. A temporal beat enables to determine the child’s span of life in the world. The body of a pregnant woman, which is gradually ever expanding, constitutes a bodily model for the adept, who completely identifies with it to the extent of being able to experience the same metamorphosis through giving birth to the “immortal embryo” and making it grow inside the body person. A pregnant woman is a living being, no longer with borders: borders vanish in the expanding movement, enabling her a more acute sensibility while communicating ability. For the Daoist adept, a body endowed with a transformational ability opens onto the ultimate goal of involution to origin and of becoming “one” with the Dao. The transforming movement constitutes the core of Daoist practices; while the adept’s body is dilating, it is projecting itself in the world and simultaneously incorporating world components. The metamorphosist’s skill is the essential ability required for the creation of a “Daoist body” envisioned through the metaphor of the small child’s “authentic Self.” In the ritual experience, this ever-transforming body is a temple unveiling a superior and harmonious world inhabited with divinities.

The “Daoist body” is also a mystical body. The experience of a child’s development shares similarities with that mystical experience through incorporating a “continuity between the inner world and the outer world, between the feeling of being one with the environment, which discovers itself being, for an essential part, another oneself” (Anzieu 1980: 160). From an enlightenment involving the senses, the mystic person returns to a primary state, which enables the transformation process. Furthermore, she lives a hard and painful regressive process: she is able to control it while simultaneously experiencing a primary state of non-integration and a limitless and original feeling of oneself (Winnicott 1974). Foucault (1966) refers also to this notion of “aspects interlacing” when he evokes a set of rules regulating and orienting the “world prose.” Last but not least, Levi-Strauss (1966) identifies a coherent rationale to the “savage mind” locating it at a strategic level of appropriating the natural world, which is approximately fitting to human perception and imagination.

In the Chinese thought, the “interlacing points” are the Five Phases (wǔxíng 五行), namely Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water imagined in perpetual transformation of one into another. Xíng means “go ahead, follow a path.” The macrocosmic organism resonates with the human (microcosmic) organism: as the Dao without shape, which may be strong or weak, soft or hard, yin or yang (yīn yáng), dark or bright, the human on the path is changing, either expanding or concentrating, while his figure is undefined, ever evolving (Seidel 1969).

These resonances are crucial in Daoist meditation of internal organs, of spirits and deities inhabiting the body, which are visualized, and primordial forces are interiorized while one contemplates the exterior world through the visual sensorial organ, the eyes (Robinet 1979). The human and the world are “organisms” from a physiological perspective like any cell or living being. From the first century A.C. Daoists developed the concept of body microcosm, which is also a bodypantheon. The deities living in the body are similar to the deities in the worldmacrocosm. The Daoist adept bounds body parts with regions of the universe through communicating with deities inside the body. In order to preserve qì, jīng (精), shén (神), the process of realizing the Dao consists of “nurturing the form” (yǎngxíng), “nurturing the life,” (yǎngshēng), and cultivating the person (xiūshēn 修身) (Engelhardt 1987: 9). These experiences of the body, the person, and the world in perpetual movement nurture experience. The generic and simple technique of qìgong denominated “relaxing qìgong” (fāngsōng gōng 放鬆功), which is a basic sequence in many qìgong forms, is based on the visualizing of various parts of the body, from the most internal (the essence jīng, namely sperm and vaginal secretions, and internal organs) to the most external sensorial elements (hair and skin). Visualizing internal organs is described as a

fundamental technique of Daoist meditation in Chinese sources (Robinet 1979: 94-129). This very clear vision of the inner body evokes the “inner vision” of Daoist adepts. However, divinities living within the body vanished in modern qigong experience (Micollier 2004). Zhao lǎoshī explicitly refers to the Daoist model of knowledge transmission through the development of a privileged master – disciple relation:

My own master is a Daoist master of the Longmen group from the 19th generation. This Daoist master (daoshi 道士) is from the 24th generation. . . For instance, you and me, we are potential disciples and myself the master; between you all, no generation distinction whatever your age. In the case I am the first generation, you will be representative of the second one. In short, we shall all be affiliated to the Longmen branch. (Micollier 2013: 144)

The school of the “Door of the Dragon” (Longmen pai 龍門派) is a branch of the Daoist school (Quanzhen dao 全真道). Inner rituals (neigong), which are at the core of the qigong experience (described in Micollier 1995, 2004), echo strongly with the experience of inner alchemy (neidan). This form of Daoist meditation, dear to the Quanzhen school, includes the visualization of a whole range of divinities living within the body, which in the end comprehend a whole pantheon (Robinet 1979, 1991).

