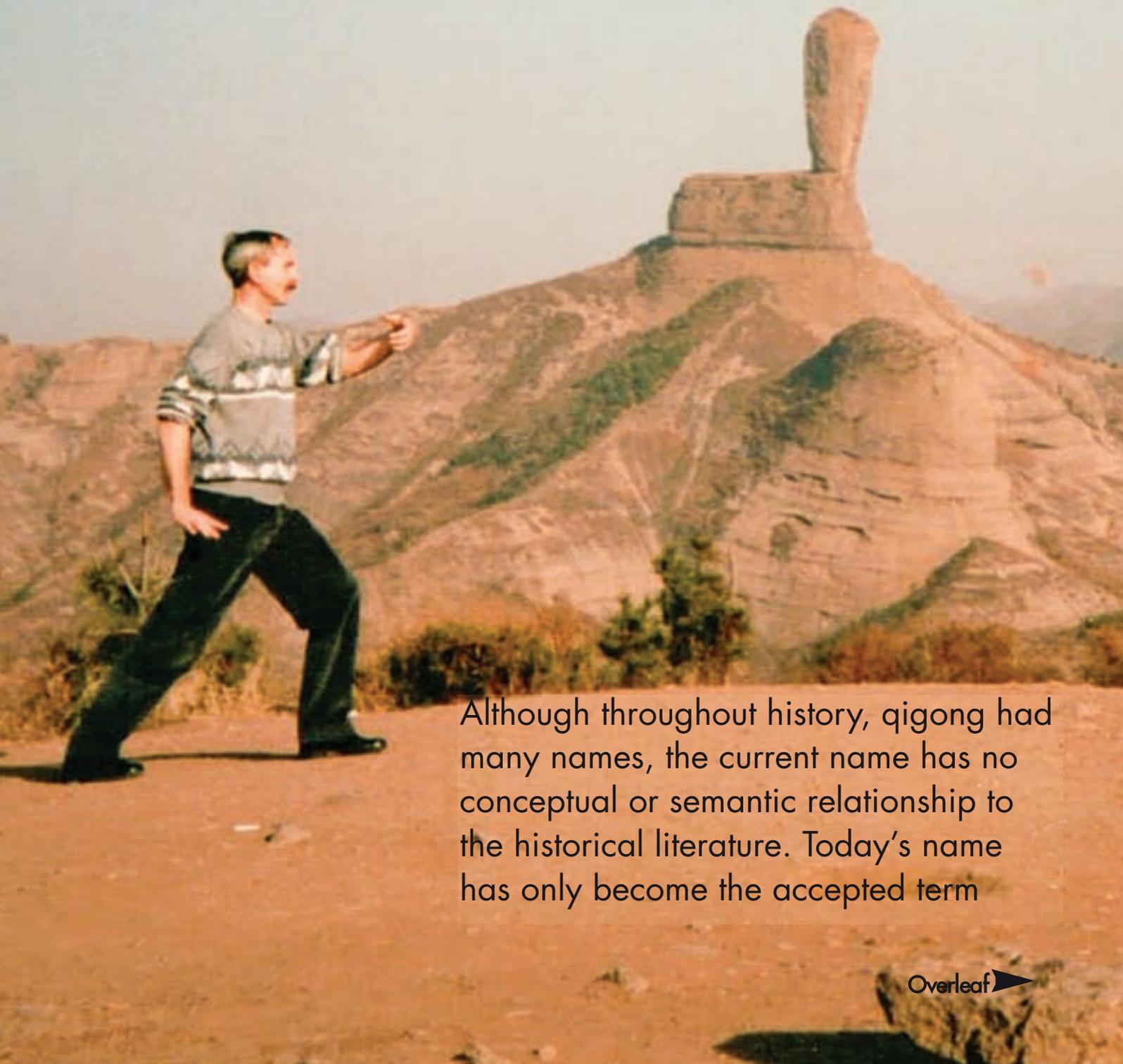


# Qigong roots – a history

Gordon Faulkner



Although throughout history, qigong had many names, the current name has no conceptual or semantic relationship to the historical literature. Today's name has only become the accepted term

Qigong is composed of two words which Chinese dictionaries define as follows.

