

# *Religion and Science around the World: Review Articles*

with Ernst M. Conradie and Cornel W. du Toit, “Knowledge, Values, and Beliefs in the South African Context since 1948: An Overview”; Ignacio Silva, “Science and Religion in Latin America: Developments and Prospects”; Dirk Evers, “Religion and Science in Germany”; and Jianhui Li and Zheng Fu, “The Craze for Extra-Sensory Perception: Qigong Fever and the Science–Pseudoscience Debate in China.”

## THE CRAZINESS FOR EXTRA-SENSORY PERCEPTION: QIGONG FEVER AND THE SCIENCE–PSEUDOSCIENCE DEBATE IN CHINA

*by Jianhui Li and Zheng Fu*

*Abstract.* From 1979 to 1999, a heated dispute over the science or pseudoscience of extraordinary power or extrasensory perception (ESP) took place in China. During these two decades, many so-called “grandmasters” of ESP and Qigong emerged, and millions of people across the country studied with them; this was known as “Qigong Fever” or “ESP Fever.” The supporters of ESP argued that ESP existed, people could cultivate ESP through specific Qigong training, and ESP was a science; whereas the opponents of ESP denied all of these. Both sides of the dispute had many supporters. With the onset of Qigong Fever in China, some Qigong and ESP masters developed their Qigong organizations into Chinese-style religions. Qigong Fever ended when the religions were banned by the Chinese government. The rise of Qigong Fever demonstrated that basic questions about the boundaries between science and pseudoscience were not easy to answer. Different theoretical and practical consequences resulted from different answers to these questions.

*Keywords:* China; extraordinary power or extrasensory perception (ESP); Qigong Fever; science-pseudoscience debate

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From 1979 to 1999, China witnessed a heated debate on “extrasensory perception” (ESP) or “extraordinary power” (Palmer 2007), which describes a range of supernatural human abilities, including telepathy,

Jianhui Li is Professor of Philosophy in the School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, 19 Xijiekouwai Street, Beijing 100875, China; e-mail: ljh@bnu.edu.cn. Zheng Fu is Assistant Professor in the School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, 19 Xijiekouwai Street, Beijing 100875, China; e-mail: shenzhou6635@mail.bnu.edu.cn.

fluoroscopy, clairvoyance, telesthesia, precognition, telekinesis, idiodynamics, out-of-body experience, special physiques (e.g., body-elicited combustion and body-elicited electricity), and others. During those two decades, enormously popular so-called “grandmasters” of ESP and Qigong, such as Zhang Baosheng, Zhang Xiangyu, Yan Xin, Zhang Hongbao, Zhang Xiaoping, and Li Hongzhi (the family name is first in Chinese names) emerged. Qigong are English words for two Chinese characters: *qi* (气) and *gong* (功). *Qi* is often translated as life force or life energy. *Gong* is often translated as work or cultivation. The two words are combined to refer to a broad range of Chinese self-cultivation exercises for cultivating and balancing life energy, especially for health. Millions of people across the country went to study with these masters. This social phenomenon was named “Qigong Fever” or “ESP Fever.” The fever did not cease until the most well-known ESP grandmaster, Li Hongzhi, was brought down.

With the development of Qigong Fever in China, there arose a frenzied debate about whether ESP is science or pseudoscience. The supporters of ESP held that ESP existed, ESP could be cultivated through specific Qigong practices, and that ESP was science. Scholars at Tsinghua University even wrote that they had conducted an experiment that revealed a molecular structure in the laboratory of Tsinghua University changed when Yan Xin, in a display of his extraordinary power in Guangzhou, demonstrated telekinetic powers. However, the opponents of ESP held that ESP did not exist in this world, that the practice of Qigong could never produce ESP (though Qigong practicing could surely improve human body functioning), that ESP performances were nothing but magic shows, and that ESP was a pseudoscience.

Both sides in this dispute had many supporters, including renowned scientists and philosophers as their advocates. Well-known scientist Qian Xuesen, who was considered the father of China’s rocket and atomic bomb program, was among the supporters. He swore by the spirit of the Chinese Communist Party that ESP was science. In contrast, economist and philosopher Yu Guangyuan and scientist He Zuoxiu (a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences) were among the opponents. They believed that ESP was nothing more than magic show and pseudoscience. Though two sides held opposite attitudes toward ESP, they both raised the question about standards of science and had their own answers, which were used to defend their own opinions. Their debate continued until the occurrence of a Falun Qigong event in 1999, and subsequently Qigong Fever began to cool down. However, currently, a decade or so after the Falun Gong event, some evidence shows that Qigong Fever may have a revival.