The ethnographic experience enables one to see the weaving of tight threads between qigong and Daoism within a movement of theoretical, sensorial, and experiential interlacing. The world and its cosmological mapping, the body and person’s experiences, the collective experience, the history and knowledge path in qigong located between innovations and heritage transmission, and the religious affiliations of master and practitioners all contribute to this weaving process. This spatial and temporal movement gives birth to shapes with uncertain and ephemeral outlines, and traces lines of encounters and lines of flight in between these actual experiences of qi’s cultivation.

Qigong experiences are also deeply connected with Buddhist lore: depending on specific qigong forms and masters’ teachings, variations in the form, the choreography of movements, interactions, relations, and ritual processes together resonate with Buddhist experiences. For instance, practitioners transport themselves in lotus flowers’ space and practice Oneness (lianhua taishang lianyī 蓮花台上練一; Micollier 1995: 210-215) where they develop

“knowledge produced by the thought in action” (yìshì zhīshì 意識知識). In his own training, teaching or healing, Zhao lǎoshī chants the mantra Om mani padme om in Tibetan or in Chinese (Hong mami bei mi hong).

From the discourses of practitioners on some modified or liminal states of consciousness they had experienced, and also observed situations, I described

experiences recalling “near-death experiences” through various qualities of “qigong state, attitude” (qigong tai 氣功態) and the intensity of this transformation of overall mental state (Micollier 1999). Sensorial and perceptual experiences of practitioners evoke those of people living mental transformations, experiencing expanded or modified states of consciousness (Micollier 1999; Chen 2003) and near-death experiences in religious experiences (Becker 1981) or in coma-related neurological experiences. Becker’s (1981) philosophical study highlights the centrality of near-death experiences in the practice of Pure Land Buddhism (Jingtū zong).

Discussing the how and why of human experience and interestingly taking it as entry and exit points, phenomenology and Buddhism deeply interrogate the human condition; they both aim at elucidating similar epistemological issues, namely perceptions, sensations, cognition, noetic construction, embodiment conditioning, limitations, and going beyond embodied paths to comprehend the world. Their shared objective is to solve the most crucial human dilemmas and issues through a methodic investigation of the means of knowledge (Lusthaus 2002).

## Conclusion

Phenomenological engagements show affinities with East Asian philosophies (Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch, 2003). From theory to method, applying phenomenology, “seeing” experience, and “becoming aware” (Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch, 2003) resonate with qi cultivation, Buddhist and Daoist experiences.

Undoubtedly, the qigong world opens up the body person, the “life world,” social and politico-religious reality, and religious experiences. Through their immediate lived experiences, qigong practitioners develop sensibility (mǐngǎn 敏感) to qis (qigǎn 氣感): these qis are living and are active entities in bodies and persons in movement, and reciprocally humans have transforming power upon them. Body experience involving all the senses, breathing, emotions, and feelings sheds light on a body co-constituted by, and inhabiting, the surrounding world. These sensorial experiences are situated in both a material and a social world.

Inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and Latour’s proposal on the body, to closely bind it to time, my article sheds light on qigong experience involving immediate sensorial perception, an experience of embodiment opening onto other horizons. The qigong world immerses into the life world of persons through a fundamental sensory nonverbal experience, offering to the gaze movements, sounds, and gestures, with some such gathered into martial or performing arts forms. These choreographic sets

sketch an aesthetics and a poetic of the body, reflecting emotions, feelings, and relations between persons within an “inhabited” space. Practitioner-dancers move through a material and mental space delineated by their master. First therapeutic, rather than aesthetic bodily expression, this inhabited space discretely depicts the space of Daoist ritual even though not perceived and thought as such by the “dancers.” These bodily experiences unveil a poetic of the body in movement and transformation, animating people’s daily life. As I have hopefully demonstrated in this article, these are woven together with phenomenologically interlaced threads of affects, sensations, and emotions, constituting a heavy share in experience.

This article tentatively unravels the threads of an anthropology of the body feeding on phenomenological air coming both from Europe and East Asia, more specifically the Chinese world. This anthropological engagement resonates at both the theoretical and the methodological, more precisely the empirical level. Bodies in movement shed light on a choreography, which is an invitation to comprehend how the interplay between anthropology and phenomenology can offer critical and innovative views. Throughout our journey in the qigong world and religious experiences, the interlacing of experience and consciousness immerses in the life world of the individual and human groups through a relational analytical lens and along the lines of a phenomenology of perception.

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