

DESIRE AND SELFHOOD
GLOBAL CHINESE RELIGIOUS HEALING IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

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I-Fan Wu
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I-Fan Wu, Ph. D.

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This dissertation is an ethnographic examination of Chinese meditators who, propelled by their suffering, pursue alternative religious healing education to harmonize their conflicts with social others and to answer their existential questions. Using Lacan’s analysis of desire as an analytic with which to understand two religious healing schools—Bodhi Heart Sanctuary in Penang with global lecturers, and Wise Qigong centers in Penang, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen—this dissertation delineates and explains how, in the Chinese diaspora, unconscious desires are expressed through alternative religious healing systems. The doctrines of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary and Wise Qigong follow a similar internal logic: they teach their disciples to submit themselves to a new alterity that resembles Confucianism, requiring self-submission if not asceticism. In so doing, practitioners, misrecognizing the source of their self-making, claim to transcend their suffering by overcoming their desires with the guidance of the new alterity, which represents a new form of ego-ideal.

By attaching themselves to the best object—Buddha’s Right View, or *hunyuan qi*, the “primordial energy”—practitioners believe that they revitalize themselves as they address and work through the existential dilemmas involved in everyday interactions. This dissertation explicates the process through which Chinese forms of “self-help”

therapy make sense to people as a manifestation of cross-cultural human existential concerns while these concerns take distinctively Chinese forms. This dissertation contributes to a more psychologically informed understanding of Chinese middle-class women's and men's desires by delineating how religious aesthetics seen as an ideal alterity generates transcendence in suffering through experiencing healing aesthetics and observing the play of desires. In the cases of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary and Wise Qigong, Chinese practitioners' dissatisfaction is transformed by adopting a meta-perspective to negate their desires through asceticism, thereby fulfilling their ultimate desire—reaching nirvana, or the state of eternal happiness and abundance, attaining ideal selfhood.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I-Fan Wu was born in Taipei, Taiwan. She was enrolled in The International School of Penang (Uplands) in a primary school in Penang, Malaysia. Her Ph.D. research at Cornell University took her back to Penang. As a psychological anthropologist, I-Fan will continue to use ethnographic methods to document and navigate life to understand people and their culture.

Dedicated to my parents and mentors

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NOTES ON TRANSLATION

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese Chinese, and Hokkien Chinese are my own. I have sought to use the Pingyin system for Romanization followed by Chinese characters in translating Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese Chinese, and Hokkien Chinese, but the reader should note that local Malaysian variations may occur in the Romanization of the Chinese language.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

BHS	Bodhi Heart Sanctuary
CBT	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
CEO	Chief Enlightenment/Enjoyment Officer
CFM	Christian Federation of Malaysia
CFO	Chief Feeling Officer
CIO	Chief Investigation Officer
COO	Chief Operating/Observation Officer
DAP	Democratic Action Party
ESP	Extra Sensory Perception
GMDS	The Goddess of Mercy Devotional Society
Gerakan	Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, the Malaysian People's Movement Party
MCA	Malayan Chinese Association
MCCBCHST	Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Daoism
MIC	Malayan Indian Congress
MYR	Malaysian Ringgit
NEP	New Economic Policy
NOC	National Operations Council
PAP	Singapore People's Action Party
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia
TED	Technology, Entertainment, Design conferences
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
USD	United States Dollar

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Research Questions

In this dissertation, I ask: how do Malaysian Chinese cope with their desires (or suffering, in their words) through religious healing systems? A proper answer to this question falls into three parts, as the data I collected in the field manifested. First, how do symptoms of blockage index personal and politico-economic distress in qigong and Buddhist systems and social interactions? Wise Qigong explains blockage in its qigong theory as an individual's physical and psychological stagnancy, a condition that impedes physical circulation and interferes with success because of the blockage of energy flow along the meridians. In contrast, Bodhi Heart Sanctuary (BHS) treats a blockage primarily as a mental block, a form of stubbornness, manifested in resistance to seeing things through Buddhist alterity. By politico-economic distress I mean family interactions, because I encountered practitioners striving to solve family conflicts most prominently during my fieldwork.¹ Second, how does religious healing such as qigong and meditation evoke an individual practitioner's deep desires and emotions (Sapir 1993; Morris 2000), revealing or reconciling conflicted systems of knowledge that both free her from and bind her even more firmly to the cultural logics of Chinese Confucian values (Peletz 1997)? Third, how do qigong consultations elicit a range of cultural discourses that feed into practitioners' self-healing, self-making, or identity construction

¹ This dissertation does not explore blockages as political or ethnic symptoms manifested in a kind of political unconscious, as illustrated in Willford's (2006) and Butler's (1997) work. There are no data yet to support this account of how the somatic and the political can be related at this current stage. I will focus on this question in future research.

(Brownell 2009)? These questions lead to a concluding question: To what kind of religious alterity do practitioners respond, helping them transcend their suffering by transforming themselves? By alterity I mean an external system, an ideology, or a perspective from which to train practitioners to cultivate an alternative worldview and way of life.

The answers lie in my observations and analyses of two meditation communities: the Wise Qigong Association and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. The two schools are occupied mainly by ethnic Chinese in Penang, Malaysia. Wise Qigong is a Beijing-based qigong healing association that has spread internationally to Penang, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen, where I conducted my fieldwork, and elsewhere. Qigong is a Chinese healing practice that aligns practitioners' movements with breath and meditation. When Wise Qigong conferences are held in Malaysia or China, practitioners in Asia and speakers from Asia attend. Wise Qigong instructors also travel abroad to conduct weeks or months of qigong instruction in Europe, Australia, Malaysia, America, and elsewhere. Wise Qigong is a transnational institute that nevertheless projects a nationalistic tone—the pride of Wise Qigong as a Chinese science operates within a Chinese nationalistic logic.

Bodhi Heart Sanctuary (BHS), on the other hand, is a local Penang religious institute that is open to global Buddhist speakers, ideas, and healing traditions. It also has a plan to expand elsewhere in Malaysia and Asia. BHS seems to have a democratic viewpoint, allowing a diversity of traditions and heterodox and interim nuns and monks to stay and study. BHS positions itself as a place that accommodates all Buddhists with activities that benefit everyone.

Wise Qigong practitioners are trained to look inward to control their desires and thereby achieve an advanced way of life. BHS meditators adopt Buddhist reincarnation ideology to see themselves as products of karma accumulation, being aware of their emergent desires to be more conscientious and reach nirvana. Both Wise Qigong and BHS practitioners rely on external religious systems to manage their desires to solve social problems and health issues engendered by patriarchal Confucian interactions. Wise Qigong's and BHS's teachings, from the practitioners' perspective, inspire practitioners to embrace and understand their own suffering.

Suffering also acts symbolically as desire in the Buddhist context because to desire (and form attachment to things) is suffering, and Buddhists seek to distinguish their desires by practicing the Buddhist way of life, as my interlocutors at BHS believe they do. In this sense, suffering becomes a kind of symbolic means of expressing desire to get beyond a blockage or impasse. Thus, transcending suffering through religious healing practices functions, in my view, through a mechanism of alienation (Sangren 2017). Such alienation lies in the practitioner's habit of basing his productivity or transformation on religion rather than on himself. In so doing, he misrecognizes the authentic source that would fill his emptiness by identifying with such doctrines such as the abundant *hunyuan qi* in Wise Qigong and Buddha's Right View of *vipaka* in BHS. That said, by misrecognition I do not mean false consciousness or other Marxist concepts (Marx 1992; Marx and Engels 1978; Žižek 1989) that influence some ideologically. I mean that one identifies with a better, beautiful thing elsewhere instead

of inside oneself, a kind of transcendent power one generates from oneself which, from the Marxist theoretical point of view, is misrecognized.²

I do not mean that it is a mistake for practitioners to adopt such a view. In fact, it is the key mechanics of belief that take place in education or any form of transformation. Situating one's identity through another's projection of oneself, according to Lacan (Lacan and Fink 2004), is part of the universal human psyche. Being influenced by Freud's concepts of the ego, the id, and the super-ego,³ and Hegel's (1979)

² Marx ties consciousness to ideology. He argues that political-economy, controlled by either the local upper class or the global market system, dominates and enslaves lower-class laborers by creating a naturalized system that alienates them (Marx and Engels 1978, 163). This system could be the caste system or the German thinkers' prioritizing thoughts and ideas over materialistic and sensuous reality (1978, 166). That is to say, consciousness is shaped by history (i.e., the making of history by someone) that represents "the Other" for an individual. For instance, historians reduce the real living existence of an epoch into a certain written, fixed essence. In addition, the upper class also naturalizes the "*unequal* distribution" (1978, 159) of resources through ideology, to exploit working-class people by taking away their surplus value and welfare. The working class's consciousness is alienated, putting "the religious production of fancies (i.e. ideology) in the place of the real production of the means of subsistence and of life itself" (1978, 166).

Seeing consciousness, instinctive needs, and all human production as products of humanity's struggle against the natural environment (to make a living within the limits of material conditions) (1978, 150), Marx suggests that "circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances" (1978, 165). Humans create tools to satisfy their desires and to solve problems, but at the same time new desires and problems will be generated, waiting for them to invent new modes of subsistence and life to solve the new problems (1978, 150). Marx's interactive view of people and the environment and its assumption of adaptation-survival-social-progress could explain social change, especially change in the era of globalization, where people, tools, and materials are mixed on a larger scale in disparate environments (when people move around). Personal differences are, however, left unmentioned. Marx (1992) emphasizes collective sociality as he describes laborers as a mass of collective clones using parts of their bodies working in factories with well-organized machinery assembly lines. He also implies the existence of a social matrix of consciousness without concern for individual differences, assuming consciousness as a social product that has nothing to do with individuality.

³ Freud suggests that one's personality is the result of interactions between the id, the ego, and the superego. The id, driven by uncoordinated instincts, is suppressed into the unconsciousness (Freud 1990, 20). The ego, the organized, realistically presented self, and the superego, the moral, social self, emerge on the surface as consciousness. This is a hypothetical construct of the human psyche. Although some claim that Freud's hypothesis does not correspond to neuroscientific discoveries, Freud's insights remain valuable for suggesting a historical formation of self-drawing forces from the social and the instinctual.

view of desire as negating others' presence within the self (as if I recognize myself as you recognize me),⁴ Lacan's mirror stage (Lacan and Fink 2004) suggests a form of

Freud posits a sophisticated psychic system that explains the inner conflict one experiences due to the dilemma caused by one's instinctual drives on the one hand and coercive accommodations of social (ethical) requirements on the other. He sees consciousness as a protective cushion or receptor of external stimuli (1990, 30). According to Freud, a child's first separation from his mother when playing the "fort-da" (or peek-a-boo) game is a way to cope with the pain of loneliness and being forsaken by one's mother. This is the first time the child consciously feels the pain of the self-other distinction and he plays the throwing game to announce his "instinctual renunciation" (1990, 14), to make the situation more pleasurable by acting "*active*" (1990, 15). This temporary projection/transference (1990, 33, 22) of one's emotions for a person (i.e., mother) to the object (i.e., the game, or activities with an object or a person) will reiterate again and again throughout one's lifetime.

Freud has a pathological/historical view that presupposes one's self as suffering trauma since one's desire cannot always be fulfilled and has to be repressed into one's fantasy or dreams (1990, 37) or repeated (1990, 22-23) in the clinic. Trauma, according to Freud, is the injury caused by one's not feeling at home, when "any excitations from outside . . . are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (1990, 33). Trauma could cause any of various neuroses (1990, 38-39) or result in active or passive actions such as playing the fort-da game, undergoing psychotherapy, or repressing it into dreams "to master the stimulus retrospectively" (1990, 37). Freud hints at the liberation of the self that comes from elevating one's desire from the unconscious to the conscious level.

Nevertheless, Freud seems to vacillate between emphasizing the constraints of one's nature and how people cope with the trauma retrospectively. He would likely not think it would be easy for one to shed one's personality and life history, even if he or she understands and is willing to get out of the "loop." It is universal, for Freud, for a person to be driven by the pleasure principle throughout one's life course, but to suffer all the way. Each person is unique in the way that he or she is shaped not only by his or her nature but also by his or her encounters with people and the environment.

Just as Marx's underscores every human's boundless desire to maximize self-interest and production (i.e., subsistence, tools, and themselves) within environmental limits, so Freud (1990, 3) stresses the economic pursuit of pleasure as an instinctive drive. Both Marx and Freud have a historical view of human progress and limitations. Nevertheless, differing from Marx's collective material-centered view, Freud focuses on individual mentality without taking cross-cultural differences into consideration. His hypothesis of the id, the ego and the superego implies a cultural force that is integrated into an individual's nature. However, these social-individual interactions form a unique (historical) individual psyche, distinguishing that individual from others. Nevertheless, his treating boys' castration fear and girls' phallus-worship differently assumes patriarchy as a pervasive if not ubiquitous social fact. For Freud, everyone has been more or less traumatized, whereas for Marx traumatic alienation occurs only to the collective body of lower-class laborers. However, both Freud's concept of trauma and Marx's concept of alienation suggest massive social manipulation that imposes on certain people if not all people a form of unconscious paralysis that leaves them incapable of becoming their own *real* agents.

⁴ Just as Marx saw alienation in laborers' work, so Hegel views slaves' work as an "alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own" (1979, 119). Both argue dialectically about the conflict of social class (in Marx), and the split-self and the master and slave (in Hegel). However, Hegel stresses mutual recognition (1979, 112)—one could not recognize oneself without the

subjectivity that relies on the specular of the other or the self rather than identifying itself (the self) from its own reflections of itself (the self).

In other words, the self identifies itself through the spectacular, the gaze on or from the other, a source separated from itself over which it has no control and in the face of which it has no autonomy: the self relies on the others' image of the self to recognize itself. The division of the psyche (into the self and the other) leaves an incomplete feeling, emptiness, or lack that propels agents to strive for autonomy or attention from others by finding new objects and the new spectacular from objects to fill in the void of the separation, in search of autonomy and wholeness. The search for new objects functions partly as self-defense for the self: in this process the subject submits to the law (society) of the new object in the form of an ego-ideal parent. The ego-ideal and the self-image get harmonized in an imagined relationship, a relationship one cultivates with an 'object petit a' in Lacan's sense (Lacan and Fink 2004). This relationship allows agents to achieve some sense of resolution, although a true resolution seems never to occur because the tension and the space between one's self-image and the law (society) can never be filled.

According to Lacan (Lacan and Fink 2004), this partial recognition of an alluring object creates the dynamics of transcendence without the recognition of its social origins. My dissertation aims to reveal the hidden social dynamic that underlies the often

other's recognition. Nevertheless, there is always an active force that eclipses the passive self (1979, 113). But then the immediate self includes the former self by forming the new (blended) self in forsaking the former self. The double-ness is a temporary negation, a middle term (1979, 112) that eventually proceeds to the truth (1979, 114)— by struggling to reach the state of being-for-self (1979, 114), the I, the absolute mediation (1979, 115). Conflict/negation is inevitable in Hegel's dialectics since both the split self and the slave or master need the negative force to recognize each other's existence (1979, 118).

mystical or sublime quality of religion. Thus, my reading of alienation leans more toward Kant's interpretation of religion (Gasché 2003), according to which religion provides aesthetics, values, morals, and ethics to enable humans to grasp the sublime and the beautiful, which otherwise would exceed the limits of human comprehension.

The sublime, according to Kant (Gasché 2003), assumes a mysterious magnitude like the stars in the universe that exceed human understanding. The magnitude of the sublime compels humans to try to comprehend it, which generates a restless, anxious feeling, or *angst*. The beautiful, in contrast, provides a calm aesthetic that is pleasing and soothing. Religion provides an aesthetic understanding for comprehending the complexity of the world, one's surroundings, and events with congruent principles. In other words, religion gives believers a perspective that enables them to feel some sense of comprehending something that is beyond their comprehension when reason fails to explain it systematically.

The cultural systems that find expression in Wise Qigong's doctrine and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary's *vipaka* belief enable practitioners to hold on to a principle that is semiotically pleasing in the Chinese sense to explain the incongruity of life in a way that supports them for the time being. In other words, the doctrines help practitioners of qigong and Buddhist meditation see their world from a perspective of alterity, which in turn enables them to transcend their suffering. Religious healing teachings help them grapple with their existential, social, and philosophical questions without making them sensible in a logical way or even known in an objectified language through their embodiment of qigong and meditation. For some practitioners, as seen in later chapters,

the aesthetics of religious healing lies in Chinese language users' appreciation of cultural beauty through their eyes, bodies, and tastes.

The two religious systems under study also resemble patriarchal and Chinese cultural systems. As illustrated in this dissertation, this also gives the two religious systems aesthetic and sense-making functions for practitioners. The two religious systems, according to practitioners, liberate them from their over-reliance on social validation, which is the cause of their suffering, according to Theravada Buddhism as promoted in the Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. However, the Confucian logic in both Wise Qigong and BHS in fact binds practitioners in a way that is similar to how they can be caught up in patriarchal cultural systems. The familiarity of Chinese cultural and patriarchal systems draws practitioners in while confining them within the same logical framework while they believe liberation from the old system is occurring.

It is imperative for practitioners of BHS and Wise Qigong to transform themselves if they are to transcend their suffering in the world in which they exist. Suffering is a theme that recurs repeatedly in my research. My interlocutors in the field talked and thought about it every day. Both BHS and Wise Qigong are affected by Buddhism. Suffering, through the Buddhist's lens, is attachment. For my interlocutors, the Buddhist's way of negating one's attachment by recognizing one's own desires as illusory becomes a powerful analytic that helps them organize their lives. As shown in later chapters, the *vipaka* karma system of BHS and the qigong theory of pain and pleasure and controlling desire in Wise Qigong are being applied to make sense of practitioners' suffering to reflect on their lives more broadly.

