

The Cultural Transfer of Chinese Health Practices: *Qi Gong* in a Western Psychiatric Setting

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I. Introduction

This article originated from the philosophical reflection of my work as a teacher of *Qi Gong*. It is not a work in Chinese or comparative philosophy and therefore different in method and intent. Here, I want to illustrate problems and possible ways of transferring a notion of a Chinese cultural practice into a Western medical context.

Two days a week I am teaching traditional Chinese Health exercises, *Qi Gong* (气功), to patients of a psychiatric clinic in a German hospital. Most of them get their treatment in the so called „Tagesklinik“ (day clinic) for 6 to 8 weeks. That means they come every morning and spend their day with regular activities, like specific educational programs, psycho- and occupational therapeutic activities and once a week *Qi Gong*. In the afternoon they leave the hospital and spend the night at home.

Most of the patients practice *Qi Gong* for the first time, some of them have not the slightest idea of what that is. In this point there is not really a big difference to the medical staff. The management implemented *Qi Gong* for several reasons, first of all there is an increasing demand by patients. Some of the physicians think it is a kind of gymnastics, others think it is a relaxation technique. Nobody knows about the complexity of this practice and the fewest know any research on it.

As a teacher I am confronted with the challenge to explain patients as well as medical staff what I am doing. That's why I had to go deep into the theoretical discourse on *Qi Gong* to get the common German terms for the description of its practice. What I found were several modes of talking on Chinese health practices, on *Tai Ji Quan* (太极拳) and on Chinese Martial Arts depending on the self-conception of the practitioner. For instance, most of them explain “*Qi*” with life energy, others with breath and again others refuse to translate it. Only a few talk on the practice, their principles and the specific function of the movements. But there are also some exceptions, for instance, several useful books who try to take a medical point of view – in general they focus on specific styles or exercises, like *Ba Duan Jin* (八段锦) or *Yi Jin Jing* (易筋经) – and several general explanations on *Qi Gong*. A great source are translations of Chinese texts, some of them are online

and available for free (e.g. Brennan). Last but not least there is an extended research on Traditional Chinese Medicine in general. You will find research papers on the efficacy of *Qi Gong* and acupuncture and on the search for *Qi* and the Channels in which *Qi* passes through.

So I found myself in the middle of a translational process, a process of the transfer and – I had to find out – of transformation of a Chinese cultural practice. What was at first an endeavor for a good explanation for teaching, became a reflection on ideas, language and terms and on the translational process itself.

In the following I would like to discuss some of the results of this work. In a first part I want to talk about some difficulties and pitfalls of cultural translation and transfer. The second part deals with the significance of Chinese practices and the philosophy behind these practices.

II. Problems of translation and cultural transmission

Especially the translation from Chinese into a western language is of high complexity. Over 90 % of the Chinese characters are so called phonetic compounds, made up of a semantic or meaning-indicative element, the signifier or radicals, and a phonetic, or sound-indicative component. The relation of these components is not clearly. Often are phonetic elements even more meaning-indicative than the signifier. Additionally, there is the relation of the character to the sound. The Chinese standard language employs 4 tones and the sounds are not distributed evenly across the characters (cf. Rosemont 2015). For instance, there are 80 characters pronounced “shi”, 15 of them in the even (first) tone. And, there is a difference between spoken and written language. As Creel puts it:

„The Chinese characters made Chinese civilization, the culture of the book, and not the orator.” (Creel 1997, 447)

The earliest philosophers, like Kong Zi (孔子) or Lao Zi (老子), conveyed their views orally, not in a written form. Thus, one has to keep in mind, that these classical writings are based on the conversations with their students (Rosemont 2015). A point which will be relevant in the second part of my article.

But let me emphasize again the well known fact, that translation is more than simple transcoding of words but a cultural transfer and thus as well an interpretation. There are some interesting theories

concerning translation as cultural transfer and I will pick some arguments to illuminate the role of the translator and the practice of translation itself.

The first argument concerns the structural and material conditions in which translation takes place. David Wright (Wright 2000) describes in his book „Translating Science. The Transmission of Western Chemistry into Late Imperial China, 1840-1900” how the ideas and the vocabulary of modern Western chemistry were transmitted to China and taken up by the Chinese people. Around 1800 China had an „enormous technical knowledge and subtle theoretical understanding” (Wright 2000, xxii), so Wright and he asks, „[w]hy should the Chinese have shown any interest in Western science [...]?” (Wright 2000, xxiii).

