

# Experiencing Qi<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In a previous paper, “The Social Construction of *Qi*,” (Frank 1997) I argued that the concept of *qi* (a Chinese word pronounced “chee,” referring to “life force” or “vital energy”) operates within several competing conceptual frameworks, including cosmological, health-related, martial, literary, sexual, and environmental. I used the ethnographic setting of *taijiquan*<sup>2</sup> practice in urban Shanghai, particularly focusing on the basic two-person self-defense exercise called *tui shou* (pushing hands), as a framework for looking at how the meaning of *qi* changes in an endless round of shifting social contexts.

But “social construction” is, of course, an inadequate term for getting at the subjective *experience* of *qi*. This paper will focus, therefore, on a question that is both subject-oriented and subjective: how do individuals immersed in the various *qi* contexts mentioned above describe their own bodily experiences of *qi*, explain the observed experiences of others, or communicate techniques and principles that can lead to the bodily experience of *qi*? To answer this question, I will draw on direct interviews with *taijiquan* and *qigong*<sup>3</sup> practitioners and on text-based testimonials pertaining to *qi* development exercises. The more general concern of the paper is whether or not phenomenological methodologies (that is, methods that utilize and account for the full array of senses) have a place in a contemporary anthropology. With this second issue in mind, I begin with a kind of morality tale of the social dangers of practicing phenomenological anthropology.

### Phenomenological Approaches: The Skeleton in Anthropology’s Closet

Anthropology has always maintained its dirty little secret of ethnographers who crossed into territory where their own bodily expe-

riences made traditional ethnographic modes of representation and interpretation obsolete. For the purposes of this paper, I will limit my discussion to three such anthropologists, Frank Hamilton Cushing, Carlos Castañeda, and Paul Stoller, all of whom, to varying degrees, have suffered ostracization from the profession at least partly because of their explicit reference to and reliance on their own sensory experience.

Frank Hamilton Cushing, one of the pioneers of American anthropology, suffered criticism throughout his career for spending too much of his time at Zuñi trying to *become* Zuñi and not enough time writing field reports to his colleagues in Washington. Something of a *wunderkind*, Cushing began his career at 19 as curator of the ethnological department of the National Museum in Washington, DC. In 1879, he joined John Wesley Powell on an expedition to Zuñi Pueblo. Cushing spent much of his time between 1879 and 1884 recording and participating in Zuñi ritual and daily life, but a combination of ill health and dissatisfaction among his Washington colleagues finally forced his replacement by Jesse Fewkes and his return to the East Coast. He continued to do significant archaeological research in Maine and Florida until his death in 1900 (Strong 1993; Hinsley 1983; Green 1979).

What was it that made Cushing's actions so threatening to the anthropological establishment of the time? Thomas Csordas has written that "the paradigm of embodiment means not that cultures have the same structure as bodily experience, but that embodied experience is the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world" (Csordas 1993). Cushing seemed to take this mode to heart at a time when the Cartesian mind-body split left little room to justify the use of the body as a proper instrument of science. The following excerpt from one of Cushing's lectures on his Zuñi experience is representative of what he called "observations and participations." Here Cushing and his Zuñi companions silently lie in wait for potential Apache attackers in the middle of the night:

Presently I heard a splash in the river. No other noise, except a little later a tinkling which immediately ceased. I knew that the Apaches were coming, for the tinkling sound was made by the ornaments of a bit. I pulled the blankets of my nearest companion, and he pulled those of the one next to him. Then we leveled our firearms and waited. (Cushing 1979:154)