The Analytic of Desire

By desire, I do not mean a simple wish: I want to distinguish desire from the everyday usage of the word “desire” as denoting a wish. By desire, I mean something that is deeply rooted in the psyche that involves a kind of negation of the self to transcend one’s current identity into the formation of a social subjectivity, or a selfhood that adapts to the environment and feedback from people with whom one is close. This subjectivity is built on the desire that emerges from the essential division of the self (Butler 1997). The divided self in modern Chinese culture, according to Kleinman et al. (2011, 5), is a self that is “torn between self-interest and collective good, struggling over desire and responsibility, negotiating contradictory emotions, shifting attention between things in and out of awareness, and juxtaposing imagination and practical action” (Kleinman et al. 2011, 5). Kleinman et al. (2011) discuss this divided self in a Chinese setting, suggesting a Chinese self in particular. Yet against this psychological background Kleinman et al. (2011) also acknowledge universal psychological characteristics. Building on this, Sangren (2017) argues that desire, as an instituted fantasy, is being created through society’s trumping of the subject’s desire, creating social unease that eventually generates dialectical tensions in society that lead eventually to structural transformation.

As I observe in this dissertation, there are instances in which the divided subject attempts to, at least partially, overcome the sense of division or contradiction that, at most times, gets harmonized through embracing religious healing, and, at rare times, prepares the subject for future effective enactment. By effective enactment I mean, as shown in the Bodhi Heart Sanctuary’s Buddhist education, cultivating a clearer or

reflective view of one's play of desire that is shaped by one's upbringing and environment that allows one to embrace her nature and accept a situation as it is, rather than insisting on projecting desire to force a certain result. As my dissertation shows, my informants enact their ideas by adopting symbols of religious healing systems for their own personal use (Obeyesekere 1981) and by submitting to a new cultural system while at the same time reinforcing the existing social structure.

Transformation and Self

Focusing on the tension involved in maintaining one's self and cultural integration, Sapir suggests that, on the one hand, culture provides objectified idioms and thoughts that agents use to express their emotions regardless of individual variations (Sapir 2010, 24); however, there is a gap between the individual and the cultural ideal in virtue of which the individual has to accommodate "himself to the preferred as if [his personality must be dictated by the] cultural patterns of his society" (Sapir 2010, 27), on the other hand. From the individual's viewpoint, although "he cannot break the social patterns that are required of him . . . he is perhaps looking for new symbols for his own satisfaction" (Sapir 2010, 26). Individual variations in mass cultural production of the same assembly line should be taken into consideration.

Along the same lines, some anthropologists connect individual idiosyncratic experiences with the cultural contexts in which people live, seeing both as interactive processes. Hallowell (2010) suggests that the behavioral environment orients agents with a total episteme to (1) define their senses of self (Hallowell 2010, 33), (2) reference their relationships with other objects (including people) (Hallowell 2010, 34), (3) locate

who and where they are with spatial and temporal indicators (Hallowell 2010, 35), (4) provide individual incentives to motivate the pursuit of aspirations parallel to the requirements of the behavioral environment (Hallowell 2010, 40), and (5) standardize a system of values to internalize and objectify self-worth (Hallowell 2010, 43). Hallowell suggests that these “conceptions of the self” provide models enabling individuals to articulate personal experience within a cultural framework. Although cultural hegemony invites and coerces individuals to be imprinted with standardized values (if not excluded) on a one-way street, individual resistance to following mainstream practices, as Hallowell points out, manifest in various renditions of self-preservation, from self-defense (Hallowell 2010, 44) to self-enhancement (Hallowell 2010, 45).

Another study of self-preservation through healing is shown in the Das and Das application of Kleinman’s “explanatory models” (1988, 121) to demonstrate how patients among the urban poor in India name their recurring illnesses to seek “relief of symptoms” (Das and Das 1988, 83) through various streams of treatment such as complaining to family members, blaming a patient’s physical weakness on their negligence, and consulting local alternative healing practitioners, bio-medical doctors, and Muslim diviners (Das and Das 1988, 89). Patients’ perpetual subjectivity lies in their attempts “to authorize the real [symptoms] within the precariousness of their everyday life, engaging explanations from both political economy and culture” (Das and Das 1988, 90) through mobilizing their “networks of information and influence” (Das and Das 1988, 81). Because symptoms of illness are recurring, patients look to multiple diagnoses of illness and disease to read and heal their bodies physically and

psychologically through medical care and/or divination as they move perpetually from one healing locality to another, trying to comprehend and name their symptoms.

Even a bio-medical reading of a “disease,” according to Das and Das (2007), has a hidden cultural and psychological dimension that is often neglected by a biomedical diagnosis, causing urban lower-class patients in India to direct their mistrust and anger at kin and neighbors “to displace the ‘real’ causes of illness” (Das and Das 1988, 90).

Das and Das (2007) and Obeyesekere (1981) offer ethnographic elaborations of Hallowell’s “conceptions of the self.” Both illustrate how those who are socially perceived as “abnormal” or sick use culturally accepted “public” idioms to articulate their distress and illness. They use various “healing” traditions, borrowing their symbols, meanings and interpretations, to explain their psychological positions and physical ailments to other social members. On the one hand, the Indian urban poor are limited in their choices of healing traditions, and they are deeply influenced by those cultural constructions; however, on the other hand, they facilitate the knowledge of multiple pathways to try to relieve themselves of psychological and physical symptoms.

Although both Indian urban poor patients (Das and Das 2007) and Sri Lankan ascetics (Obeyesekere 1981) are still perceived as (socially) deviant and are excluded by their societies to a certain degree, they somehow manage to communicate with others through the facilitation of cultural “public” meanings (Obeyesekere 1981). Their ways of resorting to diverse healing traditions could be viewed as forms of the art of living, a way of seeking self-preservation through defense and enhancement of oneself through individual idiosyncratic interpretations and approaches. They fill in the gap between the Self and the Other with socially and individually accepted knowledge. This puts them

in a more harmonious position when searching for satisfying new symbols, as Sapir (2010) argues. This is their constituted subjectivity influenced by the interwoven psychological, social, cultural, economic, and political arenas. They are also constituting themselves as they seek various lenses of “public discourses” to make sense of their illness, symptoms, and relationships in their ordinary lives.

The Buddhist Self (reduction) and the Qigong Self (increase)

Some may argue that harmonizing the self with society through religion or education or object petit a, in Lacan’s sense (Lacan and Fink 2004), does not lead to structural transformation. Self-help research (Cooper 2014) sees the educational process as soothing by enabling the self to release pressure, a self-improving way of enhancing the quality of one’s life. This could be seen as a strategic, effective, and practical enactment enabling subjects to improve their everyday lives in contrast to pursuing revolution, which is more time-consuming and costly. Although the process is not revolutionary or in any sense transformative of the social structure, one may suggest that the educational process is a collective striving to prepare subjects to feel good about themselves, filling in the void with an imagined object petit a (Lacan and Fink 2004), and preparing strategies and actions to reduce their suffering. Both Buddhist and qigong education changes their practitioners in terms of identity, worldview, and conduct, shaping and transforming them into new selves.⁵

⁵ For instance, several couples in BHS treated the meditation education as couples’ therapy in addition to learning about Buddhism. Wise Qigong female practitioners in Butterworth, Penang, also uses Wise Qigong teachings to help them harmonize their interactions with husbands who were indifferent or had extramarital affairs. The degree of transformation the practitioners go through in Wise Qigong and BHS may not be revolutionary, but the education provides a practical and effective framework and social support needed to make their lives “easier.”

The Buddhist self requires the negation of desire, as the Buddhist sees the mind as something with which to overcome the self and attain the state of no self—in which devotees imagine themselves seeing beyond concepts and symbols, “seeing things as they are,” as Bodhi Heart Sanctuary’s teaching goes. BHS teaches its students to observe their emotions and negate their desires (attachments) to accumulate good karma or *vipaka* to increase the chance to reach nirvana—a place which is the end of suffering. Wise Qigong, in contrast, teaches its practitioners to restore more qi and ignore their emotions to do more qigong instead. This functions as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)—using actions to interrupt over-thinking and paralysis to enact action. While Wise Qigong teaching emphasizes the accumulation of qi—reducing all other desires and focusing on qi accumulation—BHS stresses the negation of desire (or attachment) to gain good karma and *vipaka*. Both, however, manifest a fervor in worshipping their teachers, the Grand Master Pang Ming and Buddha, negating the individual self and enlarging the collective self.

There are two types of narcissism: primary and secondary narcissism (Kohut 1977). Primary narcissism occurs in men who have weak egos due to an abrupt separation from their mothers or a major transformation in their pre-teen years that creates a narcissistic wound. Kohut (1977) describes how a boy is everything to his mother until the age of five, after which he is treated as a man who is required to follow social obligations away from the caring warmth and touch of his mother. Kohut (1977) argues that this wound may cause the man to rely on a symbolic mother to prolong his intimacy. Extending that theme of shortened intimacy between mother and son to North

America, where babies are made to sleep alone, Kohut (1977) suggests that babies do not experience enough warmth from their mothers for them to cultivate self-love. That trauma creates a narcissistic wound that increases the tendency toward becoming violent.

In contrast, secondary narcissism occurs when people attach their egos to their masters' egos. For instance, Indians are into hero worship or Guru worship. They pay dramatic deference to great or noble people. Kohut (1977) explains that these people attain their sense of self through the master as they imagine the master as an idealized parent. In this way, the master becomes a super-parent, an ideal figure who can do no wrong. This ideal figure is unlike their biological fathers, who let them down, frustrate them, and eventually, as they believe, betray them.

This leads to a different form of narcissism from that of North American men: Indian actors defer and worship guru figures with a fervor that is different from that of the worshippers of stars in the West. A Westerner would not commit suicide when his or her favorite star passes away, but Indians sometimes commit suicide when their gurus pass away because it is too painful or generates too much angst to see their hero, whom they regard as part of them, die. So they would rather die physically together with the hero than experience the living death every day torturing their minds. That is, according to Kohut (1977), Indians bind their narcissistic glow of self with their guru to such an extent that the guru's death is an insult to the ego. In other words, they need that sense of narcissistic glow from their guru. Their internal logic runs like this: because you are great, and because I am part of you, I by extension am also great because I am your disciple.

Similarly, Kakar (Kakar and Sharma 2014) also argues that the guru-student relationship is similar to psychoanalysis yet it is more effective by reaching deeper into a student's psyche (Coward 2014, 141). Kakar (Kakar and Sharma 2014) also describes a form of Hindu subjectivity affected by karma, positing a universal psyche similar to that of Lacan (Lacan and Fink 2004), in virtue of which humans are caught up in the play of their desires, mistaking hunger for fulfillment (Kumar 2014, 252). Kakar (Kakar and Sharma 2014) provides a Hindu case of an ego that needs an ego object.

Discussing the Asian subjectivity that attaches to a guru, Rolland (1988, 8-9) suggests that the self in India and Japan integrates more of the we-self and spiritual-self and less of the individualized self which is more distinctive in Americans. Indian and Japanese self-identity emerges and is felt through belonging to another individual who is a guru. Contrastingly, Lacan's Buddhist-influenced idea of the self (Lacan and Fink 2004) sees the self as an illusion, a construction that needs to be shattered, because the self is the result of social conditions, which drives the self to pursue a speculative relationship with an ideal object to fill a void. It is through this pursuit that one mistakes hunger for fulfillment, as Kakar would argue (Kakar and Sharma 2014), yet hunger keeps searching for new objects to fill the emptiness. The Buddhist concept of the self leads to drastic negation of desire, treating hunger as an illusion because hunger is a product of history and culture.

In contrast, the ego-psychology school practiced in North America embraces the existence of a healthy ego. A fragile or traumatic ego can be strengthened. Once the ego has sufficient warmth, empathy, and support that resembles a mother's care, the disturbance of the ego that would lead to psychological pathology will subside.

Another school, CBT, which ignores the ego completely, focuses only on action to push back against the effects of over-thinking. That is, the CBT school believes that, by acting and focusing on other things, a person can break destructive patterns of thought to rewire the brain by replacing thinking with other activities.

In North America, as Rolland (1988) argues, the ideology of the ego-ideal posits an ideal person who is autonomous, independent, and able to think and feel on his own terms. This emphasizes the individualized self while suppressing, downplaying, or even sanctioning the collective self. However, North Americans are still tempered by deep longing for community and family—all the things they are told to put aside. Even though the ideal person is a self-made person, individuals are conflicted within because they still need attachment to participate in collectivity. In Western society, autonomy is prominent. However, Westerners still need social attachments and exhibit emotional dependence.

The ego-ideal can vary with the cultural context, but to a large degree humans share a common psychology. During my fieldwork I observed that selfhood as understood by Malaysian Chinese differs from North Americans' selfhood. Yet I believe that Chinese people in Malaysia face similar existential problems trying to balance social demands and individual aspirations. While there are particularities about the idealized self, the ego-ideal in the Confucian Malaysian Chinese world or in the greater Sino-phone world also supports and frustrates the self, as I observed in my fieldwork. Therefore, the analytic of desire informed by Freud (1990), Lacan (Lacan and Fink 2004), Butler (1997), and Sangren (2017) provides an analytical perspective

from which to understand how agents address, transcend, or are propelled by their desires when they master new languages or systems of culture and religious healing.

Religious Healing and Transformation

Many minorities in Malaysia seek a convenient retreat in religious activities (Ackerman and Lee 1988). Blending local and transnational cultural elements from media in religious practices, Malaysian Chinese express their unrecognized identities as subtly as possible (DeBernardi 2004) through the mechanism of transcendence, whereby the subject can transcend daily socio-political strife and explain away her or his sense of injustice or frustration through divine healing (Willford 2006, 2013).

Since one's senses and experiences affect and are affected by external stimuli, religious healing provides a comforting space in which to relieve the pain of social denial caused by state ideology or naturalized gender norms through culturally acceptable "symbols for [personal] satisfaction" (Sapir 1993) that renew subjects' self-images and fill the void of self-denial or culturally over-determined behaviors as they seek social recognition (Hallowell 1949). Trance experiences offer reflexive (V. Turner 1969) yet legitimate voices to female actors (Zempleni 1977; Ong 1987; Langwick 2011) in the name of a-moral spirits (Boddy 1989), enabling them to see life differently through consciousness modification, or emplotment, a therapeutic hypnotic mechanism of narrations that render participants' minds receptive to change via fasting, dancing, and ritual ordeals in ritual settings (Calabrese 2008, 339). In other words, religious healing experiences induce physical and psychological transcendence (Csordas 2009)

of the ordinary self and daily strife, unfettering or critiquing the norm with an intuitive, emergent, and transformative consciousness.

To relieve somatic symptoms caused by politico-economic conditions, healing rituals offer narratives to appease agents' sense of injustice with interpersonal care and social attention (Das and Das 2007; Craig 2012; Hsu 2012). Chinese patients, for instance, express emotional messages through somatic symptoms to bonesetters, spirit mediums (Kleinman 1980), or traditional Chinese medical doctors (Ots 1990) to address their resentment or haunted sense of injustice, inculcated over years or generations. Similarly, under the repressive policies of the Chinese state, qigong practices not only show the increasing need among Chinese to “breathe” out (Chen 2003) their “repressed desires” (Xu 1999, 987), but also indicate Chinese intellectuals' demand for “cathartic healing in connection with fright” (Ots 1994, 134). Accordingly, qigong activities resolve “the painful conflict between Chinese tradition and Western science” (Palmer 2011, 198) by sustaining a sense of vitality and control over uncertainty through interpersonal care and social interactions (Scheid and MacPherson 2012). Systems of knowledge alter, however, as they translate into new contexts. The Penang Chinese, moreover, have used religion as a form of politico-cultural expression since colonial times to assert their right to be in Malaysia through ritual practices such as colonial-era Chinese Sworn Brotherhoods and the post-colonial Hungry Ghost Festival (DeBernardi 2004).

As religious education provides a system of alterity with symbols and expressions that enable the individual to transcend her or his suffering (Robbins 2007), the gap between cultural models of the self and the experiential self (Hollan 2010) is

often understudied, perhaps because the subject's self-awareness is not rewarded by society and thus remains underdeveloped. However, practitioners of Wise Qigong and BHS are encouraged to be "mindful" of their play of desires and sensations to understand themselves better. Their understanding of their subjective experiences adds to "the complexity of the relationship between cultural models and the self" (Hollan 2010, 296).

Research "Entry"

Anthropologists typically bring a mix of cultures and languages with them into the field, affecting how local communities receive them. It usually takes some time for a local community to observe and decide to accept or reject an anthropologist. Geertz (1973) described how he and his wife were being treated as if they did not exist until one event when the couple ran with the natives without really knowing why but sensed that they would get into trouble if they did not run the natives. They laughed with the natives afterwards and that became the turning point when the natives accepted them as part of the community. Every anthropologist has his or her own unique mode of entry when approaching research subjects.

My entry to the field started in 1992 when my father worked in Penang, where I attended a local international school for two years. This became an ice-breaker when I returned for my fieldwork when the locals asked about my personal reason for choosing Penang as the site of my research. I conducted fieldwork in Penang in 2005-2006 for my MA thesis and in 2011, 2012, 2014-2016 for my doctoral dissertation. My early history established with Penang enabled locals to quickly place where I was in the local

social stratification. Sometimes there were people we knew in common that put me into the local network prior to any established friendship. Also, the languages I speak and my educational background in Penang, Taiwan, and America helped me connect with both Chinese-educated and English-educated Malaysian Chinese.