The Qigong and ESP Fever debate demonstrated that basic questions about the definition of science, the characteristics of science, and the boundaries between science and pseudoscience were not easy to answer. Different answers to these questions result in different theoretical and

practical consequences. This article reviews the two decades of Qigong Fever and the accompanying dispute over science and pseudoscience, and offers possible reasons that these new religions focusing on body cultivation came to thrive in China at that time.

#### THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF “READING WITH EARS”

On March 11, 1979, shortly after China’s Reform and opening to the outside world, a news report in *Sichuan Daily*, which described “a child named Tang Yu in Dazu County who can ‘read with his ears’” (ears have function of eyes), grabbed worldwide attention. Ear reading was regarded as violating common sense and scientific concepts and soon attracted great interest from the chief leaders in the community, county, district, and province where the child, Tang Yu, resided. The story was reprinted by many other newspapers and caused a chain reaction across the country. Eventually, this event caught the attention of international media, including Voice of America, Associated Press, Agence France Presse, Reuters, and others. Their correspondents in Beijing consulted relevant Chinese institutions, hoping to discover the details of ear reading.

To people’s disappointment, ten days after the original report, a Chinese investigation team declared that “reading with ears” was nothing but a magic trick (Yu 1986, 1). As a common trick, it could be expected to vanish from the public attention when the fakery was disclosed, just as other similar performances had. However, more examples of ESP were unexpectedly made public by the media, resulting in a vigorous ESP movement. Only a month after the original report of “reading with ears,” several large media outlets, such as *Beijing Science and Technology News*, *Hebei Science and Technology News*, *Anhui Science and Technology News*, and *Mysteries to Be Explored*, had reports of children who could read with their ears.

More and more people were reporting that ESP was in some of their body parts; these body parts went beyond the ears and included hands, hips, and soles of the feet (Yu 1986, 4). The owners of such ESP were usually juveniles and their performances were not proficient. Usually, their ESP tended to disappear for no apparent reason. The ESP claimed by Tang Yu and Jiang Yan was soon disproven (Yu 1986, 1). In face of this, the *People’s Daily*, one of the most influential newspapers of the Chinese Communist Party, began to reveal its attitude toward this ESP movement. On May 5, 1979, the *People’s Daily* published Zu Jia’s article “From ‘reading with nose’ to ‘reading with ears,’” in which Zu Jia stated supporters of ESP “lacked the intention of seeking truth from facts, instead their purpose was to play to the gallery” (Zu 1979). A month later, on July 2, the *People’s Daily* reported in detail the test of Tang Yu’s ESP abilities. The negative attitude from the Party paper temporarily stopped the public reporting of ESP phenomena.

In spite of the *People's Daily* negative attitude toward the ESP movement, critiques of the movement, in general, were not a large or angry group at that time. Yu Guangyuan, the distinguished philosopher and economist, then vice director of the State Science and Technology Commission and vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, had said, "I used to believe that the ESP movement in China would finally fade into history" (Yu 1986, 1–2). However, in fact the movement did not perish; in contrast, it prospered under the support of some prominent scientists and government officials.

#### QIAN XUESEN: HUMAN ESP WILL LEAD TO A NEW SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

On June 18, 1979, the Hongkong newspaper *Ming Pao* published Li Xuelian's article "Reading with ears, not necessarily insane," in which Li Xuelian held that "some leaders of Committee of the Communist Party of China might have been acting arbitrarily before learning enough about the subject of ESP" (Li 1979). The article played a vital role in reminding the supporters of ESP that the only direction for the development of ESP was as a science. The relevant studies from other countries should be used to break old thinking patterns, which characterized ESP as a trick. As a result, getting access to the ESP studies in foreign countries became a research project of great interest. At that time, the Chinese government had just initiated a policy of reform and opening to the outside world, and thus learning from the culture and technology of other countries was encouraged. Coincidentally, it was rumored then that both the Soviet Union and the United States had been researching ESP for military applications. For example, one book said that the U.S. Navy had performed mind reading in its submarine the "Nautilus" in 1959 and the Soviet Union had experimented on thought communication from Moscow to Leningrad (Ostrander and Schroeder 1970). It seemed that studies on ESP had emerged as an advanced area of modern science and had military applications; therefore, China should catch up. Thus, at that time, following nearly every report of advanced ESP phenomena from foreign countries, China soon announced the same discovery or an even more astonishing discovery. Consequently, the discovery of ESP transited from accidents to universal screening and induction.