Gong: *meritorious service; achievement; result; skill.*

Qi: *air, gas; smell; vigour; spirit; anger; atmosphere; attitude.*

Selection from those choices gives qigong today's meaning of 'vital energy skill' and many other similar variants from these choices.

Although throughout history, qigong had many names, the current name has no conceptual or semantic relationship to the historical literature. Today's name has only become the accepted term since the 1950s. Before that, the oldest and most diverse form is daoyin. One of the foremost Chinese academic sites for the study of these exercises is the Daoyin Yangsheng Centre at the Beijing University of Physical Exercise.

However, although I personally talk about daoyin, I also take note of a passage in the *Xunxi*, a 3rd-century BCE philosophical text. According to this passage,

聞而實喻

之用也 (When a name is heard, the reality is conveyed; such is the usefulness of a name). Thus, for the sake of this article, I will continue to use the modern name qigong. More about the origin of the name later.

Within qigong, qi has three aspects.

- Qi refers to the air breathed in and out and through qigong, which can improve the respiration function.

- Qi is the medium through which we connect all parts of the body and interact.

- Qi is the very essence of human life and qigong contributes to the growth of this substance.

Qigong is the modern umbrella term for a range of exercises known to work and develop skill with the body's energy. Currently, it is divided into five main overlapping traditions: Medical, Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, and martial. The central aspect of these traditions is health.

The history of qigong in this period comes under the heading of 'fact, fiction, myth, and speculation'. And, to play devil's advocate, there are four concerns that can beset people researching qigong in its early development.

- *Pareidolia*: The tendency, when looking at something, for perception to impose a meaningful interpretation, so that one sees an object, pattern, or meaning where there is none.

- *Motivated Perception*: Seeing what one wants to see.

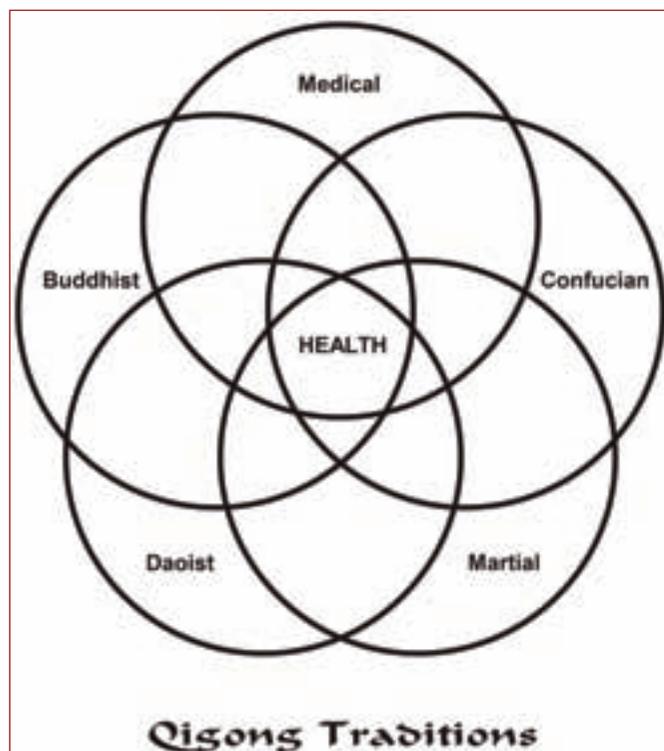
- *Motivated Reasoning*: Coming to conclusions one is predisposed to believe in.

4. *Confirmation Bias*: The tendency to look for and interpret information that supports their view. All the qigong information in the pre-imperial era is debatable and the history presented here follows the most commonly held beliefs.