With my undergraduate training in Taiwan, I have met some Malaysian Chinese or family friends who went to or are planning to study in Taiwan. I find those people who have connections with Taiwanese backgrounds approachable and willing to help me in my research. In addition, due to the racial quota system in Malaysia, a majority of the Malaysian Chinese have studied abroad in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere in the West. English-educated Chinese who themselves or family and friends have experience studying abroad in Western countries tend to trust me in deference to the Ivy League school I attend and are willing to assist me with my research. My Chinese demeanor and my way of communication in Mandarin Chinese, Hokkien Chinese, English, Cantonese Chinese, and Malay also make the local Penang Chinese comfortable because the way I carry myself suits the Confucian model to which they are accustomed. My background, which includes linguistic and educational diversity, enables the Malaysian Chinese to see me as a former member of their society experiences who resembles them or someone they know locally. Because most Malaysian Chinese tend to identify me quickly as someone they know, I have received many invitations to local gatherings with family and friends. Through those opportunities, I am able to gather information not just from public attendance at Buddhist or Qigong schools but also through private perspectives interacting with family members of informants.

My closeness with my informants also help me to be open and receptive to qigong education and Buddhist meditation. As classmates in qigong classes and meditation retreats, my informants and I share interests in religion, philosophy, existential quests, psychology, and healing. They treated me like the girl next door, approachable and easier to confide in. One Wise Qigong practitioner, a married female in her mid-forties, even cried when she shared how her husband treated her like a stranger in the house in our interview in Butterworth, Malaysia. With their deep trust in me telling me what made them “suffer,” I knew them more deeply which is, as I see it, the foundation of this dissertation.

In addition to interviewing practitioners in BHS and Wise Qigong in Penang, I also conducted fieldwork and interviewed Wise Qigong practitioners in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China. I interviewed 23 meditation practitioners in Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, and 30 in Wise Qigong Penang communities. I also conducted 11 interviews with Wise Qigong Hong Kong and Shenzhen communities. Based on the information I gathered from these interviews in Chinese diaspora communities in Penang, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen, I hope this dissertation clarifies the characteristics of contemporary Chinese self-help groups through Wise Qigong and BHS education.

Research Subjects

My interlocutors in BHS and Wise Qigong are mostly middle-class and upper-class Chinese people. These Malaysian Chinese find satisfaction in the doctrines of Buddhist meditation and Wise Qigong more than other ethnic groups and lower-class populations do. What attracts these people to continue spending their time and energy

doing meditation and qigong with their groups says much about social distinctions and the development of tastes in religious or spiritual consumption in Penang. Although the alternative healing and spiritual practices that I describe in this dissertation may produce a universal form of psychological transformation, how the doctrines and practices make sense to middle-class and upper-class Malaysian Chinese says much about cultural distinctions (Bourdieu 1979) associated with class and ethnicity.

Penang has the largest population of Chinese in Malaysia. Qigong and BHS practitioners are mainly Chinese. However, they speak Chinese and English. One BHS instructor, Hor Tuck Loon, comes from Kuala Lumpur, and he brings some Kuala Lumpur practitioners who are his core members to Penang for medication retreats. In this sense, the regional connections between Kuala Lumpur and Penang people are tight and frequent. Also, these Buddhist societies communicate frequently on social media—on WeChat groups and WhatsApp groups. They ask questions, and Hor Tuck Loon posts newsletters and his latest reflections on *dharma* on these cyber groups to inspire his students and carry on their Buddhist reflections every day. His students also keep asking questions on those cyber group sites. The globalization of religion requires transportable messages and portable practices (Csordas 2009, 4-5) to make religious practice easy to apply to more people, encouraging them to engage more deeply with those practices.

In addition to global connections, regional contacts are frequent in BHS. Several BHS speakers come from elsewhere in Malaysia. Both a prestigious monk and a Wise Qigong Master Hong who lived in Ipoh also gave a lecture on Wise Qigong at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. In this sense, the Hokkien Chinese-speaking angle in Penang in learning Qigong or Buddhism is not that prominent. The development of Wise Qigong

in Penang and BHS creates a globalized Confucian effect and a sense of local Malaysian Chinese feeling.

Malaysian Chinese as both Malaysian and Chinese

Every Malaysian Chinese I met from 2006 to 2016 during various phases of my fieldwork identified themselves not only as a Malaysian citizen but also as a member of a Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia adopting Chinese cultural and religious practices. The BHS instructor Hor Kwei Loon, who speaks Cantonese Chinese at home and English at school and at work, emphasized the importance of Confucian values as the core identity of being Chinese. Professor Tan from the University of Science, Malaysia, once mentioned how some Malay politicians still see Malaysian Chinese as Chinese only, even if they have been Malaysian citizens for two generations. In contrast to Malay politicians' statements that suggest that Malaysian Chinese migrate back to China, Malaysian Chinese, in contrast, identify themselves as Malaysian politically.

Malaysian Chinese's eating habits and language use reflect customs that differ from those of Chinese people in mainland China. Malaysian Chinese have been influenced by Malay, Indian and other cultures in their food and language use. For instance, Malaysian Chinese often blend multiple languages in a sentence—perhaps including Malay, Cantonese Chinese, Hokkien Chinese, Mandarin Chinese, and English. Their food also contains spices and curries influenced by food from ethnic Malays or Thai cuisine. Culturally, however, most Malaysian Chinese adopt a fusion of Buddhism and Daoism, conducting religious practices similar to those of the Han Chinese in China and Taiwan: worshipping the Heavenly God, the Goddess of Mercy, Mazu, and Buddha, other deities from Southeast Asia. From what I observed in the field, Malaysian Chinese

comprise a distinctive group—they adopt Chinese Confucian and religious practices yet they are influenced by religions from India, Thailand, Burma, and the West. They tend to be more open to new ideas and diverse cultural practices as a minority group in Malaysia.

Malaysian Chinese speak Hokkien or Cantonese. They like to blend in various Malay words when demonstrating their understanding of the concepts that inform Wise Qigong as well as in lectures at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. The blending of local languages engenders differing perceptions and worldviews associated with experiencing qigong or meditation classes. According to the Wise Qigong Masters Sung and Wen, who taught in Hong Kong for several years before teaching Wise Qigong in Malaysia, the level of understanding of Chinese in Wise Qigong drops considerably in Malaysia because (1) they lack familiarity with deeper Chinese culture and language immersion, and (2) they do not want to be professional qigong experts and are merely happy with being non-professionals.

My own sources and observations also resonate with Sung and Wen. When I interview Malaysian Chinese, I have the sense that they are restricted by their weak language mastery when they try to express their emotions with sophistication. They tend to use many languages in a sentence, but often find it difficult to grasp deeper essences or describe their emotions and meditation experiences in greater detail. When I was in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, practitioners borrowed terminology from familiar schools to explain what they know about Wise Qigong concepts. Some from Hong Kong had earned degrees in schools in America and the United Kingdom, and they blend psychology or other therapies or even Christian ideas to support and find commonality

with the system they learn through qigong concepts. In Malaysia, however, although some intellectuals can articulate their qigong experience in Chinese or English, in most of my interviews with Malaysian Chinese informants are less sophisticated in expression in describing their qigong experiences and emotions. They also tend to blend in a linguistic mix of phrases to capture what they feel. Overall, I see a decline in facility with language when Malaysian Chinese express their feelings and qigong experiences. I cannot discern whether this is a gap between their experiences or merely a gap in how they express themselves, because the depth of their experiences is limited by their linguistic mastery—or lack thereof.

Outline of Dissertation

I will close this chapter by summarizing the structure and content of the dissertation. To explain how the unconscious desires of Malaysian Chinese are manifested and materialized in Wise Qigong and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary's synthetic traditions, chapter II first reviews the political and social context of Malaysia. Although my dissertation accounts for individual desires and family interactions rather than ethnic politics and conflicts, chapter II serves as the backdrop for the Malaysian Chinese experience where ethnic demarcation in Malaysia is distinctive and thus religious research on Malaysia tends to find correlations between religion and the politico-social environment.⁶

⁶ Malaysia, not having experienced a revolution, has not forged a shared national identity. With the multiple ethnic groups embracing their own cultures and religions, the unified national identity as a collective has its internal opposition. On the one hand, ethnic minorities are proud of their national identity; on the other hand, the state's restrictions on major social welfare programs regarding ethnic other and lower-class citizens creates a sense of displacement, a void that minorities fill with their own cultures and religions. The rift between subjectivity, ethnicity, religion and national identity and social recognition is manifested in religious activities.

Chapter III introduces Wise Qigong, explaining its doctrines, institutional developments since the 1970s-'80s, its particular pattern of branding Wise Qigong's efficacy, its strategies for recruiting intellectuals and peasants, and internal conflicts that arise in the context of institutional development. The chapter reveals a historical pattern and branding position that Wise Qigong continues to use in its contemporary institutional development.

Chapter IV shows how alterity in Wise Qigong's educational approach is learned through a "giant" self-ritual that is repeated every time and that enables the practitioner to transcend his or her suffering as well as physical and mental blockages. Practitioners come to see qi as the best object in the world, an object that confers all sorts of positive transformational energy to the individual. Qigong-learning, the new (restorative) relationship practitioners cultivate with good objects, strengthens inadequate (external) bonding by arranging and organizing an imagined safe haven, a womb in qigong practice.

Chapter IV shows how education under Wise Qigong is conducted to move practitioners from skepticism toward belief and to reaffirm through action the "truth" that the qi would be effective only once they believe in Wise Qigong. This chapter explains how Wise Qigong's doctrine compensates Chinese practitioners for not fulfilling their desires by providing a syncretic cultural system and practice with which to make sense of and navigate their desires and sufferings through a self-controlled lifestyle requiring a negation of desire. Qigong practice helps practitioners fill a psychic void (Keane 2014; Willford 2006; Kleinman 2006) by integrating a new cultural system

to shape a new subjectivity through their new (imagined and real) relationship with the good object. By demonstrating how meaningful Chinese aesthetic experiences are generated, I contribute to research on religious studies by explaining relationships between repressed emotions, desires, and idiosyncratic Chinese cultural expressions in qigong practices in Malaysia.

Chapter V offers a Buddhist version of alterity for YT, the Malaysian Chinese woman, to bridge the gap between the self and the cultural model. The chapter provides a native perspective on why a woman meditates and how she is motivated to end her suffering through negating her desires. The BHS meditators' practice of turning inward centers on values of *vipaka*, or reincarnation, in Buddhism which leads to a certain regime of Buddhist social conduct that YT follows.⁷ *Vipaka* is considered by Buddhists a historical process that forms one's programming for generations. Understanding *vipaka* encourages meditators to unblock a fixated mentality, something that YT calls blockage, that is caused by *vipaka*. However, as YT suggests, the underlying issue with most social suffering is guilt or an ambivalent emotion or a conflict between oneself and social others. By turning inward, YT believes that she will eventually "see things as they are," reaching the end of her suffering while cultivating her ability to see multiple sides of herself formed from her past programming. To free herself from the cultural logics of Chinese Confucian and patriarchal values (Peletz 1997), YT submits herself but at the same time binds herself even more to Buddhist cultural meanings and

⁷ When the dates of meditation retreats conflicted with the Bersih 4.0 movement on August 29-30, 2015, most BHS people attended the retreat. During the retreat, master Hor Tuck Loon also explained that those who registered for the retreat but went to the rally instead were doing good things that generated negative results: they added up negative points to their karma by creating negative emotions within themselves and contributing negative sentiments to the environment.

patriarchy. YT shows how meditators' beliefs and practice of *vipaka* elicit a range of cultural discourses that suit her taste to comprehend her suffering, desires which contribute to her identity construction. I provide an ethnographic case illustrating how the self understands itself by sensing the gap between the cultural model and the self.

In the conclusion, I restate the argument of this dissertation and explain why I have arranged it as I have. In the epilogue, I describe the difficulties I experienced while conducting this research in a general discussion future reference for researchers who find themselves in a similar position to mine.

Time and Limitations

This dissertation was written in a specific time and space that contribute to its own limitations. The majority of my doctoral fieldwork was conducted while Najib Razak was the prime minister of Malaysia. This was a specific moment in time during which Najib's corruption cases became public, and even the Malay population was embarrassed by Najib's corruption. This is a time when the racial quota system, Malay middle-class favoritism, and Najib's leadership together made the Malaysian Chinese in Penang feel deeply dissatisfied. Seven or more of my Malaysian Chinese informants in Penang voiced how unhappy and angry they were with Najib's leadership, and twenty participated in the Bersih movement. However, they want to talk about it only in private in a car or if they are in a public area and speak about it in Chinese in very low voices. Dissatisfaction with Najib's rule was at its height while the practitioners, even though they believe in the karma system and know that anger will increase their karma, are angry and some even chose to participate in the Bersih movement over participating in

a meditation retreat. However, intense dissatisfaction with Malay rule notwithstanding, Penang is a relatively comfortable place for Malaysian Chinese to live compared with other states where ethnic Malays are typically the majority. This puts Penang in a unique place from the standpoint of studying Malaysian Chinese because its Chinese population is in the majority. Also, during my fieldwork most Malaysian Chinese in Penang were quite comfortable with the leadership of the mayor, Lim Guan Eng (林冠英), who encouraged economic development in Penang since 2008.

With the newly elected prime minister of Malaysia, Mahatir, and Finance Minister, Lim Guan Eng, most Malaysians, including Malays and ethnic Chinese alike, are hopeful that economic and ethnic development will accelerate in Malaysia. Future research will address the limitations of this dissertation that were the result of time and space.

CHAPTER II

MALAYSIA CONTEXT

Introduction

This chapter was written before Dr. Mahatir Mohammed was re-elected as the prime minister of Malaysia for the second time, in May 2018. Many Malaysians hoped this would bring transformation to the country. This chapter reviews Malaysian history and the context of ethnic identities and class politics because the ethnic-class divide is a pervasive condition that Malaysians experience in their daily lives. This dissertation focuses most directly on the pursuit of self-help by individuals of Chinese heritage who use healing practices to address their social problems and existential quests.¹ Yet it is impossible to avoid considering the cultural and religious background, which is in many ways defined by differences between distinct ethnic groups and segregation by class. Growing dissatisfaction with the Malay middle-class's political domination is another major factor in the emergence of opposing contingent forces and discourses that have come into play.

This chapter begins with the post-independence period, tracing the events of the May Thirteenth riot and the launch of the New Economic Policy (NEP) that has

¹ My interlocutors in Bodhi Heart Sanctuary (BHS) and Wise Qigong Association are mostly middle-class and upper-class Chinese people. Through the doctrines of Buddhist meditation and Wise Qigong, these Malaysian Chinese find satisfaction more readily than members of other ethnic groups or the lower-class population. That these people continue spending their time and energy practicing meditation and qigong with their groups says much about social distinctions and the development of taste in religious or spiritual consumption in Penang. Therefore, although the alternative healing and spiritual practices that I describe may produce a universal psychological transformation through qigong and Buddhist meditation healing processes, we can learn much about class and ethnicity by observing how these doctrines and practices make sense to middle- and upper-class Malaysian Chinese.

exacerbated the ethno-class divide. I then turn to the emergence of *dakwah*, an Islamic resurgence that has asserted Malay identity while resisting the Malay government's Westernized statecraft and modernization policies (Ong 1995; Peletz 2002). Malaysia attempts to create a distinctive image of a modern "Asian" nation that celebrates religious and cultural differences. In government tourist advertisements, Malaysia is shown to be proud of its diverse cultural and ethnic groups as a means of attracting international tourists. However, according to the Malaysian constitution, the government must prioritize the welfare of middle-class Malays over that of ethnic minorities including Chinese, Indians, and others (Kahn and Loh 1992; Weiss 2006; Mohamad 2013a, 2013b).

Responding to the rise of Malay consciousness and political domination, ethnic Chinese and Indians redirect their suppressed desires and ideas into religious pursuits, which draw them into global networks (Yeoh 2011; Peletz 2013; DeBernardi 2004, 2006; Willford 2013). Their religious pursuits and preferences reflect class distinctions (Willford 2006) and gender differences (Ackerman 2001; Hoffstaedter 2011; Peletz 1995, 1997; Ong 1995). Similarly, Malaysian Chinese pathfinders, through transnational Wise Qigong education and global meditation training in Bodhi Heart Sanctuary (BHS), are concrete examples of the intersection of religious transcendence and global projections. In light of studies of minority religious practices and their relevance to identity politics, this chapter reviews theories of the formation of religious subjectivity. Religious subjectivity is a function of how religious devotees' unconscious desires are manifested through religious activities with social (micro) and

political implications. We begin with the historical context of Malaysia in the post-independence period.

The National Identity, May Thirteenth riot, and the New Economic Policy

Malaysia achieved independence in 1957. Extending the British colonial arrangement, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), led by upper-class Malays, dominated the civil administration, giving special welfare to the bumiputra (Malays). In exchange for the Malays' political preeminence, non-Malays received citizenship and the right to participate in their own cultural and economic activities (Crouch 1996, 21). However, the constitution based its national identity on Malay language and culture as well as Islamic practices (DeBernardi 2004, 1; Hoffstaedter 2011, 25), establishing Malay and English as official languages, a ruling that held until 1967 (Crouch 1996, 23). The UMNO allied with both the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and continued to control political power until the 1969 federal election.

The majority of the Malay population lived in rural areas in the post-independence period, engaging in agriculture and fishing. One of every five city dwellers was a Malay government official. Non-Malays predominated in white-collar occupations and commerce, but the majority of Malays were in the working class (Crouch 1996, 15, 22). As Malays expected the state to advance their economic interests through the UMNO, they were unhappy to see white-collar non-Malays in control of significant portions of the country's economic resources. Moreover, the entry of Singapore into the federation in 1963 added tension to the already unsettling

economic imbalance along ethnic lines (Crouch 1996, 22). Securing ethnic Malays' status as the majority, Tunku Abdul Rahman, then the Malaysian prime minister and head of the UMNO, expelled Singapore from the federation in 1965 (Crouch 1996, 22).