At the same time, the Chinese *Journal of Nature*, based in Shanghai, demonstrated a great interest in ESP by publishing a large number of observational reports and academic papers, which were said to confirm the existence of ESP. In one article, researchers even described that among the 40 random children (approximately 10 years of age) they recruited, up to 63% had top perceptual abilities (He et al. 1980, 9). In June, 1980, the famous scientist Qian Xuesen, then the honorary president

of the China Association for Science and Technology (CAST), visited the *Journal of Nature* and said that reading with ears “is objective and cannot be denied.” He also encouraged ESP researchers to “be brave and persistent” in the face of doubts and denials (see Editor’s Report 1980, 587). Qian Xuesen’s fame and influence in China’s community of science and technology guaranteed that his words would provide support for ESP proponents; he not only asserted that we should do ESP research but also shed light on how to do ESP research. Unsurprisingly, from 1979 to 1982, the Chinese *Journal of Nature* published 53 articles on ESP; these articles were all from China’s top universities and research institutions. China’s fever for ESP had reached a climax.

On May 11, 1981, China’s “Second Symposium on Human Body ESP” was held in Chongqing city, Sichuan Province, with support from both the Chinese government and China’s community of science. Representing the Chinese government, Yang Chao, then the secretary of the Committee of the Communist Party of Sichuan province, and Nie Chunrong, then the secretary of the China Association for Science and Technology, delivered reports during the opening of the symposium. Representing China’s community of science, Qian Xuesen submitted an article named “On Launching Basic Research on Human Body Science.” One year later, Qian again expressed his confidence in ESP research in a meeting on “human body science.” He said, “I believe what truly appeals us to explore along this winding and hard road is that it may lead to a new scientific revolution in the twenty-first century, perhaps even greater than the early twentieth century scientific revolution led by quantum mechanics and relativity theory” (Qian 1988, 211). From then on, “human ESP (or human body science) is the dawn of a new scientific revolution” became ESP supporters’ slogan. The soaring patriotism and lofty scientific feeling attracted a growing number of people to the study of ESP.

#### YU GUANGYUAN: ESP IS ANTISCIENCE

In the furor of ESP research, however, Yu Guangyuan, then the vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the vice director of the State Science and Technology Commission, stated, “I just could not bear this ESP Fever anymore” (Yu 1986, 1). In July 1981, he delivered a speech at the Workshop for the University Teachers of Philosophy in the Renmin University of China titled “Philosophical Comments on Propaganda of ‘Reading with Ears’ in Recent Two Years,” in which he harshly criticized the ESP represented by “reading with ears” and noted “we should stop any ESP-related antiscience propaganda” (Yu 1986, 27). Specifically, his critiques included:

- (1) All existing ESPs were nothing more than “tricks,” and these could never be accepted as science.
- (2) That “seeing is believing” could be deceiving. We should not evaluate ESP in the empirical fashion. Instead, we should base our evaluation on whether the demonstrations of ESP were scientifically reasonable.
- (3) ESP is the extension of spiritualism, and spiritualism was against the basic ideas of Friedrich Von Engels’ dialectics of nature.

Yu later published several public speeches and articles, publicly criticizing ESP from philosophical angles. For example, in his article “To Accept Spiritualism or to Accept Dialectics of Nature?” (Yu 1986), Yu explained his stance toward ESP thoroughly. In this article, Yu got ideas from Engels’s article “Natural Science and Spiritual World” in the *Dialectics of Nature*. In Engels’ article, several famed scientists were criticized for believing in spiritualism in nineteenth century (Engels 1968). Yu said, “I believe today we still must hold the ideas adopted by Engels in his article . . . till today, what Engels had criticized is still propagated as before. Thus all of his criticisms are still valid today” (Yu 1986, 68). Yu believed that from spiritualism to ESP, there were “no substantial changes.” As a result, Engels’ critiques of spiritualism could be directly applied to today’s ESP.