And indeed, at the beginning of the translational activities the transmission resulted less in the acquisition of Western science than in a revival of interest in the own Chinese tradition. As well failed the European attempt to impress the Chinese with technology. Only when Western military technology was seen to be so overwhelmingly effective in the battles of the two Opium Wars (Wright 2000, xxiii) the interest changed. In dependence of the situation and the different conditions before and after the Opium Wars (1. OW 1839-1842; 2. OW 1856-1860), the social role of the translator (and the function of the translation) varied and changed. According to the translational context Wright describes several modes or functions of translation (cf. Wright 2000). Let's have a look on some examples: In the 1860s the Chinese translators Xu Shou and Xu Jianyin (father and son) conducted their own experiments on optics and thermometry in their hometown of Wuxi in the Lower Yangzi Valley. For them translation was above all a process of discovery as well as an instruction. On contrary for missionary translators, translating of science was another means to spread Christianity. All of the missionary translations show the influence of a natural theological text by William Paley (Natural Theology, 1802). For them translation was a kind of evangelism.

During the 19th century translation took the form of authority. The translator could act as a secular missionary, as well as science could be a public spectacle or popular journalism to enlighten the seemingly non-enlightened. Of course the new terms had to show their ability to survive in the new environment (Wright xxvi). According to this examples Wright understands the role of a translator as follows and quotes Andrew Chestermans „Memes of Translation“:

„[A] translator is not someone whose task is to conserve something but to propagate something, to spread and develop it: translators are agents of change. Translators, in fact, make a difference.” (Chesterman 1997, 2)

Surely a strong thesis.

Let me illustrate that, using the example of *Qi Gong*. The history of the transmission of Chinese Health practices into Western countries has yet to be written. But let's have a short look on some interesting points: Besides of some forerunners (e. g. Sophia Delza, a dancer and student of Ma Yueliang who performed the first known public demonstration of *Tai Ji Quan* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1954), the practice of *Qi Gong* was taken on especially by people interested in alternative life styles. I guess it was much later than the 60s – which were dominated by Indian philosophies or Japanese Zen Buddhism – that *Qi Gong* could take a foot in Western societies. Nowadays, in our so called postmodern society – the German-Danish sport scientist Henning Eichberg writes – the body has become a matter of choice and construction (Eichberg 2009, 85). Next to the beauty industry *Qi Gong* is now also a part of the commercial or market logic of the wellness complex. But that's just one side of the coin.

On the other hand you have to see the economic motivated change of the health sector. Thus *Qi Gong* came into the focus of medical practitioners and management because of his preventative effects. Alternative medical therapies are requested by patients too. The people, so Eichberg, want to take their body and their responsibility for their body back. This demand is part of a „civil logic“, a logic that is opposed to the alienation and reification of the body in an economic and biochemical dominated health care system (Eichberg 2009). As a consequence of both the practice of *Qi Gong* came finally into the focus of scientific research.

These two points already show several actors in a „field“ – a term Bourdieu elaborated (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) – of translational activities with their specific logic of action, their interests, their own symbolic system and last but not least their specific media of communication and agency (like movies, literature, tourism, scientific papers).

Let's consider a second argument which takes up the relationship between two cultures in the process of translation and transmission: There is no one-way street of knowledge, so the argument. I just want to remind on the famous work of Homi Bhabha and his concept of a „third space“ (Bhabha 1994), or on the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz who coined the term “transculturation” (Ortiz 1947/1995) or the concept of a „contact zone“ coined by Mary Louise Pratt (Pratt 1992). All of these concepts describe a kind of transcultural or hybrid space which arise in the often unequal encounter and exchange of two different cultures.

In this context, for me it is interesting to see the change of the representation of *Qi Gong* in the Chinese culture itself, often provoked by the influence, sometimes dominance of Western ideas. The systematization and standardization of Chinese medicine in the last century, of *Tai Ji Quan* and also of *Qi Gong*, as well as the influence of Western trained Chinese academics who taught and teach Chinese practices to a wide range of interested parties from all over the world, have led to a change of interpretation of central terms and terminology. This transcultural dynamics taken together have shaped the representation, the terminology and also the ideas on Chinese health practices in China and the Western Countries as well.

My last argument focuses especially on the transmission of a cultural *practice*. The knowledge the translator or better mediator would like to transfer is not anymore a more written description (propositional knowledge or *knowing that*, to use the famous distinction by Ryle [1945]), or a written prescription. First of all it is practice, it is acting or moving in a special way, it is *knowing how* to do something. Not only for *Qi Gong* we can speak of an embodied knowledge you get through experience, you have to learn (additionally to the language), to adopt.

III. The relevance of experience – an anthropological approach

This argument highlights the importance of personal experience of the other culture. But also the first and second point suggest the relevance of an (temporary) involvement in the everyday cultural life of a language community. If translation is cultural transmission, than it requires a certain familiarity that goes beyond a simple knowledge of language use. This – of course – is not a new insight and it is standard in every linguistic education program. What I want to stress is a methodological reflected participation.