When the National Language Act expired in August, 1967, UMNO supporters suggested making Malay the only national language while the MCA, the MIC, and some non-Malay opposition parties opposed it. Playing to both sides, the prime minister established Malay as the "national" language and English as the "official" language (Crouch 1996, 22). Many non-Malays felt relieved by this result, but many Malays felt they were sold out by the UMNO. Their anger simmered into a communal riot that resulted in twenty-three deaths in Penang in November of the same year (Crouch 1996, 23).

The sensitive issues of language and education continued to simmer during the federal election in 1969. These issues stirred the insecurity of both Malays and non-Malays for fear of the Other's encroachment on "their established rights" (Crouch 1996, 23). The May 10, 1969 election revealed a major shift in Malay votes to Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), the opposition party to the UMNO, in many traditional UMNO areas. In addition, increasing numbers of voters were turning to non-Malay opposition parties: the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which has its origins in the Singapore People's Action Party (PAP), and Gerakan (Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, the Malaysian People's Movement Party), a party in Penang that embraces a multi-communal ideology and remains open to non-Chinese members. The Alliance (UMNO, MCA, MIC) lost at the state level in Penang and experienced declining voter turnout in Perak and Selangor, with its share of the votes dropping from 58.4 percent in 1964

to 48.5 percent in 1969. Although the Alliance still gained most of the votes at the national level, the MCA lost parliamentary seats, dropping from twenty-seven to thirteen. Increasing support for the DAP and Gerakan among ethnic Chinese indicated their disappointment with the MCA (Crouch 1996, 7, 18-19, 23, 48).

On May 12, 1969, supporters of the Gerakan and the DAP held a victory march through Kuala Lumpur, the capital. Their celebration angered UMNO supporters, spawning unprecedented acts of violence, ranging from torching Chinese shops to deadly fights between Malays and Chinese until July (DeBernardi 2004, 1). Official reports listed 172 deaths in Selangor (the state where Kuala Lumpur is located), eleven in Perak, seven in Melaka, four in Negeri Sembilan and one in Terengganu. Among the 196 who were killed, 143 were Chinese and twenty-five were Malays. However, a much higher death toll among the Chinese was listed in unofficial reports (Crouch 1996, 24).

To curb the May Thirteenth violence, the government declared a state of emergency that lasted until 1971, during which time the parliamentary system was suspended and political power was transferred to the National Operations Council (NOC), which was led by the deputy prime minister, Tun Abdul Razak, and other Malay elites, including the leaders of the MCA and the MIC (Loh & Kahn 1992, 1). The Malay elites concluded that the gradual approach to racial questions adopted by Tunku Abdul Rahman was insufficient to secure broad support from Malay voters (Crouch 1996, 24). Shifting to an authoritarian approach, the state intensified its political control over civil issues through the Sedition Act (1971), the Universities and Colleges Act (1971), the Official Secrets Act (1972), and the Printing Presses and

Publication Act (1971). The curtailment of political pluralism manifested even more firmly with the launch of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which granted special privileges ranging from land entitlement to job and university admission quotas, to the mostly Muslim Malays, from 1971 to 1990 (Jomo & Gomez 1997; Means 2009). The National Development Policy (NDF), a continuation of the NEP, was launched during 1991-2000, focusing on economic growth and modern construction, excluding the welfare of the Malay lower class (Hoffstaedter 2011, 25-26; Peletz 1997, 1995, 2002), ethnic Chinese (DeBernardi 2004, 2006), ethnic Indians (Willford 2006, 2013, Kent 2005), and women (Ong 1987, 1995; Hoffstaedter 2011). The aftermath of the May Thirteenth riot has legitimized a governmental system of positive discrimination that affects the ethno-class divide in Malaysian society to this day.

Fragmented Visions: *Dakwah* Reform, the UMNO government, and non-Malays

Competition between the UMNO and the PAS, and the emergence of *dakwah*, a global form of Islamic fundamentalism in Malaysia, were the two movements that most strongly affected the formation of Malay identity in the 1970s (Ackerman and Lee 1988, 55). The UMNO, a Western-influenced party of upper-class elites, has been criticized by the PAS, a political party that strives to establish an Islamic state, and its supporters among the Malay peasantry in Kelantan and elsewhere. Supporters of both the PAS and *dakwah* resisted the development of a Westernized modern Malaysia shaped by the NEP that enriched the Malay middle class, who were seen as corrupt and unethical (Peletz 2002, 9).

Dakwah, the piety movement that calls Muslims back to the faith (Hoffstaedter 2011), was led by several independent groups competing for what it meant to be a Muslim in Malaysia in the late 1960s or early 1970s. In general, *dakwah* expressed Malays' dissatisfaction with the state's modern Westernized policy, the decline of Islamic traditions, upper-class Malay corruption and moral bankruptcy, the impoverishment of the Malay majority, and the economic success of non-Malays (Ackerman and Lee 1988, 55; Peletz 2002, 9; Ong 1995, 174).

Malay consciousness against non-Malays intensified when Mahatir, whose first stint as prime minister ran from 1981 to 2003, envisioned a national culture based on Malay identity, projecting his imagined ideal future for a Malaysian race (*bangsa Malaysia*) (DeBernardi 2004, 124). Mahatir also promoted the idea of making Malaysia a modern Muslim nation as an alternative to Western-style development. His ideas were very well received both in Malaysia and abroad among Muslims (Peletz 2002, 5). In the context of heightened Malay consciousness, the *dakwah's* critique of modernization and Westernization set the tone for the modern state's largely authoritarian Islamization projects (Hoffstaedter 2011). New amendments were passed concerning "the penal and criminal codes . . . that bestowed wider powers on the government in controlling religious dissent" (Ackerman and Lee 1988, 58) to control the direction of the *dakwah* reform.

Merging Islamic discourses with the state's modern economic development, the UMNO state has intensified the reification of ethnic-class boundaries in Malaysia (Willford 2005, 45). As Islam attained its greatest degree of control over social and economic opportunities, non-Muslims' religious activities, with their inward-looking

ideologies, unconsciously resisted Islamic aggression and the ethnic hierarchy (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 6, 37, 155), a topic to be discussed in greater detail in chapters III, IV, and V as well as in the following section.²

Linguistic Differences, Cultural Heterogeneity, and Class Distinctions

Early Chinese immigrants in colonial Malaya from the maritime provinces of southern China “spoke mutually unintelligible dialects and represented distinctive subcultures” (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 58). However, in contemporary Malaysia, Chinese can understand each other whether speaking English, Chinese, Chinese dialects, or Malay. Malaysian Chinese today can be categorized into four groups: those who speak Mandarin and/or Chinese dialects at home; those who speak English at home and might also speak Chinese dialects but are illiterate (cannot read or write) in Chinese; Peranakan Chinese, who do not speak Chinese languages; and Peranakan Chinese who speak Chinese dialects but are illiterate in Chinese (Tan 2004, 104). Recently, many ethnic Chinese worry that Chinese teenagers and children speak only Mandarin Chinese at home and in school, slowing extinguishing Chinese dialects such as Hokkien (widely spoken in Penang) and Cantonese (widely spoken in Kuala Lumpur). Meanwhile, many middle-class ethnic Indians and Malays, especially those with business backgrounds, send their children to Chinese primary schools. Those non-Chinese children are able to speak fluent Mandarin Chinese and can read and write in Chinese. According to my observations of 2014-2015, some could speak a

² Because many people were hopeful that Mahatir would bring change to Malaysia after he was elected prime minister in May 2018, a dramatic transformation of Malaysia’s political and ethnic landscapes might be coming. More information will be released and more research will be conducted to address this issue as time unfolds. This dissertation’s data were collected when Najib Razak’s corruption was exposed in the news.

little Hokkien, as their non-Chinese parents learned how to speak Hokkien with Chinese classmates and colleagues.

Among Malaysian Chinese, English education was popular during colonial times and into the 1960s, as it led to social mobility and economic opportunity. However, the rise of Malay hegemony after 1969 intensified the re-Sinicization movement in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1973, a group of leaders proposed the formation of independent Chinese schools, in which English and Malay would be taught, resisting national school systems that use the Malay language only. Independent Chinese schools were very popular from 1973 to 1986 (DeBernardi 2004, 125), indicating the Penang Chinese's fear of losing Chinese culture in the context of Malay assertiveness.

Independent school systems must still follow state regulations, however, to organize "within the framework of a Malay-dominated educational system" (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 59). Other restrictive issues for Chinese education include a 45% quota for ethnic Malays in college admissions as part of the NEP. Finding it difficult to be admitted to their preferred programs or schools in Malaysia, many Malaysian Chinese students attend universities in Taiwan, Singapore, and the West. Nevertheless, the Malaysian government has never recognized degrees from Taiwanese universities. To make matters worse, the only Chinese university in Singapore, Nanyang University, was closed in 1980, merging its English sections with the National University of Singapore (DeBernardi 2004, 126). Consequently, some talented ethnic Chinese students who studied abroad, especially those who studied in the West during the 1970s and 1980s, never returned to Malaysia, feeling uncertain

whether they could find a place in Malaysian society (DeBernardi 2004, 120). This context shapes the international outlook of Malaysian Chinese even to this day (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 60).

The differences in educational background and language use for social interactions that exist among Malaysian Chinese suggest the heterogeneity of their cultural orientation and identity. Those who speak Mandarin at home are influenced by Chinese philosophy, values, and practices through exposure to Chinese mass media and publications. Those who speak Chinese dialects such as Hokkien or Cantonese at home but speak English in school are also slightly influenced by Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucian values and practices. According to the observations I conducted in 2015, English-educated Chinese see their Chinese-educated compatriots as more “docile,” “coachable,” and “trainable,” prioritizing respect and relationships over individualism and critical thinking. My observations suggest that Chinese-educated Malaysians typically see the English-educated as “bananas,” a metaphor for having a yellowish skin with a white interior (the Western cultural influence). The divide between the English-educated and the Chinese-educated has not proved serious because most share Hokkien as a language in common. However, in terms of reading newspapers and leaving comments on controversial public issues, the divide in readership between English and Chinese newspapers or e-news sites makes it difficult for the Chinese to come together to discuss and comment on the same news platform or to think as a unified, collective Chinese population. Chinese-educated readers read Chinese newspapers while English-educated Chinese read English newspapers. My interviews with a local architect and an assistant at BHS confirm my observation that

the ways in which Malaysian Chinese linguistic divisions are reflected in media factor into the fragmentation of public forums for ethnic Chinese in Malaysia.

In addition, as mentioned above, fewer in the younger generation in Penang speak Hokkien than was once the case. The educational system no longer divides people into English and Chinese schools, but the differences in curriculum between public Malay schools and independent Chinese schools still exists. In the future, younger Chinese in Penang may have to speak English or Malay to each other if they cannot communicate in Chinese or Chinese dialects.

In general, people from mainland China or Taiwan undergo a more culturally and linguistically homogenized socialization process—with Han Sinification as the mainstream standard. In contrast, Malaysian Chinese blends Eastern, Western, and Southeast Asian traditions, shaping them into a creole of cultures that is specific to Southeast Asian Chinese—neither completely Westernized nor Han-Chinese Sinified. Those who preferred to think and act in English enjoyed their immersion in Western cultural forms and practices before 2009, prior to the economic rise of China. However, as China has risen as an economically strong country second only to America, many middle-class English-educated Chinese have started to take Chinese language and philosophy more seriously through religious or healing practices that speak to them. Rather than learning Chinese as a language, the senior generations (approaching or reaching the retirement age of 60) pursue Chinese-related cultural and religious activities to cater to their desire to understand the philosophical aspects or meanings or mission of their lives from the past to the present continuing into the future. For instance, Muichuee, a 75-year-old woman and former primary school

teacher, has started her Chinese/English language exchange with the Wise Qigong Master Kun from China, in Penang. She felt that her inability to read Chinese characters with her own understanding has become a barrier to her advanced training in Wise Qigong.

Chinese-educated Malaysians who also seek to understand the meanings of their lives use primarily Chinese sources in conjunction with English sources. YT, a retired woman in her 50s, also a meditation group leader from BHS, read widely in both languages, from books on *dharma* to TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks or prestigious religious presentations on YouTube. She may use English and Chinese in a non-standard way, conventionally perceived as fragmented sentences or as violating conventional standards of grammar. She has opened two linguistic windows to expand her knowledge so as to better understand her situation philosophically and physically.

Both English- and Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese are a far cry from the Chinese in China or Taiwan (Tan 2004), although some may hold a Taiwanese bachelor's degree and most of them watch television shows from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China for leisure.

Although the varied language preferences among the Malaysian Chinese have “produced a highly fragmenting linguistic and cultural complexity” (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 60), most non-Peranakan Chinese (i.e., English- or Chinese-educated Chinese) identify themselves as non-Malays and non-Muslims in a Malay-dominated country. As more than 90% of the Chinese population see themselves as Buddhists,

they have vaguely shared a religious identity in Malaysia (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 60), albeit with class distinctions.

Through spiritual practices, many middle-class Chinese can express their desired cultural identity (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 13). Some Chinese-educated believers studied Buddhism through the teachings of an English-educated meditation master to gain “Anglophone” experiences (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 65), while the English-educated master of The Goddess of Mercy Devotional Society (GMDS) underwent re-Sinification surrounded by Chinese Mandarin-speaking worshippers (Ackerman 2001). By re-Sinification, I mean learning Chinese culture, Chinese religion, or Chinese language through the window of Chinese religious activities with Mandarin Chinese speakers.

As in the abovementioned examples, Chinese believers often choose Buddhist societies based on personal choices embedded in the socio-political context that best reflects their tastes, which are shaped by their social statuses and backgrounds. Accordingly, Buddhist syncretism and meditation have appealed to university graduates because spiritual experiences resonate with their interest in developing higher consciousness of the “human potential movement” (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 75). Similarly, Chinese businessmen have found hope in Tibetan tantric Buddhist rituals that promise to bring health, prosperity and protection to them (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 71-72), while Chinese women and children have sought help from Guanyin because of her non-discriminative response to distress.

The Baitiangong movement, a middle-class religious group that worships the heavenly father in Kuala Lumpur, also demonstrates the connection between believers’

desires and socio-political context. Mr. Zhao, the leader of the Baitiangong movement and a former marginal member of the MCA, translated Malaysian Chinese's "political satisfactions into a religious message" (Ackerman and Lee 1988, 150). He synthesized an eclectic discourse in Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, providing a new vista of "ideological innovation" (Ackerman 2001, 296) that resonated with followers' socio-political fantasies at the juncture of the political void post-May Thirteenth.

Influenced by local politico-economic dynamics (Tan 2004), the Hungry Ghost Festival, a territorial religious activity that started in 1974, mobilizes grassroots Penang Chinese "to construct a political revitalization that [addresses] the community's collective anxieties" (DeBernardi 2004, 128, 156). However, the appreciation of this activity on the part of lower-class Penang Chinese who are "less educated [and] non-Anglicized" (DeBernardi 2004, 126) marks a class distinction. The Chinese middle class, especially English speakers, despised The Hungry Ghost Festival, seeing it as superstitious and wasteful, bringing pollution and chaos to the city, as they are more interested in spiritual salvation.

Practitioners of the Wise Qigong Association and meditators in BHS fall into this Chinese middle-class population, comprised mostly of former school teachers, former employees of international high technology companies, and professionals such as lawyers, accountants, and former employees of local banks. They range in age from 45 to 80 years. Many are empty nesters as their children have married and formed new families. Most of Wise Qigong and BHS qigong and meditation practitioners face difficulties related to ageing, wondering how to improve their next lives, and motivating them to practice Buddhist meditation to secure a better next life. Some

suffer declining health or energy, or even chronic sickness, and thus hope to find ways or an elixir to relieve the mental and physical pain. There is a pervasive sense of feeling lost in their lives as they transition into a retirement lifestyle with ageing bodies, unsure of what they might become in the future. The social support and deep cultural meanings they draw from qigong and Buddhist meditation provide cultural aesthetics and Chinese philosophical embodiment to the practitioners.

Even though Malaysian Chinese are immersed in a diverse and interactive linguistic and ethnic world that distinguishes them from the mainstream Han Chinese ecology in Taiwan or mainland China, an underlying commonality of Confucian influence affects Malaysian Chinese, Taiwanese and Chinese in mainland China and elsewhere in the world. Cultural differences on the surface do not affect the deeper psychological structure and forms of attachments in family interactions under Confucianism. Family interactions between parents and children, mothers and sons, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, fathers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are directed to conform to what constitutes proper behavior in Confucian teachings. One's position with oneself, one's family, and with one's nation are taught and internalized as a standard, customized way that Chinese individuals are urged to follow. Children are educated to develop an indebted sense of respect for the elderly, putting one's contingent desires behind historical and social responsibilities. The suppression of the individual for a greater common good is revealed in religious practices.

As we will see in chapter V how YT reconciles her guilt toward her daughter and her hate for her mother-in-law through Buddhist meditation, in this chapter we

review how Taiwanese mothers empower themselves through religious worshipping—a cultural logic that projects one’s agency onto *ling*, an abstract “imagined” existence/substance based on a believer’s firm faith. The internal logic of Chinese people’s religious psyches and physical symptoms of psychology are analyzed in the next section.