Considering Yu’s significant academic and political influence, it was not surprising his attitude was soon echoed by many in the academic community, including renowned scientists Zhou Peiyuan, Mao Xincheng, and Pan Shu. Their critiques, together with Yu’s, were soon reprinted by the *People’s Daily*. In the face of the disagreements, on June 15, 1982, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China released an official announcement, which dictated that “human ESP should no longer be introduced or propagandized by media from now on. No one shall criticize or debate over ESP. . . . No one shall carry out any human ESP experiment. No one shall put on ESP performances for the purpose of publicizing.” This is the so-called “three-not policy” on ESP. After the announcement, debate over ESP accordingly, but temporarily, vanished from newspapers.

The subsequent facts show that the announcement suppressed the criticisms of ESP, but did not have much impact on its supporters. For example, early in 1983, the Institute of Aerospace Medicine (the 507 Institute) was made China’s ESP research base and launched long-term ESP research initiatives. From 1983 to 1987, Qian Xuesen had delivered more than 100 speeches in the institute regarding the importance of ESP research. His speeches were organized as a book *Talks on Human Body Science and Modern Science*. In 1988, another book of Qian’s, *On Human Body Science*, was published. Because of Qian’s high social position in science and

politics in China, his theory became the guideline for research on ESP. The plans for the establishment of special ESP research institutions were soon implemented. In March 1983, the Chinese *Journal of Nature* and the Preparatory Committee for the Society of China Human Body Science together issued an internal quarterly journal titled *Human ESP Studies*. Three years later, on May 26, 1986, the Society of China Human Body Science was officially established, which finally legalized ESP research in China. With public approval and a legalized academic society, it was expected that ESP research would develop in the same fashion as any other field of scientific research. However, the Qigong grandmasters arrived and diverted ESP on to a completely different track.

#### FROM ESP TO QIGONG FEVER

In 1986, Yan Xin, a Qigong master, attracted enormous public attention. Before Yan Xin, Qigong had been a mysterious way of body cultivation, the guidelines of which were far from clear. Thus, though many Chinese knew Qigong, few could practice it. Yan created a new method of dissemination, “power-displaying reports (PDR)” or “force-displaying reports,” to maximize the popularity of Qigong. PDR allowed everyone easy access to Qigong and its practice through gatherings to learn Qigong, cure illnesses, and spread the practice of Qigong. By doing this, Yan brought the mysterious Qigong much closer to the general public. Even earlier than Yan, a more senior Qigong master named Zhang Baosheng was transferred to the 507 Institute to join the military research in June 1983. For the general public, this was undoubtedly regarded as an affirmation by the government of the importance of a Qigong grandmaster.

Public belief was strengthened when, on December 25, 1985, the Society of China Qigong Science was established. “Together with its numerous local branches and the Society of China Human Body Science, the Society of China Qigong Science has led China’s social movement and academic research in relation to both human body science and Qigong. With their efforts, the number of ESP and Qigong followers then shot up to thousands, and public belief in ESP could be seen everywhere in social life” (Tu 2009, 17). On July 15, 1987, China’s State Education Committee Commission issued Document No. 128 of the year 1987, which asked important educational institutions to initiate ESP and Qigong research programs, open human body science courses, and train teaching professionals for these courses. The spread of Qigong Fever at that time seemed irrepressible.

Qigong became the primary proponent of ESP for two reasons. First, folklore held that Qigong contained all known ESP phenomena, including super-sensory experiences, such as reading with the ears, thought

transmission, and mind-triggered object movement. What is more, it was said that Qigong could give rise to new ESP phenomena that were even more unbelievable. Second, compared with ESP, Qigong was more attractive to the public, most of whom were not born with ESP. Specifically, Qigong found its charm in that: (1) ESP is just occasional and not all people have it, while Qigong is common to all people and was deeply rooted both historically and culturally; (2) Qigong has more efficacy than ESP, for example, Qigong is an efficient way to keep fit and healthy; (3) ESP studies could not clearly explain ESP induction; the practice of Qigong, however, would result in ESP, according to some reports; and (4) ESP organizations were unstable, while Qigong boasted a large base. ESP had been occasionally of interest in its own right in the past, but it was now connected to Qigong.