Obviously, there is nothing exceptional in the description itself. Any travel writer or journalist of the time might write similar prose (with perhaps a bit of embellishment). What makes Cushing's work unique is that he is not a travel writer; rather, he is a scientist writing for a scientific audience and seeking legitimacy among scientists. In other words, Cushing was in no way removed from the Cartesian paradigm. On the contrary, he was a man of his time and shared with his peers an excitement for social science *as* science. Yet, in practice, science and sensuality seemed comfortably compatible for Cushing. In the example above, Cushing is fully immersed in the moment. For him, anthropology has become a life and death struggle. As Jesse Green, Cushing's biographer, puts it, "What he brought to his science at this juncture in its history were the imagination and talents, and some of the quirks, of an artist" (Green 1979:16). That Cushing himself was aware of his own questionable position in the profession is apparent in his work. "The day is fast approaching," he wrote, "when it will be demonstrated that the personal equation is the supremely essential thing in such researches as this, provided it has been abundantly [saturated] with the primitive elements it is dealing with – has absorbed at all points practical, sensational, or emotional" (Green 1979:16-17). While his colleagues always respected him from a certain distance and later European anthropologists such as Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss counted him as an influence, it is only in the era of the post-modern that Cushing's creative, modernist work has been rehabilitated as ethnographic methodology ahead of its time.

It would be seventy-five years before another anthropologist so immersed in what Paul Stoller refers to as "sensual scholarship" exerted the kind of influence that Cushing had. But in the late Carlos Castañeda's case, the estrangement from the field was almost complete by the end of his life.<sup>4</sup> While Cushing had seemed an odd bird of sorts to his colleagues, he was respected and genuinely admired. In contrast, Castañeda's fame and influence on the general public – and his position as one of the fundamental icons of 1960s anti-establishment sentiment in this country – spawned jealousies and recriminations from which his professional career never really recovered, despite his apparent efforts to continue teaching and to be seen as a legitimate anthropologist. It was not a matter of credentials. Castañeda received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from UCLA in 1973, five years after *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* – a revi-

sion of Castañeda's masters thesis—hit the bestseller list.

Castañeda's work begins with his search for a Yaqui medicine man who can teach him about psychotropic plants as part of his graduate research. Upon meeting Don Juan Matus, Castañeda becomes the sorcerer's apprentice and learns a series of techniques to learn to *see*, Don Juan's term for the special way that a true warrior perceives the world. Castañeda's adventures cover several books as he incrementally reaches new levels of knowledge and becomes more and more immersed in both the social and cosmological world of Yaqui sorcery.

The following passage from *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*, the third book in the series, is typical of Castañeda's concern with the senses. Here, Castañeda is engaged with a certain discolored spot he has noticed on the desert ground:

I stayed motionless for perhaps an hour. My thoughts began to diminish by degrees until I was no longer talking to myself. I then had a sensation of annoyance. The feeling seemed to be confined to my stomach and was more acute when I faced the spot in question. I was repulsed by it and felt compelled to move away from it. I began scanning the area with crossed eyes and after a short walk I came upon a large flat rock. I stopped in front of it. There was nothing in particular about the rock that attracted me. I did not detect any specific color or any shine on it, and yet I liked it. My body felt good. I experienced a sensation of physical comfort and sat down for a while. (Castañeda 1972:293).

Though we have no evidence that he is directly referring to phenomenology in the above excerpt, Castañeda's approach is very much in line with Merleau-Ponty's discussions of intersubjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 1964)<sup>5</sup> and anticipates more unabashedly phenomenological approaches to anthropology that come later (Stoller 1997; Csordas 1993; Seremataki 1994; Sklar 1993; Winkler 1994). It is noteworthy that none of the scholars I have just cited mention Castañeda in their work. If Foucault, Appadurai, and Hall are the right talismans for the anthropological shaman to wield in the year 2000, Castañeda is definitely the wrong one. To do so would be to undercut and delegitimize one's own work.

What specifically generated Castañeda's estrangement from "legitimate" anthropology? Some of the reasons were obvious: his

refusal to cite sources, suspicious incongruities in his factual information about Yaqui beliefs, and a well-cultivated “man of mystery” persona. But the estrangement runs much deeper, for Castañeda’s books are definitely the work of a man who has immersed himself in his work, regardless of whether the work is fact or fiction. While Castañeda always makes sure to let the reader know that he is taking copious notes, for which he is often gently derided by Don Juan, we soon realize that the body itself, with all its senses, is Castañeda’s primary research tool. It is a tool that he hones throughout the years under the guidance of his teacher. It is through the kind of sensory slight of hand that Merleau-Ponty describes in *Phenomenology of Perception*—I refer specifically to Merleau-Ponty’s example of the changing perception of a house as one passes it—that Castañeda establishes his own argument for manipulating the senses as a way to increase awareness and ultimately gain wisdom (Merleau-Ponty 1964). As is the case with Paul Stoller, whose work with the Songhay sorcerer Adamu Jenitongo cannot help but remind us of Castañeda, there is no question that Carlos is “the Other,” not only to Don Juan, but to himself. For the fictive (if not fictional) Carlos that Castañeda created in his writings, anthropology was completely sensual and personal.