Chinese Ideology, Gender Roles, and Religious Subjectivity

Just as Malaysian Chinese turn to religion for emotional sanctuary and expressions of cultural identity under state denial of the ethnic hierarchy, so Taiwanese women, feeling rejected by Chinese patriliney, transform their social frustrations into empowerment through religion. With faith in *ling* (magical power), Taiwanese worshippers project their agency onto *ling*. In this sense, they make *ling* efficacious. Moreover, their projections of individual power onto *ling* help them transcend their ordinary selves and daily strife to reach an otherworldly place from which they derive a new perspective with a sacred validation that generates determined hearts. In this way, they make themselves powerful through worshipping. Believer’s sincerity is therefore both the cause and the effect of *ling*, a process that Sangren (2000) calls alienation. In addition, Taiwanese mothers also misrecognize their inner power as an external spiritual energy, and thus they are alienated from their productive value. However, the misplaced value of *ling* enables believers to experience the authenticity of their “individual value and identity” (Sangren 1987, 203) that induces their actions in real life. In most cases, worshippers seek worldly improvements, i.e., political and material power, in a mystical form. Sangren writes:

I return to the argument that individual pilgrims are impelled on their quests not by a presumed universal (i.e. acultural) desire for *communitas*, but for a culturally particular kind of power. In the case of Chinese pilgrimages like those to Pei-kang, this “power” encompasses such notions as *ling*. An important benefit of gaining greater conceptual control of culture is that it provides a means for authenticating one’s individual value and identity in cultural terms—that is, a means of acquiring a cultural “hero myth” that perpetuates a sense of individual power. Moreover, this power can confer obvious political advantages in manipulating the symbols that legitimate authority. Thus power that is magical (*ling*), in the sense that its genesis in social relations is mystified, can actually become power as we tend to think of it in more material terms. Such magical power can function as social power precisely because both types of efficacy have the same culturally mystified social origin. (Sangren 1987, 203; my underlying emphasis)

Recalling Sangren’s idea of alienation to explain the mechanism whereby faith misrecognizes the source of power, making the effect the cause and vice versa, some senior Wise Qigong instructors explain alienation of religious worship using their own theory of qi. When worshippers firmly believe the efficacy of worshipping or kowtowing to a statue of Buddha, they are projecting their previous inner energy onto the statue, rendering the value of the statue extrinsic to the statue itself. The value of the statue comes from the agent’s intrinsic power, which projects a highly elevated sense of value onto the statue.

Moreover, as most qigong practitioners consider qigong a hidden treasure of Chinese traditional culture, qigong is seen as undervalued. However, most qigong practitioners come to rely on qigong because of a life crisis—a physical illness or an identity crisis that involves losing a sense of direction or of one’s purpose in life—and the aesthetics of qigong, in a sophisticated synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, provide “a means for authenticating one’s individual value and identity in cultural terms” (Sangren 1987, 203).

As we will see in chapter IV, the “giant” image of themselves that Wise Qigong practitioners conjure up before every session allows them to feel and experience a “hero” self-projection that provides inner power. This inner power in turn activates social connections—a practice that extends oneself to the universe, connecting with social others. Although many senior Wise Qigong instructors agree that Wise Qigong functions like a religious induction into an individual faith, they disagree that qi comes from a “culturally mystified social origin” (Sangren 1987, 203). Nevertheless, as Wise Qigong’s qi is seen as more efficacious than any other energy source, particularly because the source of Wise Qigong’s qi, *hunyuan* qi, the blended or synthesized qi (混元氣), comes from unified oneness. They consider *hunyuan* qi the most original energy arising before the yin and the yang were divided. From a cultural analyst’s viewpoint, *hunyuan* qi could represent a mystified social origin for qigong practitioners. Moreover, Wise Qigong’s theory utilizes Laozi’s texts while Daoist philosophy creates “legitimate authority” by “manipulating the symbols” of Chinese culture (Sangren 1987, 203).

Extending from insightful theorization of the mechanism of Chinese faith, my research provides ethnographic data in detail, describing the process through which Malaysian Chinese people manipulate cultural symbols, traditions, and philosophies to “authenticate [their] value and identity in cultural terms” (Sangren 1987, 203). Yet, as I study Malaysian Chinese’s faith process, local diversity in culture, language, and ethnicity brings unique attributes to the formation and healing of a qigong meditator’s social suffering. The two ethnographic cases in this dissertation extend the range not

only of Chinese studies (of Chinese in the diaspora) but also of Malaysian or Southeast Asian studies (of Malaysian Chinese) in general.

The basis of a religious healing clinic's treatment of a physical ailment are signals of discomfort in the body that indicate hidden complaints in patients' social relations (Kleinman 1980). Physical pain and complaints are somatic symptoms derived from emotional pain and social suffering. Taiwanese patients treat spiritual healing services as an indirect way of symbolically removing their psychological obstacles through a mechanism that is akin to psychotherapy (Sangren 2000, 2017, Kleinman 1980). Treatment of such psychological obstacles, or blockages, involves addressing patients' anxiety by providing confirmation to the uncertain self. The strengthening of faith itself makes an agent more certain of a desired outcome.

Ritual and social support also strengthen a patient's faith in the possibility of mending the gap between the present and an expected outcome. In addition, social gatherings and ritual participation decrease one's sense of anomie (Durkheim 1951) or alienation from social others. This resonates with what Sangren (1987) calls the "dialectics of sincerity as alienation and as production." The more sincere and faithful one is to a religion, the more one is alienated; the more sincere and faithful one is to a religion, the more living one produces because he misrecognizes the power that lies elsewhere rather than in himself. This is a process of alienation that helps the agent produce more for the mystical social origin, forgetting that his contingent consciousness is the agency through which to act out historical continuations with new meanings.

I am not using “alienation” in the Marxist sense of consciousness or other Marxist concepts that attribute many phenomena to a kind of ideological formation. Rather, I mean that qigong practitioners themselves produce a kind of transcendent power which from the Marxist standpoint is misrecognized because misrecognition of the social production of the transcendent allows for partial recognition of the symbolically transcendent. It allows a dynamic yet alluring and desirable aspirational goal without necessarily recognizing its social origin. It is that hidden social dimension that adds to its mystical or sublime quality.

As we will see in chapters III and IV, Wise Qigong shows that practitioners must firmly believe in qigong. The stronger one’s faith is, the more likely the desired outcome is to occur. Sincerity plays a key role in the formation of faith and the efficacy of *ling* through one’s strivings and conduct. Sincerity is a manifestation of authentic faith in believers. Sangren says:

Sincerity . . . thus plays a crucial role in the expropriation of value. In the cases of devout women, the value constituted by their domestic productivity, in the broadly conceived sense employed here, is not only presented as a gift from the gods, but in addition the entire nexus depends upon women’s *active* production in consciousness of the alienating structure that facilitates this expropriation of value. . . .

In sum, the complex rhetoric of *lingyan*, worship, testimony and fulfillment of vows is not only a means by which the value of women’s productivity is expropriated to be redeployed to other ends, but women are also key producers of the structure for this expropriative process. Moreover, the entire expropriative process is itself productive in the sense that local territorial cults and wider pilgrimage networks are among its products. The ‘surplus value’ expropriated from domestic arenas of production makes these wider social solidarities possible. (Sangren 2000, 174)

In the above passage Sangren mentions that “. . . women are . . . key producers of the structure for this expropriative process” (Sangren 2000, 174). The “surplus value expropriated from domestic arenas of production makes these wider social solidarities possible” (Sangren 2000, 174). The surplus represented by women’s contribution to patriarchal society is undervalued. According to Sangren, this is the driver of alienation manifested in the religious craze in Taiwanese mothers.

The engine of Chinese social productivity, reflected in how worshippers misrecognize their source of empowerment, lies in women’s “polluted” labor (Sangren 2000, 1983). Women’s status as “polluted” explains why women are treated as inferior to men. The Chinese social stigma of women as a weaker counterpart is projected through the ideal female role in female deities. The three Chinese female deities, Guanyin, Mazu, and Eternal Mother, as mothers of all humanity who are like Chinese mothers, provide ways to circumvent paternal authority and social obstacles, if one asks with a pure heart. However, unlike male deities who, like real-life bureaucrats, can be bribed, the three female deities skip wifhood to practice only motherhood, maintaining their purity while Chinese women are considered polluted in real life. The implication is, as Sangren suggests, that being a wife and mother is to be polluted in Taiwanese eyes, because of her expansive ties holding space for her and her son (known as the uterine family) in the patrilineal system to secure her motherhood and social position in the family into which she marries in being treated at least in part as an outsider by the mother-in-law, yet being asked to contribute and fulfil social responsibilities that prioritize the husband’s parents and relatives over her own parents and relatives. A mother’s name cannot be included in an ancestor’s worship unless she

has a son to support her existence in the family both while she is alive (materially and socially) and after she passes away (symbolically and socially). Motherhood, the effort to create space for the mother and her child, stands in contrast to the paternal blood line, extending the lineage in time. Because motherhood's contribution is not valued in the patriarchy, the mother is driven to strengthen her ties with her children (sons in particular) to survive in the patriarchal system. Sangren writes:

Just as mother-son coalitions bring about the eventual overthrow of patriarchal authority in the family, so, too, alliances between the Eternal Mother and her children bring recurring rebellion to the Chinese state. But family division does not bring an end to patriliney any more than successful rebellion brings an end to the bureaucratic, hierarchical structure of the Chinese state; for, while the metaphor of uterine coalitions provides a model for rebellion, it lacks a corresponding model for an alternative structure of authority. (Sangren 1983, 22)

Mother-son coalitions as well as person-divine coalitions enable females to create space with legitimacy. The space compensates for the missing space of social recognition by mothers. Mothers' power and social value are undermined as "a counterpart less than the males" in the patrilineal system (Sangren 1983). Mother-son and person-divine coalitions also provide space for social acknowledgment and recognition of mothers. However, most literature on the Chinese uterine family (mother-son relations and power play patriarchy) focuses on female resistance, "a model for [female] rebellion" (Sangren 1983, 22) or "eventual overthrow of patriarchal authority in the family" (Sangren 1983, 22), but does not provide ethnographic cases through which to understand how a mother's emotional entanglements occur at ground level. As we will see in chapter V, YT, a Malaysian Chinese mother in her 50s, with her deep inward-oriented reflection of her emotions

under Buddhist meditation training, describes her guilt toward her daughter and her hate toward her mother-in-law through her self-reflections in our interview. Moreover, the anxiety and confusion she expressed toward her mother-in-law and her guilt toward her daughter could be eased according to her as she transfers those negative emotions into her passionate pursuit of Buddhism and meditation practice.

In other words, meditation helps her to look inward earnestly by following the rule of reincarnation to earn a special kind of social recognition or acknowledgment. Her deepest fear and feelings of not being heard and seen as a female in a patriarchal system are revealed through her inward reflections during meditation. This is a unique space she holds for herself for social negotiations in the patrilineal system through inward-looking Buddhist meditation practice—“an alternative structure of authority” (Sangren 1983, 22)—emphasizing strivings in the next life accumulated from past lives. The Buddhist belief structure again resembles traditional patriarchy—it may help YT cope with social obstructions and patrilineal frustrations (as YT sees it) because Chinese religious practices empower believers to manage social relationships in a culturally acceptable way. Paradoxically, however, it may also negate women’s and agents’ (innate) power through religion (Sangren 2000).

Considering the paradoxical relationship between the productive force and social denial in Chinese culture and the subtle ways in which Chinese worshippers bargain for their agency through divine healing (Sangren 2000; Kleinman 1980), I suggest that to realistically capture Chinese mediation of identity politics we have to observe how Chinese actors, male and female, cope with social obstructions and

patrilineal frustrations psychologically and interactively from the perspective of meditators' intimate reflections on their emotions.

We will see in chapters III, IV, and V how “an alternative structure of authority” in the formation of religion is explored by Malaysian meditators by drawing on a bricolage of religious knowledge and practices, ranging from Global Buddhism to New Age religions to Christianity and alternative qigong healing or Chinese medicine, a tendency in Malaysian Chinese's particular pursuits in religious syncretism to overcome social denial (Ackerman and Lee 1997). Before we discuss syncretism, we will see how Chinese communities obtain flexible identities.

Chinese imagined communities: flexible identities, religious repertoire, and (g)localization

Transnational studies reorient the perspectives of national and single-locality studies (Tan 2007, 4). Transnationalism de-territorializes connections between people, their identification with a certain lifestyle, and the desires to belong to a place or community. With the invention of the airplane, the Internet, new forms of entertainment and media such as the international movie and music industry, contemporary people encounter people from other places more frequently than ever. This opens up new connections, options, and patterns for creating a desired self that once was anchored in a customary local role. Ong and Nonini (1997) provide a framework for seeing Chinese transnationalism as an alternative modernity, an outcome of transformations forged by global capitalism. They point out the three regimes that influence behavior to benefit state regimes through “the localization of

disciplinable subjects” (23): family, workplace, and the nation-state. However, in response to such formative powers, individuals have lifestyle options. They view the individual as a blend of simultaneously distinct identities that “[depend] on particular circumstances and the configuration of social relations that constitute our everyday world” (25). This point resonates with Leach’s (1970) idea of shifting identities: Kachin and Shan actors, perceiving the political and economic structure in which they worked, adjusted their behavior to reflect cultural expectations in distinct contexts to manipulate their control of power and raise their status through dress, ritual, language, story-telling, etc. Leach breaks away from structuralism’s idea that social structure parallels actors’ behaviors by showing how people shift their identities to their advantage in real-life scenarios.

Arguing for a view that resembles Leach’s shifting identity, Ong and Nonini (1997) view how actors or subalterns play to their strengths using global media, connections, and imagination under regime restraints. Nonini (1997) suggests looking at how Chinese agents of diverse classes, ages, and gender categories enact agency by exploiting others through patriarchal cultural logics as well as how they are exploited by larger regimes such as the nation-state, class distinctions, ethnic politics, etc. For instance, Malaysian Chinese businessmen enacted Chinese patriarchal hierarchical logics to strengthen their *guanxi* networks and transnational resources to gain flexibility and strategies in the face of “economic constraints with the cultural politics of ethnicity and citizenship in Malaysia” (Nonini 2003, 75).

In addition, modern Chinese agency exercised through national structures also includes obtaining multiple nationalities to live in other countries without embracing a

regular identity (Ong 1999; Tan 2004, 24). Nonini and Ong (1997) and Ong (1999) all suggest the importance of mobile, multiple, and alternative subjects of the Chinese diaspora who play with diverse cultural fragments within a range of contexts. That is to say, there are “multiple subjective senses of Chinese-ness that appear to be based not on the possession of some reified Chinese culture but on a propensity to seek opportunities elsewhere, a spatial projection of economic and social desires across geopolitical divides, and a bricolage with different modes of political inclusion and exclusion” (Nonini and Ong 1997, 26). This perspective dis-embeds actors from a local regime’s subjectification and national restrictions: Chinese actors seem able to stay “at arm’s length” from various regimes’ “enclosure” (Scott 2010). This implies an agent-centered viewpoint that critiques Chinese parochial values that define Chinese-ness insofar as so many overseas Chinese adopt new ways of assimilation and integration into localities that provide variations on (g)localized Chinese culture.³

³ There are various degrees of integration of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries due to state policy. Vietnam challenges Chinese loyalty and uses drastic approaches such as putting political goals ahead of economic gain led by Chinese businessmen (Suryadinata 2007, 17). Brunei utilizes exclusion to make it difficult for ethnic Chinese to obtain citizenship and a large number of them remain alien. The Malaysian Chinese comprise the largest population in Southeast Asian countries besides Singapore. The Malaysian government follows a hybrid Islamic policy that protects Malays’ welfare, which in turn excludes ethnic Chinese. Ethnic Chinese in Singapore comprise the largest ethnic population there. Singapore uses cultural pluralism to maintain its boundary and preserve the identity of each ethnic group (ibid: 21). However, Singaporean Chinese differ from their PRC (People’s Republic of China) or Taiwanese counterparts because of Westernization and Southeast Asianization (ibid: 21).

I do not include any ethnography or historiography related to Singapore in this dissertation because ethnic Chinese comprise the majority in Singapore and I intend to discuss minority status in Southeast Asia. The state policy in Singapore is to secure the welfare of its ethnic Chinese population (Heng and Devan 1995). However, research on contemporary Singapore also focuses on Westernization/modernization, national fears, and technological advancement. Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia adopt an ethnic assimilation approach to ethnic Chinese. Filipino Catholicism and Thai Buddhism make Chinese assimilation easier because Chinese culture is closer to those religions. That is not the case, however, for Vietnam. Despite many similarities between Vietnamese and Chinese culture, political leaders

Flexible citizenship does not apply, however, to most ethnic Chinese as people usually live in one locality or, if they live transnationally, they do not emphasize any home as more important. Citizenship is not the only indicator of one's national loyalty or cultural belonging, as more and more people are free from state ideology and nationalism (Tan 2004, 24). Ethnic Chinese in Malaysia in the 1960s, for instance, can be politically categorized into three groups—A, B, and C (Wang 1970). Group A retained strong ties with China and identified themselves as Chinese both politically and culturally; Group B was more pragmatic in making a prosperous living and as long as financial and familial stability are tolerable they appear to be quite indifferent to political or public matters; members of Group C were uncertain of their identities but were committed to some kind of Malay identities such as Nyonya-Baba or Peranakan Chinese. However, until the 2000s, very few ethnic Chinese in Malaysia remained in Group A. Most ethnic Chinese would be in Group B, with the Peranakan Chinese in Group C.

Linguistically, Chinese in Malaysia fall into several categories: Chinese (dialect) speakers who are literate in Chinese, Chinese (dialect) speakers who are illiterate in Chinese, Peranakan Chinese who neither speak nor are literate in Chinese, and Peranakan Chinese who speak a Chinese dialect but are illiterate in Chinese (Tan 2004:104). These four patterns of cultural assimilation are local variants of Chinese-ness. Even those who fall into the first type are a far cry from Chinese in China or Taiwan. Tan depicts their religious *pudu* worship (the Hungry Ghost Festival) as an expression of communal identity influenced by local politico-economic dynamics. He

conducted an anti-Chinese campaign for political gain in 1978, which resulted in tragedy for ethnic Chinese in Vietnam (Suryadinata 2007, 26–27).

sees localization manifested in active participation, “the process of becoming local, which involves cultural adjustment to a local geographical and social environment, and identifying with the locality” (23–24).