The legitimization of ESP was a complete breakaway from the cold indifferent attitude held by people toward mysterious phenomena. People even came to treat the existence of super-sensory capacities asserted by Qigong masters as common sense. In this atmosphere, the more incredible a Qigong master's assertion, the more credible it appeared to people and the more popular it became. The expectations were always increasing. Consequently, the new Qigong masters had to display even more incredible powers to attract interest. From this point on, the era of Qigong grandmasters arose, in which numerous Qigong grandmasters competed for the spotlight. For example, Zhang Hongbao created Zhong Gong (China Health Maintenance and Intelligence Boosting Qigong), Zhang Xiaoping claimed to be the successor of "Unification of All Methods of Qigong," Zhang Xiangyu established "Nature Centered Qigong," Tian Ruisheng founded "Fragrance Qigong," and Li Hongzhi developed "Falun Gong" (The Wheel of Dharma Qigong). All of these masters claimed that the practice of Qigong would lead to ESP. The huge impact generated by these so-called ESP grandmasters was due not only to the power-displaying reports, but also to the publicity of various Qigong books that exaggerated its efficacy. For example, in May 1987 Shanghai Cultural Press published a set titled *Five-Dime Series*, among which was a popular piece of literature called *Chinese Supermen*, one of the early books introducing a grandmaster of ESP, written by Zhu Runlong and Zhu Qiaqia (see Zhu and Zhu 1987). More than three hundred thousand copies of this book were sold and the demand was still high. Later, more of the same type of books became available, including *God-man Zhang Baosheng* and *Chinese Supermen's ESP*, authored by writers and journalists. These books and other related materials, including news reports, biographies, and novels, described ESP phenomena and events primarily recounted by ESP practitioners, without verification. Ambiguity was present even in the reports from researchers and professional journalists. Boosted by such books and reports, various types



of grandmasters constantly emerged. For instance, Zhang Xiangyu, Yan Xin, Zhang Baosheng, Zhang Hongbao, Zhang Xiaoping, Tian Ruisheng, and others were touted as grandmasters with infinite power, even as godlike men.

The public became completely obsessed with these Qigong masters and their Qigong arts. A growing number of reports stated that “Qigong could induce ESP and cure diseases which are untreatable in both Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine” (Zong and He 1989, 26). Qigong became a social power that could no longer be ignored. For example, it was estimated that “till the end of 1989, China had got sixty million Gongfu and Qigong practitioners (some said the number was actually one hundred million)” (Mi 2009, 51). In addition, “Qigong and ESP at that time had at least one thousand traditions or schools, among which Beijing alone owned more than 300. Additionally, more than ten thousand Qigong research groups and Qigong art groups were active at that time in China” (Tu 2009, 17).

Chinese cultural and academic communities were responsible for Qigong Fever for at least two reasons. (1) Qigong had been overestimated by the academic community. For example, Qian Xuesen said in 1981, “Human ESP, presenting itself either as acquired traits induced by a senior Qigong master or as inherent traits possessed by those special teenagers, is no longer something of mystery. Instead, we could study ESP phenomena and the existing system of scientific knowledge is enough for us to study them. We do not even need to create any new theory or formula” (Qian 1988, 24). (2) Qigong had been overhyped by the media. Under encouragement like Qian’s, Qigong newspapers became the main media publishing ESP papers and newsletters. “In martial Qigong Fever, many domestic media, for various reasons, did not stick to the news principles, lauding the so-called ‘grandmasters,’ ‘supermen,’ and ‘magical power’ to the skies” (Zhang 2011, 5).

As a result, almost the entire Chinese society was obsessed with Qigong. Opponents had no way to voice their opinion. As Yu Guangyuan said, “Within a long time in the middle of 1980s, . . . pseudoscience prevailed so extensively that opponents’ articles had got no chance to be published, either rejected or totally ignored” (Yu 1989a). It was not until January 9, 1989, that Hongkong’s *Ta Kung Pao* finally published Yu’s speech titled “I strongly object to the promotion of antiscience ESP” (Yu 1989b). Shortly after that, Nie Chunrong, then the secretary of the Secretariat of China Association for Science and Technology, replied with an article titled “I strongly support scientific research on human ESP” (Nie, 1991). Obviously, attitudes toward ESP and Qigong diverged significantly at the top echelons of the Chinese academic community.

### INCREASING VOICES OF OPPOSITION

ESP supporters had employed two main arguments to prove that ESP was a science: (1) ESP phenomena were verified empirical facts. Many reports claimed that their ESP phenomena had gone through rigorous scientific verification. (2) The fact that we could not yet find scientific explanation for ESP suggested that ESP might not be a subject for current science, but the subject of a new science not yet understood. To deny ESP, thus, was to be scientifically “out of fashion.”