Toward the end of his life, long after he had stopped teaching in any academic institution, Castañeda once again floated into the public eye (he had, of course, been writing new books all along, but even many of his most devoted fans had begun to lose interest). In a 1996 interview, Castañeda’s continued interest in the profession of anthropology comes out in his discussion of his new journal, *The Warrior’s Way: A Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* and the writing of a long work with the potential titles *Ethnohermeneutics* or *Phenomenological Anthropology*. “When sorcerers see, hermeneutics is the ultimate affair for us,” Castañeda cryptically informed the interviewer (Epstein 1996).

For the time being, the kind of extreme sensuous scholarship that Castañeda’s work seems to argue for remains very much on the fringe. Castañeda’s obituary in *Time International* is telling:

Death announced. Of Carlos Castañeda, believed to be 72, enigmatic New Age guru, whose best-selling books recounted the tales of a mystic named Don Juan, on April 27; in Los Angeles. A self-described apprentice of a Yaqui In-

dian Shaman, the reclusive Castañeda puffed on hallucinogenic smoke in order to manipulate time and space—all to the acclaim of his flower-power devotees (Beech 1998).

Nowhere are the terms “anthropologist” or “Ph.D.” even mentioned.

Scholars who acquire significant professional capital *before* they immerse themselves in the sensual sometimes have better luck, but are still subject to harsh criticism. Despite Paul Stoller’s reputation as a “serious” anthropologist, for example, he is still harangued by reviewers for addressing issues that extend the boundaries of anthropology into the realm of the sensual. In his review of Stoller’s *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa*, I. M. Lewis ends with the statement that “Methodologically, it provides an excellent illustration of the poverty and futility of the post-modernist mode in current socio-cultural anthropology, a movement clearly dedicated to the zombification of anthropology” (Lewis 1997). While Stoller is not focusing on sensuous scholarship *per se* in this work, Lewis is familiar with Stoller’s previous work, and we can take his statement as an indictment of Stoller’s whole methodological approach. If one is concerned with the kind of policy-oriented anthropology that will save a Kuna village from the effects of economic globalization or promote democracy in Burma, perhaps Lewis is right. Talking about “sensual bodies” will likely estrange even the most open-minded senator at a Congressional subcommittee meeting. Yet, if we are to approach unfamiliar topics like sorcery and *qi* that might more readily benefit from experience-based methodologies, we cannot so easily write off the work of scholars like Cushing, Castañeda, and Stoller.

## The Phenomenology of *Qi*

Both academics and non-academics have drawn on “sensual scholarship” to inform an anthropological understanding of *qi*. German medical anthropologist Thomas Ots, for example, has conducted research on *qigong re* (*qigong* fever), the *qigong* fad that spread to an estimated 60 million followers in China in the 1980s. Ots is primarily interested in *hexuangzhuang qigong*, or Crane *qigong*, a type of *zifa donggong*, or spontaneous movement *qigong*, where practitioners start with fixed standing meditation postures and movements and often end

up shaking, dancing, or whirling about uncontrollably. In order to support his thesis that Crane *qigong* practice creates a space for a *communitas*<sup>6</sup> of cathartic release, a liminal arena for the public performance of culturally stigmatized behavior (Ots 1994:126; Turner 1988:138; Chen 1994), Ots quotes liberally from *qigong* journals and news accounts of *qigong re* (cited in Ots, see also He 1985; Li 1983; Qi 1988; Wang 1985). It is in letters written to the founder of the Crane *qigong* movement, however, that Ots discovers “an emotional world unheard of in the *qigong* journals” (Ots:126), as in the following example:

I felt a stream of *qi* leaving the earth, lift me upwards and then turn me around in different directions. I had tried for three days, thus I felt self-assured and did not go against it. Suddenly, a force pushed me in the back. I stumbled forward and fell down on my knees. Now I became frightened. I wanted to finish the session, but before I could get up, another explosion of energy hit my front and pushed me backwards. I fell to the ground, and then this energy just whirled me around and around. Again and again, I tried to stop it, but I just didn't succeed. Then, for the first time in all these years, I became aware of all my sadness and shock. I started crying. What a relief! (Ots:127).

Ots goes on to attest to his own participation in the Crane *qigong* practice and his own eventual trance experience. Indeed, invoking Thomas Csordas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he eloquently argues for the value of an anthropology where *Leib* (the “living body”) is experienced: “I argue,” writes Ots, “that it is time to reconsider our epistemological tools: the *Leib* cannot be thought of, it must first be experienced. This calls for an approach in *Leib* research where one goes beyond participant observation—‘experiencing participation’ would be more to the point” (Ots:134; see also Merleau-Ponty 1964). In other words, Ots advocates a kind of dialogic anthropology of the senses that includes elements of Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “a primordial dialogue between body-subject and world” (Langer 1989:xvi). Such an approach raises essential questions for the anthropologist. For example, if I stop thinking and start doing, if I “go native,” am I still an anthropologist? Or, to paraphrase the Chinese sage Zhuangzi’s famous conundrum, am I an anthropologist dreaming I’m the Other, or am I the Other dream-

ing that I'm an anthropologist<sup>7</sup>?

Mantak Chia, a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and martial arts who is one of the most popular teachers of contemporary *qi* development practices, has written extensively on this subject and has produced a series of books, videotapes, audiotapes, and workshops to train people in what he calls "the Healing Dao." Chia's books often contain interviews and testimonials about the bodily experience of *qi*. In *Awaken Healing Energy Through the Tao*, for example, an anonymous student states,

I practiced the Microcosmic Orbit every morning. The total time that I spend each day is one hour. I feel sensations of heat flowing through my body. Sometimes there are sensations of a cool kind of energy. I have spontaneous movements when I practice. When they first occurred, I wasn't sure what was happening and I found that I could stop them. When I relaxed, however, it started again, and I decided that it was generated from my body rather than by any choice of mine (Chia 1983:112-113).

And in *Taoist Secrets of Love: Cultivating Male Sexual Energy*, another anonymous student testifies that, "I found that doing the testicle breathing really gives you a lift, it keeps you awake and refreshes you. I used to use No Doze to stay awake when driving long distances. Now I use testicle breathing instead, and it really works" (Chia 1984:212).

In an attempt to provide ethnographic data that can serve as a kind of cross-check for such published testimonials, the second half of this paper will focus on my own fieldwork on the bodily experience of *qi*. These accounts were drawn from personal interviews conducted in Shanghai and in the U.S. between 1988 and 1998. The interviews were conducted in both English and Mandarin Chinese.

I begin with a somewhat lengthy excerpt that I recorded during a panel discussion at the 1998 A Taste of China seminars in Winchester, Virginia. A Taste of China is one of the largest events in the United States devoted to internal martial arts training and competition.<sup>8</sup> The speaker is Henry Look, a 71-year-old architect and internal martial arts instructor from the San Francisco Bay Area who spent much of his childhood in Southern China. Look is the designer of several

dozen Benihana Japanese restaurants in the U.S. and is particularly well-known in *taijiquan* circles for his workshops on the art of *yi quan* (“mind boxing”), a form of standing meditation that develops a powerful, spring-like force in the body. In this excerpt, Look describes his observation of an experiment conducted by Dr. Herbert Benson<sup>9</sup> of Harvard on one of Look’s *yi quan* instructors, Yu Pung Shi (an ellipse in the excerpt indicates sections of the recording that were unintelligible):