With a similar perspective on Malaysian Chinese, DeBernardi (2004) shows how ethnic Chinese in Penang settled using religion as a politico-cultural means of asserting their cultural identity in initiation rites of the Chinese Sworn Brotherhoods in the colonial era and the Hungry Ghost Festival in post-colonial times. DeBernardi critiques the contemporary Malaysian government’s unfair treatment of ethnic minorities by paralleling colonial and contemporary interactions between colonial governors/contemporary leaders and Chinese. She juxtaposes riots against the British in 1857 (i.e., the Penang Riots) (DeBernardi 2004, 43) with those against the Malay on May 13, 1969 (to which I have referred as the May Thirteenth riots; see DeBernardi 2004, 114). English colonial officers tolerated the local Chinese from 1800 to 1890. Nevertheless, around 1857 they attempted to control public spaces in the city by dismantling “superstitious” and “irrational” Chinese practices, which led to the Penang Riots. Following the riots, the Chinese were granted religious liberty and “freedom of religious expression” (DeBernardi 2004, 48), but tension between the British rulers and Chinese secret societies continued, which “led to the suppression of the secret Sworn Brotherhoods in 1890” (DeBernardi 2004, 53). The riots of 1969 (DeBernardi 2004, 114) exemplify how the Malay government promoted ethnic nationalism (DeBernardi 2004, 112) to protect Malay welfare and repress non-Malays. The results of the riots shaped the new “racialized” government and the NEP (DeBernardi 2004, 119).

DeBernardi (2006) sees religion as both an embodiment of and an adjustment to history—on the one hand, Penang Chinese religious practices are products of history through a legacy of religious traditions; on the other hand, its fictive origins and creativity make it a historical invention. She also discusses the relationship between the individual Chinese spirit medium and history, a constant theme in Southeast Asian scholarship. She points out that “Chinese spirit mediums are bricoleurs who synthesize the doctrines and innovate ritual performances” (DeBernardi 2006, 9). This implies that religious practices are also used as a vehicle through which individual spirit mediums profit and gain influence (DeBernardi 2006, 294) in addition to serving as expressions of political and cultural identities. Moreover, religion is always in the making through conversations between the past, present and future as well as between the Chinese and the modern world, and it continues to express Chinese collective identities in Penang (Debernadi 2006, 293; 2004, 219). Debernadi (2004, 2006) describes how, based mostly on colonial officers’ records that express a Euro-centric point of view, the Chinese people in Penang have localized and settled from the colonial era (1800–1890) to the present.

In contrast, using mostly Malaysian Chinese merchants’ records, Wu (2003) shows how Malaysian Chinese merchants and their family networks strategically collaborated with a Malay sultanate and British colonialism between 1882 and 1909. The Chinese family business category reflects Chinese immigrants’ pattern of organization using *kongsi* to connect cultural, ethnic, and religious networks for economic benefit based on fictive kinship such as marital and fraternal ties. Rather than focusing on religious expression, Wu looks at the economic formation of Chinese

merchants as sojourners in Southeast Asia and the contingent processes of interactions with British colonial officials and Siamese and Malay sultans who contributed to economic development in the modern Malaysian state. Although Wu treats ethnicity as a bounded phenomenon without considering complexities and heterogeneity, his work on trans-border networks demonstrates how de-territorialized networks among and relations between ethnic groups, economic and political camps such as Chinese family connections, Malay sultanates, and British officers could have come into play contingently, transforming Malaysian history at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Similarly, touching on how Chinese business networks in Southeast Asia organized across regions based on family ties and connections, Cochran (2006), within the framework of (g)localization, describes how Southeast Asian medicine packaging carves out a space for the pharmaceutical business by borrowing Western technology in combination with local cultural advantages for product promotion to compete against Western-based drug companies in the wake of the Japanese military invasion and occupation of China. Western print technology and cross-regional Chinese business networks helped create attractive product packaging for Chinese drug companies in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Religious Subjectivity in Malaysian Chinese: Syncretism and Innovation

The mentality of embracing an international outlook among Malaysian Chinese emerged as early as 1969, post-May Thirteenth (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 61). Being institutionally marginalized in Malaysia, ethnic Chinese strategize to connect with

external (international) networks to secure their economic position domestically. In addition to generating business networks, international connections also bring social support that meets emotional needs through bonding with communities in foreign countries as well as achieving prestige within the local network. Even without substantial material gains, bonding with communities in foreign countries and thereby maintaining a high international profile fulfills a sense of achievement or feeds the vanity of those who elevate their social status in the local Malaysian Chinese network to this day.

During my preliminary fieldwork in 2012, members of both the BHS in Penang and a youth church in Kuala Lumpur enthusiastically welcomed their international visitors as a token of the host organizations' prestige. My interactions with Malaysian Chinese during my fieldwork in 2014-2016 also support this observation: Mrs. Fong, the station leader of Guolin Qigong, and Loon, the qigong female healer, both welcome international visitors because bringing in international visitors and showing them around to visit family or friends enables the women to demonstrate their pride in being connected to an international network. A Malaysian Chinese man in his forties who studied in Taiwan also agreed with my observation when I explained to him that I observed a sense of subtle pride among my Malaysian Chinese friends in their local communities for "showing off" their international connection. A demonstration of being connected to an international network in the local community is a reward in itself because it increases local prestige. Because of this motivation, Malaysian Chinese are open to meeting new people, learning new languages, and understanding foreign cultures. This phenomenon implies that Malaysian Chinese are open to new

knowledge systems that they incorporate to secure their social status, achieve economic gains, and build political capital to survive in Malaysia.

Although Southeast Asian people appear to be flexible in incorporating global discourses and multiple cultures, they do so in a strategic way to support self-formation rather than passively receiving all external forces as they are. As we will see in chapters III, IV, and V, the relationship with qi or Buddha that Chinese devotees in Penang cultivate provides a perspective or ideology based on which to design what the devotees believe to be a more meaningful life and through that to become better people. The interactive mode of selection is key in the process, although it may be driven by mystical origins through a mechanism of alienation from the outside. From the inside, their sincerity and passion-driven reliance on qi or Buddha's wisdom provides external support and legitimacy in the formation of an ideal self. Global discourse, unbounded by geography and origin, provides flexible international symbols that devotees select and use to secure their social status, elevating their economic and political positions in their families, society, and global communities.

Religious syncretism in Malaysia among Chinese communities in BHS is more diverse, drawing on languages and cultures from East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Tibet), Southeast Asia (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, and Singapore), the West (the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) while the religious syncretism in China of Wise Qigong blends Chinese philosophies (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism) and biomedicine with Western science and psychology.

Several factors contribute to Malaysian Chinese's flexibility toward multiple cultures and global discourses. First, the diverse ethnic environment in Malaysia allows Malaysians to immerse themselves in multiple cultures—the various languages these ethnic groups speak also expose Malaysians to unfamiliar worldviews. Second, Malaysia's geographical location along key sea routes between India and China makes global interactions frequent and available. For instance, this global influx brings about hybrid forms of local customs. For example, “Thai Theravada temples in Malaysia readily adopt Mahayana elements to accommodate Chinese devotees” (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 62). Moreover, in the Malaysian Buddhist movement, there are several meditation traditions: Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana from Tibet, Taiwan, Thailand, Burma and the West (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 67). In BHS, they also invite Buddhist organizations globally, including Buddhist instructors from Taiwan, Korea, Tibet, Thailand, Canada, America, China, Burma, Sri Lanka, etc.

Malaysian Chinese have used Religious syncretism as a strategy with which to form their subjectivity. During colonial times, English-educated Chinese in Penang synthesized Western rationality and Chinese religious values (DeBernardi 2004). In 1990, middle-class Chinese in the Buddhist movement also blended the two worlds of “the disenchanted and the enchanted” (Ackerman 2001; Ackerman and Lee 1997, 80). Some lay Buddhists found commonality between spiritual meditation and psychotherapy, seeing both as ways of “psychic transformation” toward “personal development” through “consciousness expansion” (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 73, 74). Some used their practical skills and worldly experiences to promote Buddhist practices in Malaysia.

This last observation is still valid in 2016 in Penang, as local middle-class lay devotees rely on their work experience in business to promote qigong and Buddhist industry as passionate agents for qigong masters or monks they follow devoutly. In chapter III, we will see how a local qigong leader, Peng Chew, with his Harvard University bachelor's degree in science, promotes the teachings of Master Yi, a prestigious qigong master visiting Malaysia annually for a month, by holding local press conferences to broadcast and advertise Master Yi's healing clinic sessions. BHS activities are also organized by laypeople who have worked in the corporate world. Retired middle-class employees who are devoted to Buddhism or qigong possess the practical skills, access to funding, and creative strategy needed to promote qigong or Buddhism to the general public more effectively than the monks, nuns, or qigong masters (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 81). The Chan couple, retired Acer managers, and the Hein couple, retired school teachers, are involved with BHS activities such as meditation retreats, Buddhism study groups, life-liberating events, visits to retirement homes, receiving donations and giving out scholarships to students and stipends to poor families in Penang. They are also in charge of hosting visiting monks and guests from foreign countries who come to lecture at BHS. These middle-class devotees have the practical knowledge needed to run Buddhist and qigong activities and make social events more popular among people from their network.

In 2014, advances in technology increased the frequency and intensity with which Buddhist societies connect to each other. Affiliation with a closed group in cyberspace on social media such as Facebook or WeChat or WhatsApp creates an imagined community that increases devotees' solidarity. The Internet conversations

improve one's understanding of practice, while advertisements of classes, healing effects, and international conferences enable group members to communicate with each other on a daily basis.

We can see Malaysian Chinese innovativeness from two perspectives. Weber and the British colonial officers in Penang saw Chinese syncretism as irrational and superstitious, a view which was paradoxically shared among the Chinese middle-class in Malaysia (DeBernardi 2004). Contrastingly, Ackerman and Lee (1997) and DeBernardi (2004) see Chinese syncretism as a creative alternative that pushes against the limits of rationalization that suppress interpersonal contacts (Ackerman and Lee 1997, 12). Malaysian Chinese religious innovations indicate a unique form of agency juxtaposing both subtle subversions and reiterations of the old system to create a new outlook (Sangren 1983; DeBernardi 2006) against the backdrop of the state's discriminatory ethnic policies. To better understand how Chinese in Penang express their unconscious desires through religious pursuits, we need a broader comprehension in reference to Tamil religious revitalization, to which we now turn.

Historical Displacements, Racial Categories, and Global Transcendences

Turning from state denial caused by the racial hierarchy to religious recognition, the Malaysian Tamils displace their need for an authentic place through spiritual transcendence and global projections. Their need for religious confirmation reveals their desire for political and social recognition that has been suppressed by the racial demarcation and the state's past disassociation from the Malay-Indian affiliation (Willford 2006, 281). The state's use of Sanskrit/Malay words to name domestically

produced cars to promote sales to the ethnic Indians reaffirms their historical, cultural and linguistic associations. The Malay government, as Willford suggests, attempts to transcend a modern nationalist Malaysia by concealing their connections to Indians. In response to the state's negation and stigmatization, middle-class Tamils distinguish themselves from "backward" working-class Tamils, separating themselves from the working class's "superstitious" (Thaipusam) religious practices whose doctrines they also embrace.

Relations between the Malay state and ethnic Tamils parallel relations between middle-class Tamils and working-class Tamils. As "masters" distancing their "subordinates" by denying the commonalities they share and stigmatizing the Other as backward, superstitious, and filthy (polluted),⁴ both the Malay state and middle-class Tamils attempt to place themselves in a higher hierarchy. The Othering process, or boundary-keeping between the self and the Other, is necessary for the formation of self-identity. However, similarities that the self rejects as it reluctantly finds itself and the Other generate an uncanny feeling that is stirringly disturbing because the self cannot fully negate the Other: the formation of self-identity needs recognition and confirmation from the Other. Therefore, while "masters" dissociate themselves from their "subordinates," they are also caught up in the desire to be recognized by the "subordinates" and become ensnared in the self-projected gaze of the Other. As Willford puts it,

[T]he metonymic desire for self-recognition, itself a "narcissistic demand of colonial authority," produces the simultaneous uncanny of likeness in the figure of the split or double. The gaze that is productive of recognition

⁴ This is similar to the logic mentioned earlier in this chapter: in Chinese patriarchy, women are traditionally seen as polluted and thus treated as inferior to men.

is also evidence of likeness or the menace born out of this counter-appropriation and desire by the subordinate party. In this transferential doubling or 'mimicry,' the '*disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference*' produce the obsessive iteration of difference as hierarchy. (Willford 2006, 274; his emphasis)

Accordingly, the subordinates, internalizing their masters' denial, transfer the masters' critical gaze to themselves, generating their mimicking of the Other (Hegel 1979). However, at the same time, they experience a split in themselves because by emulating the masters they are already turning against their "truest" selves. When the over-identification with the "inner enemy, the presence of the Other within" (Willford 2006, 274), becomes part of the self, little room is left for the authentic self. The suppressed desire for authenticity or the maintenance of one's "true" identity reemerges in circumstances where individual differences are allowed, such as spiritual transcendences. Emphasizing the Tamils' psyche and pursuit of social recognition, Willford (2006) suggests that the stronger social and individual denials are the more frequently mimicry takes place that intensifies the self's return to authenticity. He says:

From the dialectical conception of mimicry, therefore, there is no authentic core to Being that can possibly be retrieved and thus, by extension, no hermetic cultures or identities *sui generis*. This is equally true for colonial masters and the colonized, who negate the ethno-racial gaze yet also find recognition in the dialectic. In this sense, the spiritual domain, posited as a site of difference and autonomy, remains decidedly 'unhappy' as corporeal subjection and hierarchy continue unabated by fantasies of transcendence. In the transferential relationship of the dialectic, neither the master [n]or slave, the colonizer or colonized, can surmount the other without experiencing the uncanny effect of the Other's *partial presence* (Willford 2006, 274; his emphasis).

Willford argues here that the need on the part of minorities to be recognized and acknowledged by representatives of official power or the majority cannot be

suppressed or swept under the carpet. The institutional ignorance of ethnic minorities causes their pain, which could cause self-destructive alienated religious marches that take place during the Thaipusam festival. The return of the psyche that demands social recognition is materialized in marching on the streets with self-torture rituals that easily draw public notice and attention.

The master's ambivalent sensing of the subordinates' partial presence manifests in a middle-class Tamil's physical paralysis, as he "fervidly" participates in the Thaipusam festival with scornful comments. Middle-class Tamils rise above the working class by developing "strategic ecumenism" (Willford 2006, 2) to gain social recognition against the state's racial hierarchies. In contrast, their working-class counterparts find solace in the religious realm of imagined social equality incorporating upper-class dance elements from global Indian television shows to enhance their prestige while paradoxically perpetuating the social stigma placed on them by their "masters," both middle-class Tamils and the Malay state. Class distinctions among Indians, as Willford implies, are exacerbated under the Malay state's racial demarcation and stigmatization.

Such ambivalent feelings from the master toward the perceived "subordinates" are replicated by the feelings of mainland Chinese qigong masters toward Malaysian Chinese qigong learners. As discussed in chapters III and IV, mainland China qigong masters see themselves as Confucian missionaries in a foreign, peripheral place teaching the "natives" the most advanced technology in the hidden treasure of Chinese cultural heritage.

Unlike the blood connection between Malays and Indians in Malaysia, however, ethnic Chinese share a remote connection with Malays, in both natural and cultural senses. Ethnic Chinese retain their Chinese cultural heritage while identifying as Malaysian citizens. Institutional denial by the Malay state of the Malaysian Chinese experience is similar to what the Tamils experience. The limitations of political involvement and institutional restrictions on the welfare of non-Malays also stir up anger and pain among ethnic Chinese.

Like the Tamils, the ethnic Chinese also express their cultural identities along with their repressed dissatisfaction with the state's denial in a self-destructive way. Some ethnic Chinese walk on fire during the Nine Emperor festival. Like Thaipusam, the entire festival itself demands full public attention since participants demonstrate on the streets, forcing people to change their routes to avoid traffic jams. Allowing ethnic minorities to celebrate their cultural origins through street demonstrations enables the Malaysian state to successfully exhaust the minorities' energy to think and act strategically and effectively.

Religious festivals occur very frequently in Malaysia. The frequency keeps participants busy with logistics and details in preparation for the events. While participants walk on the streets and block traffic, a euphoric feeling arises because a gang of people are walking in the streets and being heard by bystanders and seen on news reports. This is an easy method for controlling the population that the state deploys insidiously. Ethnic Chinese's displaced desire to be acknowledged by social others is being released in their demonstrations during boisterous festival events, essentially keeping themselves busy doing nothing but displaying emotional

expressions and their presence on the streets as well as on the news. This busy work fills up time and the void of not being seen and accepted as a full authentic self. Nevertheless, as is true of the Tamil middle-class's critique of the lower-class Thaipusam festivals, Chinese middle-class qigong practitioners and Buddhist meditators also see Nine Emperor festivals as tourist events where participants are driven by a mystical origin while wasting material and energy. In contrast, Chinese middle-class meditators and qigong practitioners value inward-looking practices to reflect on one's relations to others by observing individual unconscious desires.

(G)local Religious Politics, Dissatisfactions, and Ethno-Class Unity

In contemporary Malaysia, non-Muslims have developed a sense of unity that motivates them to vote for and guard the right to convert from one religion to another and to balance the hierarchical structure between Muslims and non-Muslims. The heated inter-religious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims have extended to local legislation pertaining to freedom of religion because of numerous lawsuits over and social discontent with Islam's hegemonic attitude (Yeoh 2011). Currently, the non-Muslim population is led mainly by the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) and another non-Muslim community, the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Daoism (MCCBCHST). Moreover, non-Muslims echo the rising tone of American and European Christian communities after 9/11, confronting the hegemonic Islamic state in Malaysia that adopts particular trends in transnational Sufism as it seeks to homogenize and control Islamic subjects in Malaysia (Yeoh 2011; Hoffstaedter 2011; Mohamad 2013 b,105).