These two arguments later became the target of opponents’ critiques. In October 1990, a symposium titled “Promote Science and Suppress Superstition” was held in Beijing by the China Research Institute for Science Popularization in which Guo Zhengyi and other opponents of ESP criticized a variety of ESP phenomena and called them pseudoscience. Subsequently, opponents began to criticize ESP under the name of “opposing pseudoscience.” Accordingly, the debate between ESP supporters and opponents developed into a debate between science and pseudoscience. Opponents believed that if they succeeded in proving ESP to be pseudoscience, they would prove that Qigong’s claims were exaggerated. Then, Qigong would lose its charm for the public and would soon fade away. To achieve this, opponents opened fire on supporters’ two arguments mentioned above and tried to demonstrate that (1) most ESP phenomena had not gone through standard scientific verification and (2) there was no “new” science because ESP was not science at all.

The debate mainly focused on the supporters’ first argument, that is, that ESP exists. No matter what certain ESP followers thought, opponents believed that their beliefs were false and demanded repeated trials in public under strict conditions.

On December 5, 1994, the Chinese Central Commission of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council issued a document, “Several Suggestions on Promoting the Popularization of Science and Technology,” which stated “it is quite shocking some superstitious and benighted activities became increasingly rampant, and those of antiscience, pseudoscience frequently occurred” in recent years. This was the first time the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China urged the suppression of “antiscience and pseudoscience.” At that time, opponents’ voices began to be heard in the media. For example, supporters had once asserted that in 1982 “superman” Zhang Baosheng had gone through an ESP test where the success rate of his repeatedly performing ESP was as high as 95.5%. However, He Zuoxiu, an academican of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, made an opposite announcement that in May 1988, during Zhang’s one public performance, Zhang failed to perform ESP

due to losing the ability to use ESP or being unable to cheat (He 1995). Thus, He asserted that Zhang did not pass the public trial as supporters had claimed. Numerous domestic and international newspapers soon reprinted He's announcement, which initiated in China a movement to uncover the false nature of the ESP phenomena. On June 30, 1998, the *People's Daily* reported that, according to the U.S. National Research Council's special report, ESP had yet to be verified by science. Until then, both the scientific and political authorities had declared at the time that argument (1) was a pseudoposition, which deprived ESP of its rational basis.

#### FROM QIGONG FEVER TO NEW ARISING RELIGION

The legitimization and development of the ESP movement was based on two principles: (1) the scientization of ESP, which provided the basis for the acceptance of all types of activities associated with Qigong and ESP, and (2) the systematization of Human Body Science research, offering the basis for vigorous expansion of Qigong organizations. During the gigantic Qigong movement, some schools of Qigong attracted more followers than others. "For example, 'Chinese Health Maintenance and Intelligence Boosting Qigong' was then one typical Qigong organization in China. Officially, it announced the number of its followers to be over 30 million. Though apparently exaggerated, the real number was estimated to be as much as ten million" (Tu 2009, 18). The Qigong grandmasters were entrusted with superior positions. To attract more people, many Qigong schools ceased to use scientific terms and instead resorted to traditional mysticism. This trend was represented by certain Qigong vocabulary, such as "Kylin Culture" and "Falun Qigong." Kylin is a holy and dignified creature in traditional Chinese mystery, and Falun is a wheel-shaped Buddhist instrument representing the endless power of the Buddhist doctrines.

With the stabilization of the trust and worship for the Qigong grandmasters by the public, it became very hard for the Qigong organizations to reject the temptation to gain benefits through the people's worship. Some Qigong organizations had motives in touting the efficacy brought about by Qigong and to privilege and idolize their Qigong masters. They also tried to avoid government control and develop their organizations into religions. For example, Zhang Hongbao developed grandmaster worship to such an extreme that he required his followers to hang his "true grandmaster portrait" in their homes and worship him in religious rituals. This type of worship was also present in the Falun Gong. From that point forward, people no longer cared whether ESP was science or not because Qigong grandmasters began to propagandize ESP in a transcendent fashion which was not related to scientific or empirical evidence.

Occasionally, when asked about whether Qigong or ESP was science or not, Qigong grandmasters would say that modern science was not real science and their Qigong was a science higher than modern science. Obviously, the meaning of their science was not the same as the meaning of modern science.