LOOK: I wish to explain a little bit more on *qi* . . . on my own experience. When I first started with Professor Yu and Madam Yu, come over from Shanghai in San Francisco. . . of Dr. Lloyd Benson in Harvard. . . They went up and tried to measure the *qi*. Well, when . . . whether you believe it or not, it doesn’t really matter. However, when they put this helmet over Professor Yu’s head, all the wire’s running out, we thought he was gonna get electrocuted. Well, anyway, they showed this screen on the wall with a x-ray . . . said, “All right, Dr. Yu. Just relax, just relax.” The screen was pitch black. “Measure your *qi*.” [Look makes a whirring sound, like an electric motor]. Little stars going all over the screen. All the stars disappeared. Now, is this for real, or is somebody tampering with electricity? I don’t know. But I witnessed that myself. We have copies of the x-ray-like negative. Actually, we see all the little stars. So, when I do my seminars, like the *yi quan* standing meditation, I try to tell the students, “Look. Just imagine the *qi* traveling on top of your blood vessel, like little dots of lights, controlled by the *yi*, which is your mind. So any time you want to circulate the *qi*, just keep on using your mind to direct the travel of the *qi* to the *dan tian*<sup>10</sup> out to your limbs, to your arms, and up through your fingertips – out through your toes – whether you’re standing up or sitting down. So basically you’re doing the same thing. Now the other thing is that if you’re completely relaxed, if you do the standing, it doesn’t matter whether you do one posture or eight to ten postures, if you’re relaxed enough. And your posture is correct. Just like all the *taiji* classics<sup>11</sup>. . . I’ll guarantee you you’re arms and hands and everything will be warm. Eventually, the heat goes all the way to your fingertips. Even to the . . . will be sweaty. Another thing that, whether you believe it or not, it takes approximately thirty minutes for

one cycle of the *qi* to circulate throughout your body. That is the reason why we say the longer you stand is better. Thirty minutes good, hour even better. So just weigh that, when you do that, and believe me, you'll feel so strong— I think some of the students . . . uh . . . in my seminars . . . they try to push me, and very effortlessly, I push them back. [*Look lowers his voice to a whisper*] I'll tell you a secret guys: easy for me to push you right back because I always use my *qi*, focus on *qi*. I won't tell you then to move forward, move backward, move forward, right? . . . I say there's something more than that. So whether this is true or not . . . I experience that, that look at a old man like me you know what, able to push this guy backward, and whatever, right? Oh, this is something! That's what *qi*'s all about. And that's my own experience. And with Dr. Yu, we'd only have to touch him and he could make us spin all over the place, so would Madam Yu. Incidentally, she's still living. Ninety-one years old and teaching in San Francisco (Look 1998).

My own encounter with Henry Look, later on the same day, corroborated his description of “effortlessly” pushing back. During an interview in his motel room, Look was kind enough to demonstrate his *yi quan* technique for me. Standing about a foot away from the motel room wall, I placed my hands firmly but lightly around his wrists, trying to push him off balance or pull him down. Almost before I pushed, I found myself cleanly lifted off my feet and bouncing off the wall. It felt as if Look had allowed his own body to act as a spring absorbing and uncoiling my force, or as if I had grabbed on to a fire hose.

Let us return for a moment to the structure of Look's story. It is not an account of the bodily experience of *qi* so much as an account of the *manipulation* of *qi*, first in someone else's body and then in his own. One of the most interesting features of Look's discourse is that it is really an ironic commentary on the observer being observed. Herbert Benson's experiments on the physiological manifestations of various mind-body practices and his work on “the relaxation response” are well known beyond the context of *qi*-development practices (Benson and Klipper 1976). For Look, as an architect whose profession requires him to blend technological and aesthetic ways of thinking, it is not surprising that he should key into Benson's work as a kind of cultural bridge. Benson, the Harvard scientist, is likely to be seen by audience members as a “legitimate” observer.

In interviews with Saul Krotki of Seattle and Michael Phillips of Tucson, we once again encounter a struggle between language, experience, and the conceptualization of *qi*. As practitioners and teachers of *taijiquan* for over thirty years, both Krotki and Phillips find themselves in an elite group of *taiji* players who were present at the beginning of the current wave of *qi*-development practices and who have matured in their own practice to the point where they experience phenomena in their own bodies that their teachers described long ago or that they have read about in the *taiji* classics.