In his paper on cultural transmission, the anthropologist Talal Asad (1986) states that the cultural translation should be the main task of a social anthropology. Social and cultural anthropological work is done in the field, that simply means it is not done in a library, laboratory or workplace setting. Thus, it allows not only the concrete experience of other cultures, the field research itself becomes the act of translation as a creative process. Again it is not cultural anthropology itself I want to emphasize but its method of participant observation.

The so called „crisis of representation” (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Fuchs & Berg 1993) led to an extended methodological reflection of this anthropological core practice. Now, their instruments

reach from a dialogical approach (Tedlock 1987) up to multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 2009). In the case of an embodied practice, in her work on „The transmission of Chinese medicine” Elisabeth Hsu suggests the term “participant experience” (Hsu 2003). Thus, she emphasizes not only the relevance of practice, the *knowing how*, but also the importance of feelings, gestures etc. This embodied cultural knowledge is only translatable in a reflective act by the translator after having experienced it.

If you – for instance – want to discuss the term „*Qi*” (气) it is of vantage to know, better, to have experienced what you want to talk about. In its strongest sense *Qi Gong* is learning with the body. After practice I can take a step back and reflect on what I did, especially what I did, when my teacher said it is right what I did and how I did it. I can describe my experiences, my feelings in my own words and try to compare them with the words my teacher used.

Let me consider another argument for the importance of participant experience. If you participate in a cultural practice you can better understand the context of a term. That may be true for written knowledge too, but in experiencing cultural practices you also get the non-written, sometimes also non-spoken knowledge, relations and contexts as well as the implicit function of the concept in practice, or – as Henry Rosemont puts it – the “sounds of silence” (Rosemont 2015). Referring to the term *Qi*, Zhuang Zi (莊子) stated:

„Do not listen with your ears but listen with your heart; do not listen with your heart but listen with *qi*.” (Zhuang Zi, *Worldly Business Among Human Beings*, in: Dainian 2002, 48)

In practicing *Qi Gong* you can experience *Qi* in different ways: as warmth, as tickling, as relaxation or even as light. Of course, in all these cases you could understand *Qi* as „life energy” flowing through the channels of your body. Not to mention the more general metaphysical meaning of *Qi* as a “original energy” from which Yin and Yang and the thousand things evolve (Cunshan & Xin, 2008). The neoconfucian philosopher Zhang Zai (张载) stated, that not only all visible things were composed of *Qi* but also the empty space was *Qi*. (Dainian 2002, 57). And in a collection of philosophical treatises from the Warring States period, the *Pheasant Cap Master* (鶡冠子), one can read:

„Thus heaven and earth were formed from the original *qi*, the myriad things derive from heaven and earth.” (Heguanzi, in: Dainian 2002, 51)

But with this understanding you will not get the subtle „distinctions” (Bourdieu 1979/1984) which are expressed in different *practical* contexts. To translate „*Qi*” with „energy”, in most cases it does not really help for understanding, and for the practice in a Western context it seems sometimes meaningless or even misleading. Take as example the transfer of the term „*Qi*” into the medical context. The skepticism of Western health professionals, of physicians and medical scientist toward Asian health practices is very intense. Certainly, only one reason is the problem of translation. But in Western life science the concept of „energy” has its own history. Thus it reminds us of the very problematic concept of „entelechy” by the German vitalist philosopher and biologist Hans Driesch (1921) or the equally problematic concept of „orgon” by the German psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1942).

IV. Integration

Let’s leave the ontological questions for a moment aside, and commit ourselves to an “epoché” (Husserl 1913/1976), a phenomenological abstention from an ontological judgment. Thus, we have got the possibility to describe „*Qi*” as a special bodily sensation, a physical awareness. Indeed, in Chinese Medicine you will find the concept of „dé qì” 得气 (to obtain *Qi*), what is described as a sensation of electrical tingling, of numbness or soreness or of warmth. For the practitioner of *Qi Gong* the feeling of *Qi* makes the movement special, or the other way: If the movement is performed in a special way (relaxed, naturally) you may experience what in *Qi Gong* is called *Qi*. In *Qi Gong* the concept of *Qi* has therefore an important function: because it is realized in movement, it is also closely linked to a *quality* of a movement.

Thus, I would like to come to my third part, the integration of a Chinese notion into a Western framework.