The first use of the term qigong is another contested area. Many Chinese textual researchers agree it first appeared in the Jin dynasty (265-420 CE) in the *Lian jian zi*, a book written by the Daoist priest, Xu Xun. This text now only exists in the compendium *Jingming zongjiao lu*, which was printed around 1691 CE in the Qing Dynasty and, because of this, some researchers place the first use of the name in the Qing Dynasty.

The modern name qigong came to prominence after it was used by the Beidaihe Qigong Sanatorium and endorsed by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s to emphasise health and scientific approaches, while de-emphasising spiritual practices and mysticism.

As stated, the oldest term for qigong is daoyin. Daoyin is often translated as gymnastics. However, daoyin has significant differences from the modern understanding of



gymnastics. Daoyin exercises are based on the accumulation and conservation one's energy but the practice of present-day gymnastics requires the consumption of energy.

Dao (guiding) refers to the fact that physical movements are guided by the strength of the mind and stimulate the internal flow of qi within the body. Yin (pulling) means that with the aid of physical movements, qi can reach the extremities of the body.

The term daoyin first occurs in Zhuangzi, a late Warring States Period (476-221 BCE) text.

The pre-imperial history covers Neolithic period (c. 8500-2070 BCE), Xia Dynasty (c. 2070-1600 BCE), Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1050 BCE), Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE), and Warring States period (c. 475-221 BCE).

## Neolithic period (c. 5000-2000 BCE)

Some researchers believe qigong began either 7000 or 8000 years ago. A quick examination of Chinese history shows little evidence for this idea.

The first appearance of Chinese script is in the Shang Dynasty Archaic Language Period (1200-1000 BCE). This was only on oracle-bones and, therefore, contained no historical information. The first time we can look at factual historical evidence for qigong is in the following Pre-Classical Language Period (1000-600 BCE).

The main claim is down to a single piece of 7000-year-old pottery which appears to show a person in a qigong-like posture (pareidolia?).

Although various traditions of qigong try to trace their roots back to legendary people like Pengzu (the Chinese Methuselah), the immortals Chisongzi (Master Redpine) and Wang Ziqiao and the ancient master Ningfengzi, who have specific sets of exercises named after them, it is also clear the best speculation we have is that qigong evolved from shamanic rituals and dance during this period.

## Xia Dynasty (c. 2070-1600 BCE)

Legends claim this as the first Chinese Dynasty with Yu the Great as the first emperor, but there was little proof

that the dynasty actually existed. It is not until the Zhou Dynasty, 554 years later, that we see any writings of this first Chinese dynasty. For this reason, it was believed to be mythical, but new archaeological evidence now shows the dynasty to have been real. However, there is no information on qigong during this dynasty.

## Shang Dynasty (c. 1600-1050 BCE)

As previously stated, this dynasty is the earliest recorded Chinese dynasty supported by solid archaeological evidence and positive proof of the first written records.

*The Yijing* (Book of Changes) – possibly from this period, but more likely to be from the following Zhou Dynasty—was the first known Chinese book related to qi. It introduced the concept of the three natural energies or powers (san cai): tian (heaven), di (earth), and ren (man). Studying the relationship between these three natural powers was the first step in the development of qigong.

## Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046-256 BCE)

This dynasty was the longest in the history of China, ruling the region for almost eight centuries. It had two periods, the Western Zhou (c. 1046-771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou (c. 771-256 BCE). The Eastern Zhou is further divided into the spring and autumn and warring states periods.

Although the Western Zhou is considered the period when Chinese civilisation had its genesis, it was in the Eastern Zhou period that Daoism and Confucianism emerged with their influences on qigong practice.

## Eastern Zhou (c. 770-476 BCE)

### Spring and autumn period

In the book *Daodejing* (Classic of the Way of Power) ascribed to Laozi, chapters six and 29 contain text which mentions breathing in a qigong manner. Although the date of this text is debatable, the oldest excavated portion dates back to the late 4th century BCE.