Krotki has commented that his personal conception of *qi* is that “*qi* builds very fine threads in the body” (Krotki 1998), akin to fiber optic threads. When the fibers line up properly, “they’re terribly auditive. The *qi* has a propelled motion to it.” Krotki also talks about the conscious manipulation of *qi* in the body, though he does not consider this a crucial element in his practice, commenting that “demonstrations of power are an obstacle to knowledge.” He does describe an ability to change the color of his hands through conscious commands (that is, making the hands redder through increased blood circulation). “If I press down on the right foot, the *qi* goes to the left hand,” says Krotki. He calls this method “cross substantial” and considers it “very important to the Professor’s school of thought.”<sup>12</sup> In playing with *qi* in his own body, Krotki thinks more in terms of unblocking the *qi* than regulating it.

Phillips prefaces his discussion of *qi* with the caveat that in discussing *qi*, we have to remember that “the map is not the territory” (Phillips 1998). In other words, the moment we start to speak about *qi*, we are already off track a bit. It is an elusive concept that requires modeling from several angles. Phillips is careful to differentiate between medical *qigong* and *qi*-development practices that emphasize martial skill.<sup>13</sup> According to Phillips, in experiencing martial *qi* “you feel incredibly heavy” and hard to yourself, but someone else would feel you as “soft and squishy.” When moving the body, “it feels hydraulic.” Phillips describes the body as a balloon filled with liquid and poses the question, “Why isn’t a balloon filled with liquid crushed when it is subjected to an increase in atmospheric pressure?” The body, in other words, is like a liquid-filled balloon, and the *qi* travels in a wave through the body’s fluid. Here, Phillips’ modeling of the *qi* experience interweaves a modern technological discourse with the traditional Daoist conception of “an economy of fluids” interacting in the body (Brownell

1995: 241). In terms based very much on his own bodily experience, Philips restates and recontextualizes an oft-quoted adage from the *taiji jing*: “The *qi* depends upon the fullness or deficiency of the blood; the blood depends upon the rise and fall of the *qi*” (Wile 1996:79). This passage is also reflected in Henry Look’s statement about the *qi* traveling on top of the blood vessels like “little dots of lights” (Look 1998).

The final description of bodily experience that I will draw on comes from a 1988 interview I conducted with Ma Yueliang,<sup>14</sup> one of China’s best-known masters of the Wu style of *taijiquan*.<sup>15</sup>

FRANK: Do you imagine circulating the *qi* through special paths during the exercise [of *taijiquan*] or does this happen naturally after long years of practice?

MA: I don’t imagine circulating the *qi* through special paths during the exercise. The classics say, “Motivate the *qi* with the mind and motivate the body movement with the *qi*.” Actually, the effects of practicing *taijiquan* are three-fold: the mind, the *qi* and the body, both internally and externally with a sudden using of the mind, which in Chinese is *yi*. The classics also state, “Put stress on the spirit, not the *qi*. Too much preoccupation with *qi* results in stagnancy.” This may be difficult for the beginner to understand. For training the *qi*, it is more appropriate to practice “standing like a stake.” The learner is advised not to imagine the circulation of the *qi*.

FRANK: Once you begin to experience the circulation of the *qi* in the body, what do you do? Observe it? Play with it? Try not to think about it?

MA: The student is able to feel the movement of the internal *qi* going through the body, to some extent, after three years of earnest practice. But the learner is still in the early stage of *gong fu*.<sup>16</sup> He should keep practicing as usual.

FRANK: Is it possible in your experience to push a person without touching them through the use of internal energy? If yes, why do people practice this skill?

Of what use is it?

MA: Yes. The mechanism of pushing a person without touching the body is quite complex, but never is it mysterious. It is the effect of the sensitivity of the mind, the *qi*, and the techniques of *taijiquan* on the parts of both the practitioners, the maturity of the skill of one's *taijiquan*, which means that one's skill is even more effective and stronger when used in real fighting (Ma 1988:49).