If you practice some *Qi Gong* movements in a park in Germany, sooner or later someone will come and ask you: What are you doing? It is not quite the expected answer if you tell him you are doing “inner work” (内功). His or her question aims for an action (为). For example, what kind of exercise is this: “Opening and Closing the Form” (式走开合) (a basic movement in the practice of *Zi Wu Men Yi Jin Jing*, 子午门易筋经)? Or take *Yi Quan* (意拳), a special style in Chinese Martial Arts, as an example. You start your practice with standing exercises (站桩) adding slowly small

unidirectional movements. The founder of *Yi Quan*, Wang Xiangzhai, describes what happens in these “energetic exercises” as follows:

„First there are the paths of food and breath coming in and going out, then there is the course of kidney energy ascending. It is the art of using the acquired to assist the innate, of the revolving of energy through the energy circuit. In the beginning of training the energy circuit, draw in fresh air through your nose and send it directly to your “sea of energy”. From there it courses through to your tailbone, then curls toward your lower back, where your kidneys are positioned. This place is indeed the origin of the innate condition, the source for all the organs, and thereby the kidney water is sufficient. It then ascends along the Du meridian to the acupoints on the head, returning to the nose. The tongue attracts the kidney energy and from there it descends, filling the lower abdomen, gradually entering the elixir field. These are the essentials, the secret, of the energy circuit. Do not treat it lightly.“ (Wang 1929)

So what are these movements for? Are these mysterious energetic evocations or do they simply show a different approach to improve one's health and the quality of the movement?

In both, *Qi Gong* and *Yi Quan*, you should develop the special quality of the movement first on a basic level before you get more complicated. You should learn to be relaxed and natural (*zì rán*, 自然), what supports the flow of *Qi* and the experience of the forces that work in this simplified context. Thus, practicing *Qi Gong* involves in a special way Chinese philosophy and science.

To get this naturalness, to experience the naturalness of the forces, the unity of the body (the six harmonies, 六合) you have to be calm and relaxed. You should not try to do it – that means you should not act – you should let it happen, so the instruction of the teacher. *Wú wéi* (无为, “non-assertive action“: Chen 2015, 96), *zì rán* (自然, self-so or nature) and the polarity of *Yin* and *Yang* – Chinese philosophical terms, which among other represent the root of Chinese thought (Chen 2015, 96-100) – are key concepts of the practice of *Qi Gong*. With these concepts you get access not only to your own practice but also to a differentiated reflection of the term “*Qi*”. Now one can use the term “*Qi*” to describe different qualities of movements: the complexity and dynamics of relaxation and tension, flexibility and natural flow of the body, the breath as well as the mind:

„*Qi* transforms, flows and goes, producing and reproducing without ceasing“; hence it is called the Way *Yin-yang* and the five agents are the embodiment of the Way.” [Dai Zhen (戴震), An Evidential Study of the meaning of Terms in the Book of Mencius, in: Dainian 2002, 62]

One can experience, how the term “*Qi*” is used, which function the concept fulfills. For translation, there are two possibilities: either there is a corresponding term in the Western language, or not. If

not, than one can also assume, that this term makes a difference in the target language, that he brings something new. My thesis is, that *Qi*, *Qi Gong* and its energetic world view (Heubel 2016) make such a difference not only for Western medical practices.

Beside a different perspective on the body, there is another relevant aspect: one can try to change the bodily as well as the mental habits and improve oneself with the help of an qualitative criterion. The developmental aspects expressed in Chinese practices, are an important characteristic of the Chinese philosophies shaping them. It has a strong normative bias, often based on a sophisticated knowledge of the ways of nature, described in terms of *Qi* and *Yin-Yang*. In classical as well as modern Chinese thinking you can find the idea of the „transformation of subjectivity“, of self-cultivation (修身), of learning, of practicing in many ways (cf. Heubel 2016).

If one keeps the function of such a philosophical notion like “*Qi*” in mind, one can integrate it into a Western framework without translation. *Qi* is than a *terminus technicus*, which offers a specific, qualitative perspective on the complexity of human behaviour. For instance, one can find a similar idea in a modern textbook of Chinese medicine, which distinguishes between two aspects of *Qi*, as a „refined essence” and as a „functional activity” (Maciocia 1997, 42). And Kenji Ushiro (a famous practitioner of Karate) links the term directly to quality (Ushiro 2008).

Of course you can eventually develop such a notion further, for instance using a phenomenological language. One can already find relevant aspects and useful ideas, for instance in the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), Hermann Schmitz (1965; 1967) or others, like the experience of the „unity of movement and mind” (Buytendijk, Christian, Plügge 1963), „body schema“ (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2012, 100-103; 142), „sovereignty and motor competence” (Wessel 2015), „body experiences” [like centralizing (*Zentralisieren*) or closing (*Engung*); broadening (*Weitung*) and condensing (*Verdichten*); gathering (*Sammeln*) and dissipating (*Zerstreuung*) (Schmitz 1965; Linck 2008)]

To sum up, I think it is the specific point of view on problems of movement, mental health and change, that makes *Qi Gong* effective. The notion of “*Qi*”, together with the concepts of *wú wéi* (无为) and *zì rán* (自然), as well as the focus on transformation are characteristics that could make a difference in a Western framework as well as they could complement preventive and therapeutic practices and the discourse on mental health.

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