#### THE END OF QIGONG FEVER

The divorce of Qigong from science, together with the attempt of certain Qigong organizations to become independent from the government, led to a response by the government. In 1994, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs ordered the disbanding of the International Union of Qigong Science. The union's two newspapers, *International Qigong Newspaper* and *Qigong and Sports*, which were among the main Qigong promotion media, were also banned by the China National Press and Publishing Bureau in 1997 and 1998, respectively. Previous ESP grandmasters, such as Yan Xin, Zhang Baosheng, and Zhang Hongbao, had to give up their godlike positions and various superstitious activities were suppressed to a degree.

However, Qigong Fever did not recede easily. Actually, after 1995, with the shift of the media focus, anti-ESP articles in the media were on the decrease, while articles and books on Qigong and ESP were on the increase. Because many older well-known grandmasters had lost their godlike positions, there was a dearth of grandmasters after 1995. This created a perfect historical opportunity for Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, to emerge as one of the most influential Qigong grandmasters and he filled the vacuum quickly. After the rise of Falun Gong, books on Falun Gong were published in the tens of thousands, while the voices of opponents became harder to hear or read. As a rising religious force, Falun Gong suppressed opposing opinions with its ever-increasing strength. For example, in May 1998, a Beijing TV station reported the academician He Zuoxiu's critique of Falun Qigong, which irritated Falun Qigong followers. They surrounded the TV station and the station finally dismissed a journalist to calm the fervent Falun Gong followers. On April 11, 1999, Tianjin Education College's journal *Science Review for Juveniles*, which had a very small circulation, published He Zuoxiu's article "It Is Not Advisable for Teenagers to Practice Qigong." This article again irritated Falun Gong practitioners, who responded by surrounding the offices and conducting demonstrations. From April 19 to April 25, 1999, thousands of Falun Gong followers surrounded and attacked the editorial office of *Science Review for Juveniles*. The police was finally called in to assist. Moreover, on April 25, 1999, tens of thousands of Falun Gong followers from all over the country surrounded Zhongnanhai (the office of the central government of

China) and presented petitions to the central government, which surprised the world and shocked the Chinese leadership.

On July 22, 1999, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security released the decision banning Falun Gong. The presence of Qigong in academic research institutes had finally come to an end. The “research groups of human body science” of the 507 Institute were dismissed.

Reflecting on the passing Qigong Fever, Gong Yuzhi, a famous Chinese philosopher concluded: “Prevailing superstition, pseudoscience, antiscience, and mysticism would erode and endanger our guiding theoretical basis in thinking. Once our thinking gets infected with superstition and mysticism, it in return promotes the flourishing of Huidao School [superstitious sects and secret societies], evil cults, and gangdom, which sets a great political threat to our society” (Gong 1995, 10).

#### CONCLUSION

China’s ESP movement began in the 1970s with an ordinary social report, which gradually developed into a huge ESP fever infecting all social communities that was finally vanquished by government command. This movement lasted for more than 20 years and involved a wide range of the population, from ordinary citizens to scientists and government officials, issued thousands of publications, consumed huge amounts of funds along with other social resources, and finally burned to ashes. At the climax of this movement, the Chinese government even established public research institutions of “human body science” for the study and promotion of ESP, which were rarely seen in other countries. Notably, the movement occurred within a social background of ideological emancipation, leaving later generations a large thinking space. The Qigong and ESP Fever showed that basic questions, such as the definition of science, characteristics of science, and the boundaries between science and pseudoscience, are not easy to answer. Moreover, different answers to these questions result in different theoretical and practical consequences. In hindsight, it is noted that the ESP movement was grounded in a densely mystical culture and led to the establishment of several Chinese-style religions. ESP forms the background, carrier, and cultural roots of Falun Gong and other Chinese religions. Eventually, with the banning of several Qigong organizations, the past reports of frequently discovered ESP vanished completely. However, in recent years, there are some occasional signs of an ESP revival. For example, two new grandmasters, named Li Yi and Wang Lin, emerged, their actions were widely reported, and they were the recipients of worship from government officers, entrepreneurs, and movie stars. They went down from their altars for worship within a cloud of doubt. In the cultural environment of China, after some years, various grandmasters will probably emerge again.

Therefore, the corresponding science–pseudoscience debate is very likely to continue in China in the future.

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