Religious homogenization and prioritization of Muslim and ethnic Malay's social welfare (while restricting non-Malays) strengthens non-Malays' psyche, anger, and dissatisfaction. Non-Malay religious groups and the Bersih rallies in 2011, 2012, 2015, and 2016 that called for free and fair elections both indicate the people's intensified dissatisfaction with the Malaysian state. In addition to non-Malay social complaints, lower-class Malays also suffer from impoverishment, dispossession, and "dystopic experiences" (Mohamad 2013a, 80), as the NEP's ethnic demarcation is in effect a class demarcation (Gomez et al 2013).

Malaysia is based on a designed social divide, as the state controls ethnic boundaries to avoid unity and to secure middle-class Malays' dominance. The Malaysian government restricts cross-ethnic interactions in public areas to intimate communications (Hoffstaedter 2011), disallowing inter-ethnic friendships (Weiss 2011) and marriages (Ong 1995). To improve cross-cultural understanding, members of non-political social organizations have to "help convince citizens (for instance, by means of alternative media) . . . adjust their cognitive frames and strategies to optimize their influence" (Weiss 2006, 4). Ethno-class politics in Malaysia have intensified: conflicting group interests clash in cultural activities, the state legislative process, and global religious interactions (Peletz 2013, Yeoh 2011), each incorporating traditional and global discourses in its own way (Willford 2006, 2005, 2013; Kent 2005; Peletz 2002, 1997, 1995; DeBernardi 2004, 2006; Ackerman and Lee 1997, 1988; Hoffstaedter 2011; Ong 1995, 1987).

In the context of these intensified conflicts, Wise Qigong and Buddhist meditators promote practices that encourage practitioners to turn inward for inner

peace and social peace rather than striking or marching in Bersih rallies. Why did these people turn inwardly at this historical juncture when the country and their compatriots need their support and presence? In chapters III, IV, and V, we see how Buddhist meditators and qigong practitioners embrace certain values to maintain private boundaries against social aggressions. To them the ideology of self-preservation techniques functions as self-healing and self-improvement strategies by directing attention to a semi-otherworldly goal that matters more to them for stabilizing their inner peace. Both the Wise Qigong Association's and BHS's new assemblages of ideas and practices continue to challenge our explication of unconscious desires in Confucian patriarchy through religious practices in Malaysia.

CHAPTER III

WISE QIGONG ASSOCIATION¹

1. The history of qigong in China

While the method of qigong (with its focus on breathing and the flow of energy within the body) has been practiced in varying forms ranging from religious rituals to witch worship to Daoist practices and Buddhist meditations, as Kun mentioned in the qigong class he taught, the specific term, “qigong,” was coined in Liu Guizhen’s (劉貴珍) *The Qigong Healing Practices* (氣功療法實踐).² Scholars view qigong as a tradition that was invented in China in the 1950s and early 1960s (Palmer 2007, 5). The Chinese state reformulated qigong as part of its New China agenda (Palmer 2007, 5) by merging traditional bodily techniques with qigong, turning them into practices that generate useful *yangshen* 養身 (knowledge) that informs the development of healthy citizens with healthy bodies.³ This is an ideological project whose purpose is to standardize qigong, transforming it from feudal and religious practices into an instrument that can serve the modern, secular state.

¹ Wise Qigong’s Chinese name is Zhineng Qigong 智能氣功. It literally means The Qigong School of Intellectual Capacity. I use the name “Wise Qigong” to capture its goal, with the influence of Buddhism, to attain their hopeful peak physical and mental condition by controlling one’s consciousness to become wise.

² Liu Guizhen was a Western medical physician who claimed to be healed by qigong. He later wrote a book on “qigong” and coined the term qigong. He was born in 1920 in Hebei province, China. He was the president of *Beidaihe* Qigong Hospital 北戴河氣功療養院 for a term that began in 1956 (Liu Guizhen 劉貴珍 1957).

³ *Yangshen* 養身 literally means nurturing the body. It generally applies to actions and behaviors that enhance one’s health or physical condition through a regimen of diet, sleep, cultivation of the mind and body, exercise, and alternative healing practices, including taking herbal medicines.

The objectives of the Chinese state's construction of qigong are as follows: (1) to isolate qigong from social, religious, political contexts; (2) to give qigong a purely technical status; (3) to classify qigong within to a rational schema; and (4) to establish a new, national, path for qigong. Wise Qigong's grand master, Pang Ming, a member of the Communist Party, has oriented the mission and guidelines of Wise Qigong to parallel the Chinese state's secularized version. In Wise Qigong's newsletter, which is distributed on the social media site WeChat by its devotees, Wise Qigong has closely followed the Chinese state's political instructions and ideological directions.

Qigong has been categorized into two types: (1) hard qigong or *ying qigong* 硬氣功, which typically rouses imagined, magical martial art kicks that push the opponent miles away without physical contact; and (2) soft qigong or *ruan qigong* 軟氣功, which can be categorized into two areas: (a) meditation accompanied by gymnastic movements, or *dong gong* 動功 ; and (b) meditation without movement or *jing gong* 靜功, which includes visualization or concentration in a sitting, standing, or lying position. Because moving meditation and sitting meditation are both categorized as a part of qigong, following this categorization and for the purpose of discussing bodily movements that involve control of the body and consciousness, I treat Wise Qigong as a type of meditation by comparing it with the practices taught and carried out at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary in Penang, Malaysia.

The Bodhi Heart Sanctuary is where I first came into contact with Wise Qigong. People at the Bodhi Heart Sanctuary introduced me to other Wise Qigong centers in Penang, which later connected me to Wise Qigong centers in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Although some practitioners at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary practice Wise Qigong, they are

distinct institutional entities. Bodhi Heart Sanctuary functions like an educational center, providing space for a myriad of transnational Buddhist traditions and alternative healing trends that include meditation, yoga, taiji, qigong, and others.

Bodhi Heart Sanctuary is a Penang-based Buddhist organization with plans to expand globally since its founding in 2006. It positions itself as a liberal, open-to-all, inviting and unrestricted learning environment where people can heal themselves and engage in spiritual pursuits. It invites Buddhist speakers from East Asia, Southeast Asia and the West whose diverse backgrounds include Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhism. Its mission is to “embrace all traditions, transcending all boundaries.”⁴ Most of the regular users of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary are English-educated Malaysian Chinese, while Wise Qigong is practiced by Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese. Bodhi Heart Sanctuary provides classrooms and buildings for activities in the abovementioned open-to-all spirit. Bodhi Heart Sanctuary’s desire to “transcend all boundaries” parallels Wise Qigong’s doctrines and practices.

Wise Qigong is a qigong association based in Beijing since 1987 and in Hebei that has been expanding globally since 2001.⁵ It synthesizes Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts. Wise Qigong and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary have their own internal historical and cultural logics. We start with Wise Qigong’s historical development.

2. History of Wise Qigong

⁴ The slogan can be found on Bodhi Heart Sanctuary’s official website: <https://goo.gl/TjYPU6>

⁵ Wise Qigong first started in Hebei. The enrollment of students in both Hebei and Beijing soared quickly.

Wise Qigong's mission statement:

With the guidelines of dialectic materialism and historical materialism, Wise Qigong renovates traditional qigong through frequent practices to achieve cutting-edged innovations. Wise Qigong reinvigorates traditional qigong by discovering its scientific nature, being user-friendly to society and all walks of life while applying qigong in daily life. Wise Qigong transforms humans' instincts into mindfulness, liberating humans from being controlled by (human) nature to controlling (human) nature. Wise Qigong elevates humans to live an advanced life.⁶

Wise Qigong promotes a modern version of qigong that can be used by many people in their daily lives in any number of occupations such as farming, research, and medicine, with the purpose of helping people be more productive in whatever they do. Wise Qigong diverges from traditional qigong in synthesizing traditional philosophies and attempts to prove that its traditional heritage is inherently scientific. What is implied, as Kun explains, is Wise Qigong's scientific nature. Wise Qigong, like science, is meant to be open to examination by practitioners through repeating qigong experiences and observing the effects on oneself and others. Also, if practitioners apply qigong's methods consistently in their daily lives, the ancestral practitioners' promises will be proven true by contemporary practitioners. The key to a better life, as Wise Qigong suggests, is to transcend one's instinctual response by developing one's mindfulness and self-control techniques to achieve an advanced way of life.

Wise Qigong is *Zhineng Qigong* 智能氣功 in Chinese. *Zhi* means wisdom, intellect, or the mind; *neng* means ability, competence, or capability. Wise Qigong is a

⁶ Wise Qigong's original Chinese mission: 在辯證唯物主義和歷史主義思想指導下，對傳統氣功進行深入挖掘，反覆實踐，銳意創新，使古老的氣功科學化、社會化、群眾化、生活化，變人類自然本能為自覺智能，使人類從生命的必然王國走向自由王國，促進人類文化向更高級階段躍遷。

transnational qigong school run independently by individual qigong masters in their regional centers throughout the world. Wise Qigong centers have spread globally across mainland China and to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Macau, Australia, Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

Originally based in Beijing, Wise Qigong was founded by Pang Ming 龐明, the grand master, who started learning qigong at the age of four in 1944.⁷ Pang Ming was one of the most prominent qigong masters in China in the 1990s, a time when Qigong was celebrated and developed through various schools and practiced by many people. The phrase “qigong fever” has been used to describe the popularity and pervasiveness of qigong practice in China (Palmer 2007; Chen 2003). Pang was a Communist (共產黨員) and a government official (公務員) but has also been fully immersed in Buddhism since the end of the 1950s. According to his disciples, as much as Pang was drawn to Buddhism, its focus on the mind while neglecting the body makes Buddhist monks and nuns strong in the mind but weak in the body. He proposed adding a Daoist emphasis on bodily practices to Wise Qigong. Unsatisfied with focusing solely on the mind, Pang learned Chinese martial arts in the 1960s. He then followed Daoist learning, such as taiji and qigong, in the 1970s. According to his biography, which was published by Wise Qigong, Dr. Pang has more than ten teachers and masters well-known in various areas such as martial arts, Chinese medicine, Buddhism, and Daoism. Wise Qigong synthesizes Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism with other traditional Chinese

⁷ Pang Ming was born in September 1940 in Hebei province, China.

philosophical and bodily practices.⁸ According to Pang, Buddhism's inward-looking orientation is the essence of Wise Qigong's theory of meditation; Daoism provides a harmonious focus on mind/body and culture/Nature relations; Confucianism emphasizes an altruistic, down-to-earth outlook to serve society and the public.

Pang's opponents attack him as a thinker (a theorist or Confucian scholar) rather than a doer (a qigong specialist with extra sensory perception [ESP]) because he never demonstrates his supernatural ability to the public. Some online critiques go even further in raising suspicion about Pang's power as a qigong grand master. His disciples, however, mentioned to me on several occasions that Pang could describe past events in the lives of other people when he was in their presence. Pang would suggest to them that he "saw" what they did in the past. His sudden disclosure of his knowledge of these individuals' private behaviors made them blush. For instance, a twenty-something female Chinese professor and an Australian male visitor in his forties were embarrassed after displaying ignorant arrogance or cockiness to Pang, according to Lian, who was teaching Wise Qigong in Australia with his wife. Pang's disciples explained that his ESP cannot be revealed, to protect him from being perceived as a threat to the government and his opponents.⁹ At one point, when Pang was middle-aged, as his disciple Teng Tian explained to his qigong class in Hong Kong that I attended, Pang pretended to have symptoms of cancer to avoid public and government attention. Teng

⁸ It is common for Chinese students to learn from several prestigious teachers from various traditions in taiji, Chinese medicine, Chinese gongfu, qigong, etc. It is, however, quite unusual to learn from ten or more prestigious teachers. The description of Pang's experience implies that Pang was talented and smart enough to be accepted as a disciple by many major figures in multiple fields.

⁹ According to Wise Qigong masters, many monks and nuns with ESP are banned from showing their supernatural powers to the public. Although Pang is not a monk, he has been deeply influenced by Buddhism and even thought about becoming a monk at an early stage of his life.

Tian's explanation was offered to rebut skeptics' accusations that Pang's becoming ill justified them in despising qigong in general and brought the validity of Wise Qigong's teachings into question.

In a photograph of Pang that often appears on book covers, he wears traditional blue Chinese clothing and is seen writing at a desk with a shelf full of books behind him. He demonstrates a scholarly attitude. Another photograph shows him laughing with a little girl in his arms, depicting a kind, happy, and wise Chinese doctor with a Confucian spirit, taking care of children, women, and the weak. Pang's disciples claim that Pang was trained in Western medicine at the Beijing Medical Specialty School in 1958.¹⁰ However, some opponents from other qigong schools openly deny that Pang possesses a formal degree in Western medicine. This remains a mystery.

With the intention of integrating Confucian and Daoist teachings into qigong, with the government's recognition, Wise Qigong's pamphlet reports that Pang attended the National Medical Conference sponsored by the Ministry of Health 衛生部 in 1979. Pang also organized the first national qigong conference and established the Beijing Qigong Research Society 北京氣功研究會 in Beijing in 1979, the first qigong academic organization in China. Due to Pang's versatile background in religious and healing practices, he was able to synthesize various Chinese philosophies and bodily practices while integrating elements of science into Wise Qigong Theory.

In 1981, Wise Qigong offered its first class devoted to training qigong instructors. The organization conducted scientific experiments with other scientists to prove the materiality of qi. Wise Qigong theory's distinguished idea of *hunyuan zhengti*

¹⁰ Further information is documented here, on a website of a Wise Qigong society in the Tsuen Wan district, Hong Kong: <https://goo.gl/qj3yd7>

混元整體 was taught in public in 1985. The practice of the theory of *hunyuan zhengti* involves establishing a qi-field or *zuchang* 組場, the starting ritual of establishing a qi field for all participants that connects everyone's qi with everyone else's. The idea of *hunyuan zhengti* and the practice of establishing a qi-field will be elaborated on later in this chapter in the section on the Wise Qigong doctrines. In 1986, the Wise Qigong organization began spreading the theory and practice of Wise Qigong on a larger scale to the public. In April 1987, more than a thousand participants registered in a Wise Qigong teaching assistant workshop held in the town of Xishen, Beijing. In April 1988, another Wise Qigong teaching assistant workshop was held in *Shijia Zhuang* 石家莊,¹¹ a village in Hebei province, China, with three thousand participants from 28 provinces of China. In November 1988, Pang established an advanced qigong school, Hebei Wise Qigong College 河北智能氣功學院, in *Shijia Zhuang*.

On March 1, 1989, Pang confirmed the principles that Wise Qigong practitioners apply, which call for them to be harmonious, happy, natural, and elegant 和諧 歡暢 自然 端莊. Wise Qigong practitioners are expected to maintain a rigid, scientifically trained attitude to examine facts as they pursue the highest level of truth 嚴謹求實的科學態度. Practitioners are also expected to carry out the duty of providing social services in the right direction 堅定正確的服務方向. In 1989, Wise Qigong began its collective endeavor of promoting Wise Qigong as the bridge that closes the gap between science and traditional Chinese civilization.¹²

¹¹ The village of *Shijia* in Chinese is *Shijia Zhuang* 石家莊. The center was called: 石家莊智能氣功進修學院 in Chinese in 1991.

¹² In Kun's qigong center in Butterworth, Malaysia, he posted Wise Qigong's mission, guidelines, and instructions on the wall of the classrooms for his students to see and be reminded of in their activities.

Hebei Wise Qigong College was renamed the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center in 1991.¹³ It was relocated on *Qinhuang Island*,¹⁴ near Beijing province, in 1991. Many qigong practitioners took qigong courses in various majors, focusing on qigong teaching, qigong healing, developing the qigong ESP ability, and other areas. Graduates were given qigong certificates issued by the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center.¹⁵ The graduates were mostly Chinese from China but some were from overseas. The number of students reached a maximum of twenty-nine hundred at its high point. A seventy-two-year-old female, Yat Yuet, a Malaysian Chinese Wise Qigong practitioner and a Malaysian state-certified Chinese medical healer, spent two years on *Qinhuang Island* in intensive training in qigong. She recalled the training as rigid, as she described how she called to Pang for help in her mind while she performed the physically challenging second-level Wise Qigong movement, The Body Mind Form or *xing shen zhuang* 形神庄, for hours in front of a building where classes were conducted. She showed me her certificates issued by the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center in the 1990s.

Yat Yuet kept those certificates on a shelf with a glass door in front of her table where she conducted her Chinese medical healing clinics. In our interview, she demonstrated her pride in being the first woman in Malaysia to study qigong for two years. A younger Chinese man, Yang, the son of the senior local Wise Qigong practitioner Tao, is the other person who went with her. Yat Yuet mentioned the rigidity

¹³ The original name of the center: Huaxia Wise Qigong Training Center 華夏智能氣功培訓中心.

¹⁴ *Qinhuang Island* is called 秦皇島 in Chinese. The Wise Qigong masters often recalled memories of the good old times when they practiced qigong with deep concentration on *Qinhuang Island*.

¹⁵ In Chinese it is called 河北華夏智能氣功培訓中心.

of the Wise Qigong education not only in movement practices but also in written form: examinations she took at the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center included recitation of the purpose, goals, and responsibilities of Wise Qigong practitioners and healers wherever they are. Wise Qigong takes its mission seriously and instills its values in students by making them memorize those values for written examinations. In the senior instructor's elevating conference in Malacca in 2015, master Sung, as the key speaker for the whole conference, also made every participant recite the Wise Qigong mission and made this one of the criteria to be assessed to be awarded the certificate.¹⁶

On January 28, 1992, the Chinese Wise Qigong Research Institute in Hebei province was established.¹⁷ This center is credited early on with shaping Wise Qigong's three directions of development in education, healing expertise, and scientific research. In the same month in 1992, the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center conducted a conference on Wise Qigong Science. This is the beginning of the scientific development of Wise Qigong. At the end of 1992, the second conference on Wise Qigong Science was conducted. By 1993, seven thousand disciples were studying at the Wise Qigong school. In June 1994, the Wise Qigong school started the Special Qigong Class for Experts and Scholars program 專家學者教授班.¹⁸ Teachers with a ranking of Associate Professor or higher were able to attend Wise Qigong classes free of charge. This marked the beginning of Wise Qigong's campaign to attract intellectuals, researchers, and scientists.¹⁹ Wise Qigong instructors who had taught in this special program were adept

¹⁶ The mission of Wise Qigong is mentioned later in this chapter.