## Eastern Zhou (c. 475-221 BCE)

### Warring States Period

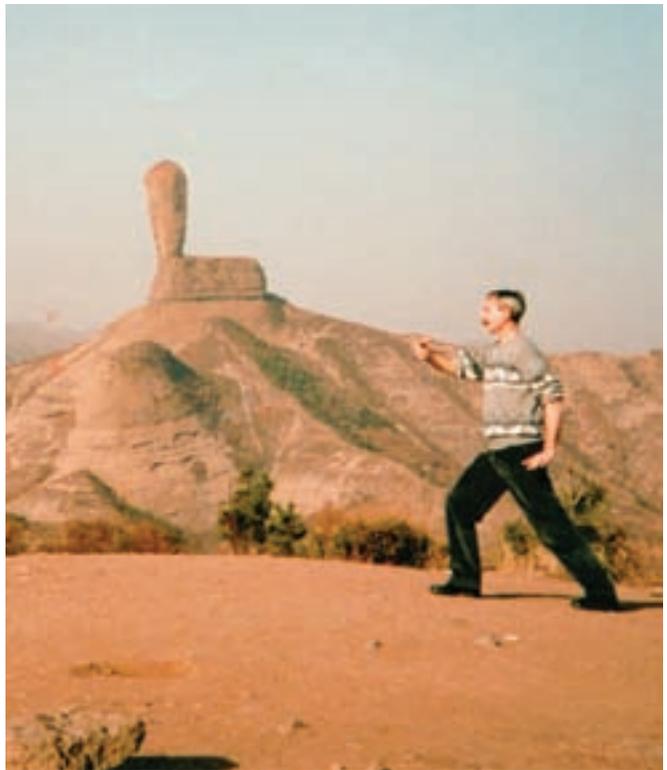
Qigong is absorbed into the Yangsheng tradition that was evolving in this period. Yangsheng, generally translated as nourishing-life, is the umbrella term for various self-cultivation practices, now considered as being primarily Daoist inspired. These longevity techniques are to keep the body healthy and maintain homeostasis by nourishing and prolonging life.

According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,<sup>7</sup> Daoist self-cultivation practices can be divided into three categories: meditation, alchemy and yangsheng. The yangsheng category includes such practices as qigong, breathing, sexual hygiene and dietetics.

However, the *Encyclopedia of Taoism* widens the yangsheng practices to include massage, meditation and visualisation, healing, and rules of daily behaviour.

This indicates that the definition of yangsheng is very fluid and still evolving. No definitive list of what constitutes yangsheng practices can be made. It has changed over time and continues to change even today. One thing that has not changed is the inclusion of the core practice of qigong.

Qigong developed into a fairly systematic art for the preservation of health in this period. For example, a book believed to be compiled during this period, *Huangdi neijing* (*The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic*), contains records of qigong, many of which deal with methods of practice,



symptoms, effects and points for attention. In the book, a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and the renowned doctor, Qibo, stresses the combination of medical treatment with qigong exercises.

Actual practical details were found in jade. The Xingqi (circulating breath) instructions for practising qigong were engraved around 400 BCE on a dodecagonal block of jade in what appears to be seal script.

The *Neiye* (*Inner Cultivation*) text, dated between 350-300 BCE, had profound effects on the development of qigong and the encouragement of daily self-cultivation.

Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (c. 369-286 BCE) described the relationship between health and the breath in chapter three of his book *Zhuangzi* titled *Yangsheng zhu* (Principal of Nourishing Life) which confirms that a breathing method for qi circulation was being used by some Daoists at that time.

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*Qigong History Part 2 will begin with the Qin Dynasty unification of China.*

Gordon Faulkner has had a keen interest in Chinese culture for over 60 years. He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society and a member of the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding. He started his martial training in 1968 and eventually switched to the style he does today, Chanquan-shu, in 1972 while serving with the RAF. In 1999 he became a closed door disciple of daoyin master Zhang Guangde and in 2003, Master You Xuande at Wudang Shan accepted him as a 15th generation disciple of Wudang boxing.