Before his death in the spring of 1998, I had the opportunity to witness Ma's *tui shou* skills on many occasions, pushing with him once myself and with his senior students many times. As Ma pointed out, it was the sensitivity of *both* practitioners to *qi* in the body that gave the appearance of pushing without touching, and the practice was generally seen as a training device that was far less impressive to insiders than it was to outsiders. As I have argued in a previous paper (Frank 1997), in public demonstrations of pushing hands, Ma served as an embodied symbol of a kind of *qi communitas* (Turner 1988). To the uninitiated public who watched his demonstrations, he seemed to embody a kind of practical magic. In the above exchange, however, it is really *individual* experience and *individual* cultivation of the *qi* that Ma is emphasizing. Despite the callow interviewer's urge to exoticize *qi*, it is Ma himself who keeps bringing the conversation back to the level of the practical.

## Conclusion

For the practitioners who have spoken through the above excerpts, *qi* is a phenomenon experienced in the body. If there is any common thread in practitioner approaches to communicating these experiences, perhaps it lies in looking at *qi* not so much as a thing, but as an action or a motivating force. This perspective was most succinctly put in a remark by naturopathic physician and internal martial artist John Painter that "*qi* is a verb" (Painter 1998). Painter is not speaking here of the way *qi* is used in either Chinese or English; rather, he is moving around the edge of the concept in very much the same way that a boxer might move around the edge of an opponent in a

sparring situation. Using *qi* as a noun form somehow confines us to the expectation that we will be able to touch *it*, taste *it*, or shoot *it* through our fingers. When we use *qi* as a verb, Painter seems to say, we have to accept our bodies as potentially solvable *physical* mysteries. We need to look at how muscles, bones, lymphatic nodes, etc., work together as a conduit for “doing *qi*,” which results in adjustments to how we actually use our bodies in a fighting situation (or in a meditative one, for that matter). Just as Merleau-Ponty dances around perception with his concept of intersubjectivity, so can we dance around *qi* by seeking its manifestations rather than its substance. My own experience corroborates this perspective. In more than twenty years of *taijiquan* practice, I cannot say that I have ever felt anything in my body that was distinctly “*qi*.” I have experienced such things as warmth, tingling, or a sensation of electricity in the hands and in the extremities, a sense of springiness in the body, an occasional ability to discharge considerable force with minimal outward movement of the body, and a sense of the mind leading the body during practice. However, I would call these manifestations of specific actions and exercises, some of which I produce consciously and some of which come about unconsciously. In other words, based on my own practice, I would consider *qi* to be several different energy-producing processes, none of them mysterious, working in unison in the body to produce specific physical manifestations. My interpretation is, of course, colored by cultural and historical biases as much as anyone else’s.

Discussion of personal experience brings us full circle to the problem I noted at the beginning of this essay regarding the place of experiential methods in contemporary anthropology. One could argue that personal accounts such as those I have included above at the very least provide a set of cross-cultural data that show biophysical commonalities in the bodily experience of *qi*-related exercises, e.g. warmth, tingling, a sense of something outside the everyday experience of the body that is produced or enhanced only during the exercises. These similarities in bodily experience, however, emphasize the differences and similarities in the *social* interpretation of experience. In more general terms, the anthropologist’s firsthand participation in and attempt to master bodily practices, whether they be prayer rituals or martial arts, actually shift research questions in crucial ways. In Henry Look’s case, for example, understanding social context is obviously a crucial factor in understanding Look’s linguistic negotiation of Chinese and

non-Chinese concepts of *qi*. One certainly has to acknowledge, in this case, the bicultural environment in which he grew up and the moment of transnational culture-making of which he is a part (i.e. the social construction of *qi*). If we limit ourselves to this social realm, then the research question remains something like “How does the social construction of *qi* contribute to public claims of power and legitimacy for martial arts practitioners?” While this is a valid anthropological question and one worth pursuing, the experience of “reality,” (e.g. the empirically relevant experience of bouncing off a motel room wall), forces a second question and the subsequent entrance into another realm of inquiry, along the lines of, “How does the concept of *qi* provide a shared social model for developing certain types of skill and power in the physical world of the martial artist’s body?” At least for anthropological research that deals with bodily practice, both types of questions are useful. With that understanding, experiential methods can surely enrich both the production and communication of ethnographies of bodily experience.

## Notes

1. Previous versions of this paper was presented in Deborah Kapchan’s seminar on body theory at the University of Texas at Austin and at the 1998 Western/Southwestern Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, El Paso, Texas, October 16-17, 1998.
2. *Taijiquan*, literally “Supreme Ultimate Boxing,” is a martial art that consists of slow motion solo practice, a full speed version, solo and two person weapons styles, a two person self defense training exercise called *tui shou* (push hands), and sparring.
3. Pronounced “chee gong,” *qigong* can be translated as “working on the vital energy.” The interviews I refer to were conducted in English and Mandarin Chinese.
4. It is worth noting, however, that the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC) began as a direct response to criticism of Castañeda’s methods, questioning of his veracity, and criticism of his dissertation committee at the 1974 meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). SAC was (and largely still is) made up of Castañeda supporters. The society has remained officially affiliated with AAA throughout its existence.
5. In brief summary (and one that does not do justice to the complexity of his argument), Merleau-Ponty, one of the central figures in 20th century philosophical phenomenology, argues that existence is not a matter of a

neutral, passive sensory vessel gathering information about an objective world; rather, the relationship between the observer and the observed is one of intersubjectivity, i.e. sensory perception actually alters reality or perceives what Castañeda refers to as “a separate reality.” Merleau-Ponty has exerted considerable influence within the anthropology of consciousness and within the burgeoning field of consciousness studies, a discipline that combines neuroscience, experimental psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and theoretical physics, particularly quantum mechanics. Consciousness studies scholars are currently engaged in a debate about whether or not consciousness itself is an event that operates at the quantum level. See Hameroff, Kaszniak, and Chalmers for more on this debate.

6. For Victor Turner, “*communitas*” refers to a sense of shared experience, values, or identity, often in the “heightened” moment of festival, ceremony, or play.

7. Zhuangzi wrote, “Am I a person dreaming that I am a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a person?”

8. “Internal” martial arts refer specifically to *taijiquan*, *Baguazhang*, and *Xingyiquan*, three martial arts that rely heavily on circularity, on developing a fine internal sense of one’s center, and on overcoming hardness with softness.

9. Look refers here to “Lloyd Benson.” I am making an assumption that this was a slip of the tongue and that he meant to say “Herbert Benson.” I have treated “uh” in this passage as I would any other utterance.

10. *Dan Tian*, literally “cinnabar field,” refers to a point approximately an inch and a half below the navel and an inch and a half in. The term may have its origins in Daoist alchemical practices that required the ingestion of small quantities of processed mercury, mercury which was extracted from the cinnabar found in mountain outcroppings. When processed, the cinnabar was melted over a flame and boiled over. The bodily cinnabar field is said to produce the same effect after long cultivation of the *qi*.

11. A set of writings devoted to the principles and philosophy of the martial art of *taijiquan*.

12. “The Professor” is Zheng Manqing, the well-known “master of the five excellencies” who emigrated from Taiwan in the mid-1960s and became the great popularizer of *taijiquan* in the US. Both Krotki and Phillips studied with Zheng during the last years of his life.

13. By “medical” *qi*, Phillips is referring to *qi* within the context of Traditional Chinese Medicine, specifically acupuncture and medically oriented meditation exercises.

14. This interview was conducted in English and translated into Chinese by Dr. Zee Wen, a long-time student of Ma’s.

15. I should note that at the time of my interview with Ma, I spoke neither Mandarin nor Shanghainese. However, when I was able to converse with

Ma in Mandarin in 1995 and 1997, he expressed the same opinions as in the translation given here.

16. *Gong fu* (commonly spelled “kung fu” in English) refers to any attainment of skill through hard work. The term is not restricted to martial arts. Nor does it refer to any particular type of Chinese martial arts.

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