¹⁷ Chinese Wise Qigong Research Institute is called 河北華夏智能氣功研究所 in Chinese.

¹⁸ This class was designed for professional specialists and scholars.

¹⁹ I encountered a male scientific researcher from Shenzhen University and a social science professor from the University of Hong Kong who practiced Wise Qigong religiously. Several practitioners, both male and female, in their fifties and sixties in Hong Kong and Penang, who

at communicating Wise Qigong theory in a more sophisticated way to Chinese intellectuals who were likely to be more skeptical and guarded than peasants and members of the working class. Kun, who was originally from China and who teaches at both Penang and Butterworth, for instance, has listed being a senior mentor of the Special Qigong Class for Experts and Scholars at the Wise Qigong Science Research Institute in China 中國智能氣功科學研究所專家教授班 資深導師 on his résumé to persuade the public of his validity as an experienced teacher when speaking to various audiences. However, in addition to appealing to middle-class intellectuals, Wise Qigong, like other qigong associations in the 1990s, attracted members of lower classes by promising discourse that would increase the productivity of crops for farmers if they learned to maneuver qi and summon positive energy to be transferred to the crops.

In August, 1994, Wise Qigong demonstrated its Scientific Qigong Experimental Results to the public through a news conference with the press at the Diaoyutai State Guest House in Beijing 北京釣魚台國賓館. This, according to Wise Qigong, was the first time Wise Qigong's scientific element was displayed publicly. In September 1994, Wise Qigong collaborated with the Chinese Medical Management Bureau in Hebei province 河北省中醫聯合管理局 to teach a class together designed to train Wise Qigong medical

have college degrees from the United States or the United Kingdom, practiced Wise Qigong often. Among them, some endeavored to take courses from taiji masters, as well as studying popular psychology and Christianity in church. Mrs. Hui, the wife of a Christian priest and a marriage therapist (whose degree was earned in the United States and who now runs a clinic) in Hong Kong, teaches her Christian folks qigong weekly in their bible reading sessions. By so doing, she hoped to make them healthy since she was recovering from cancer. She saw some parallels between Christianity and Wise Qigong as both often inspire religious fervor among those who participate in the associated activities. Yet, not surprisingly, according to her, Christianity is ranked higher spiritually while qigong provides the body-enhancing function.

experts. Wise Qigong still uses this collaborative method in 2018.²⁰

In October 1994, Wise Qigong started offering classes designed to develop students' ESP capabilities. The Chinese Wise Qigong Center of Healing and Recovery 河北華夏智能氣功康復中心 was approved by the health department of Hebei province 河北省衛生廳. This is the center where healing is developed out of the three directions of qigong, namely training, healing, and research. In 1996, an advanced qigong class 提高培訓班 was launched to elevate advanced practitioners' levels of qigong mastery. In April 1998, Wise Qigong launched classes with that focus on Scientific Research for Wise Qigong leaders from many places. From the expansion of Wise Qigong's training in multiple areas to leaders, scholars, and healers, we can see that Wise Qigong is consciously building a system of qigong education that targets elites from all backgrounds.

In the 1990s, nearly four million practitioners or laypersons were affiliated with Wise Qigong according to an estimate posted on Wise Qigong's website. Many people received Wise Qigong instructions through tapes distributed to villages, as one Wise Qigong instructor recalled how he and his family started to practice Wise Qigong. As the qigong community expanded feverishly in the 1990s, qigong centers such as the Chinese Wise Qigong Healing Center was established in *Tangshan* and many other locations throughout the world.²¹

²⁰ As mentioned at the end of this chapter, Wise Qigong has invited professors from Harvard University and Harvard Medical School and many other scholars from prestigious research institutes in China for a joint program in "An International Conference of Qi, Consciousness and Human Biology, and a Mindfulness Technique Training Program." Such collaboration with other programs provides course instructors with independence to go into any direction they want while enhancing the Wise Qigong's prestige and legitimacy.

²¹ Further emic information from Wise Qigong can be found here: <https://goo.gl/KMkpCr>

According to many Wise Qigong instructors, the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center was expanding its scale with a plan to build a qigong city. A school and a hospital were running under the auspices of the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center by that time. The Wise Qigong institute as a whole functioned like an army with several divisions, according to Kun and Sung from the Penang Wise Qigong centers. Those who graduate from professional qigong instructor training could choose from among four divisional ranks if they wanted to go for further training from and service to the Wise Qigong community, including healing specialists in hospitals, educators, researchers, ESP developers in schools, administrative staff, and transportation, marketing and purchasing staff in both hospital and schools.

Several Wise Qigong instructors shared privately with me during an international conference in 2015 in Malaysia that Pang was planning to develop *Qinhuang Island* into a qigong city. Pang even almost managed to persuade several Taiwanese sponsors to financially support the constructions. However, these Taiwanese financial sponsorships of a burgeoning qigong social activity, in which everyone involved was passionate and supportive of Pang, seemed almost like blind worship from an outsider's viewpoint, potentially threatening the government authority of the People's Republic of China.

According to his disciples, in July 2001 Pang began a quiet, solitary life under unofficial house arrest.²² Still highly respected as a spiritual leader of Wise Qigong,

²² Pang has been under house arrest or constantly on a local police watch list since July 2001. For instance, Teng Tian from Hong Kong once described how Pang had been searched by the police when he increased the frequency with which he attended meetings, parties, or qigong conferences with his disciples. Pang was often stopped by the local police, who watched him in secrecy every day. The police politely asked him, "Dr. Pang, where are you going? You have so many tea party invitations from your friends of late!" Teng Tian explained that this was a

Pang announced to the world that (as paraphrased by Teng Tian) “Pang has cut the cord with Wise Qigong and has nothing to do with Wise Qigong anymore.²³” This was a political statement designed to reassure the government that Pang is uninterested in uniting his like-minded, passionate disciples to manipulate situations and accumulate resources to build a qigong city in 1995 that might pose a threat to state control. Several Wise Qigong masters told me during breaks at the international Wise Qigong conference in Kulai, Johor, Malaysia, in 2015, that the qigong city construction was to be sponsored by a Taiwanese entrepreneur. However, the Chinese government was concerned about the overly expansive development of the qigong enterprise with financial aid from Taiwan. The project has been postponed and Pang has been under constant government scrutiny at home regarding his social interactions.

Pang’s position as a recluse caused him to assume the pen name Zhen Yin 甄隱, which he uses for his publications on Zen Buddhist 禪宗 meditation. The name “Zhen Yin” suggests that its bearer is a true Daoist practitioner who lives a secluded life. Although Pang has led a secluded life since 2001, his influence cannot, however, be underestimated. His charisma has remained strong even to this day, as his disciples still fervidly pass around his photographs, hand-written calligraphy, and even the leftover food taken from his house in Beijing after his disciples visit him. On June 8, 2018, in the WeChat Wise Qigong discussion room, Wen posted a photograph of Pang walking

polite warning from the police suggesting that Pang maintain a solitary life with his wife. Teng Tian, who established his Wise Qigong center in Hong Kong in 2007, is closer to Pang because he was among the first cohort of Pang’s disciples in the two-year intensive Wise qigong instructor training program in 1992. The disciples were being taught by Pang in person while other students from 1993 onwards watched Pang’s instructional recordings.

²³ In Chinese, he said, “龐老師公開地說他已經與智能氣功沒有任何關係了。”

through a wheat field and smiling as he observed some of his students manipulating qi on the farm to increase productivity. Her comment on Pang's picture was, "Feel how affecting and happy Pang's smile is while he inspects the experiments conducted in the field."²⁴ The respect and admiration Wen demonstrated to the group is obvious and strong.

Although Pang's disciples may deny that they worship Pang, their passionate treatment of Pang's possessions as though they exuded an aura when in their hands and seeing them as positive energy like an extended form of Pang's own seems the expression of a blind fetish that would befit a fan of a star or a royal. On June 3, 2018 I received a photograph of Pang visiting a rice paddy with several other farmers through a Wise Qigong social media group on WeChat, and I also received a copy of the picture in a private message from a Malaysian local instructor, Hui, a female in her late fifties. I have received Pang's photographs through several Wise Qigong social media groups from Penang, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen between 2014 and 2018. Pang's guided meditation recordings have been spread by the WeChat cyber groups since March 2016.

The recordings, regarded as enlightened holy messages designed to inspire minds, were distributed quickly. Wise Qigong practitioners were grateful and happy to receive pure and sacred messages from Pang.²⁵ Several days later, however, a reminder in a slightly reproachful tone warned others to stop distributing Pang's recordings to protect Pang from government surveillance. Even the photographs several disciples took with their beloved guru, Pang, during a Chinese New Year visit a month earlier in February 2016, were targeted for removal from the WeChat chatroom.

²⁴ In Chinese, she said, "感受一下老師在視察實驗田的笑容，沁人心脾。"

²⁵ In Chinese, they usually say, "收一收龐老師的好信息。"

In a Wise Qigong conference in Shenzhen in April 2016, where many practitioners from Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and elsewhere in Guangdong province met, a former Wise Qigong instructor who teaches taiji in a qigong-taiji fusion style brought an elegantly written sheet of calligraphy and displayed it for an audience of approximately seventy people. He did so with pride in sharing a good message from Pang.²⁶ Several disciples who belong to the Wise Qigong community also shared photographs of Pang's calligraphy with others on WeChat groups.

Teng Tian, Pang's disciple from the first cohort of graduates of the professional instructor training program, even carries a photograph of Pang in his wallet all the time so that he can commune with his guru every day to keep himself on the right track. In April 2016, after Teng's visit with Pang in Beijing, he brought several little pieces of Chinese cake bread from Pang's house back to Hong Kong. He shared those little pieces of cake with nine students in the class, including me. He described how the energy in Pang's house was pure and clear, and asserted that the energy purified the cake crumbs that we ate together. Sharing the cake not only showed Teng's generosity but also reflected his prestige as a qigong instructor who was close to the grand master, the source of the power of Wise Qigong knowledge. Practitioners believe that anyone who enjoys even small crumbs of the cake bread partake in the positive energy Pang possessed. Teng described how the cake bread tasted sweeter with positive energy radiating from Pang.

Until the end of my fieldwork in 2016, and even to this day on June 2018 as I continue to receive messages online from Wise Qigong communities with which I was

²⁶ In Chinese, Wise Qigong's particular phrase for good message is 好消息.

affiliated, active members of those WeChat groups still treat Pang as a spiritual leader even though he claims to have nothing to do with Wise Qigong anymore. Although many Wise Qigong centers have been free to conduct its teachings and organizations in their own way, the control over how Wise Qigong should be taught still remains at a verbal level. At some crucial moments, as I heard from senior Wise Qigong instructors, Pang would speak to his disciples whom he wanted to influence and change.

For instance, when there were disputes among several Wise Qigong instructors who were preparing for an international Wise Qigong conference at Tongji University 同濟大學 in Shanghai, according to Teng Tian, Pang communicated with the three parties involved to overcome minor differences and unite as a collective to move Wise Qigong forward. The conference was nevertheless put off after being disapproved of by the government. Two years later, the conference was finally held on May 5, 2018 at Peking University 北京大學. Rather than being blatantly open by making qigong the theme of the conference, the conference was called A Global Discussion of Marxism 世界馬克思主義大會. The discussants and speakers were Chinese medical doctors of traditional Chinese medicine from Jianxi University of Traditional Chinese Medicine 江西中醫大學 and others with the title of professor or associate professor. The conference, sounding purely intellectual and unrelated to qigong, discussed Marxism, Chinese medicine, and the theory of the materiality of the three forms of matter: form, spirit, and qi. Pang attended that conference. His photographs were again distributed through WeChat Wise Qigong chatrooms to the Malaysian practitioners.

Pang's presence gives hope to Wise Qigong practitioners regarding the development of Wise Qigong. In most Wise Qigong practitioners' eyes, anything

associated with Pang is treated as something positive and precious. Any materials related directly to Pang would be shared rapidly online in chat rooms as well as in person during local, regional, and international conferences. Although the Wise Qigong industry as a whole has lost its unified central leadership since the house arrest of Pang, and Wise Qigong instructors have been free to teach Wise Qigong in unconventional, sometimes controversial or conflicting ways, Pang's influence remains strong with most practitioners, or so it seems from their shows of respect for the Dao and the teacher or *zhong dao zun shi* 重道尊師 as the primary doctrine of Wise Qigong.

3. Wise Qigong in Malaysia

On September 30, 1992 several Wise Qigong practitioners from North Malaysia graduated from the Chinese Wise Qigong Training Center and decided to form a Wise Qigong organization in Malaysia. The organization, the Malaysia Wise Qigong Society (Persatuan Wise Qigong Malaysia),²⁷ was approved by the Malaysian state in August 25, 1995. In August 1994, the first Wise Qigong Camp 智能氣功生活營 was held in Genting, Malaysia in which practitioners from various regions and states in Malaysia participated and connected with each other. From September 30 to October 2 1995, the second Wise Qigong Camp was held, again organized by the Malaysia Wise Qigong Society, which was just after being officially approved by government. In July 1995, Pang visited several centers in Malaysia. Photographs of him taken by Malaysian practitioners still hang high on the wall in the office of the Malaysia Wise Qigong Society, in Penang. Pang's presence in Malaysia united the Malaysian Wise Qigong

²⁷ The official website of the Malaysia Wise Qigong Society is here: <https://goo.gl/WFJ44q>

members and dramatized the need for an official organization for Malaysian Wise Qigong practitioners.

In addition to the Malaysia Wise Qigong Society in Penang, an organization that takes care of all Malaysian Wise Qigong centers and represents north Malaysia, Persatuan Senaman Wise Qigong Malaysia 馬來西亞智能氣功總會, the representative organization for central and south Malaysia, was established in April, 1995 with 17 branches in Wilayah Persekutuan, Selangor, Perak, and Sabah.²⁸ All Wise Qigong centers are open to people with regard to differences in religion or race. On April 27, 1997 in the first annual official meeting of the Malaysian Wise Qigong Association (Gabungan Persatuan Wise Qigong Malaysia 馬來西亞智能氣功聯合會), the committee revised the organization's by-laws to win governmental approval. The aforementioned associations were formed by local Malaysian Wise Qigong practitioners. The local instructors include (1) those who learned Wise Qigong in Malaysia from Malaysians who studied Wise Qigong on *Qinhuang Island*, and (2) those who learned Wise Qigong on *Qinhuang Island* and brought knowledge and Wise Qigong practices back to Malaysia. Although some Wise Qigong instructors from China occasionally traveled and taught in Malaysia and Indonesia, it was not until 2001 that more *Qinhuang Island*-trained Wise Qigong instructors from mainland China migrated to and settled down in Penang, remaining for at least half a decade. Chen, a professional Wise Qigong instructor from mainland China, is an example to which we now turn.

4. The Lineage of Wise Qigong from China to Penang

²⁸ Further emic information of The Persatuan Senaman Wise Qigong Malaysia can be found here: <https://goo.gl/h7BQYi>

On the train from Butterworth to Malacca in 2015 while riding with other Penang practitioners to attend a conference devoted to elevating the qigong skills of senior Wise Qigong instructors and practitioners, a Penang local female Wise Qigong instructor, the abovementioned Yat Yuet, in her seventies, told me the story of how the first Wise Qigong instructor from mainland China, instructor Chen, arrived in Penang with other Chinese merchants from Hebei Province in 2002. As a person from the countryside who had never been overseas, he tagged along with the Chinese merchants to Malaysia to see the world, if only for a few days. One afternoon when he returned from his morning adventure to the hotel where he was staying, however, he found that his merchant friends had checked out of the hotel. Without knowing how to contact them and without money, he did not know what to do. He wandered into the Komtar shopping area in Penang, trying to figure out how to survive on his own in this foreign city with his solid Wise Qigong training as a professional instructor and practitioner. Then he saw a senior “auntie,”²⁹ a female practitioner performing the signature movement of pulling the qi or *laqi*,³⁰ sitting in front of a shop. He introduced himself to the woman as a professional Wise Qigong instructor. The “auntie” brought instructor Chen to the Penang Wise Qigong Society.

The president of Penang Wise Qigong Society at the time, Tan Sri, checked

²⁹ Malaysians call every elder female “auntie,” and every elder male “uncle” to refer to them respectfully when they do not know their names. The terms “uncle” and “auntie” apply broadly to people ranging from strangers to acquaintances to family friends and relatives.

³⁰ *Laqi* is 拉氣 in Chinese. It is a particular signature movement of Wise Qigong the purpose of which is to have practitioners feel the (intangible, invisible) qi ball between the palms. The exercise is designed to push and pull the energy between one’s palms and to connect that energy with the body and the universe. This exercise embodies the spirit of Wise Qigong theory yet requires little space for the physical movements. Therefore, this *laqi* exercise is promoted and practiced by practitioners in public when they have the time to do so.

Chen's background with the local female instructor, Yat Yuet, who had undergone Wise Qigong training for laypersons for two years on *Qinhuang Island* in the 1990s. Although Chen and Yat Yuet were trained in different Wise Qigong programs on *Qinhuang Island*,³¹ Yat Yuet she was the best person to evaluate whether Chen was a con artist based on her direct affiliation with Wise Qigong in Beijing, including a close relationship with the Wise Qigong lineage of the grand master, Pang. The Penang Wise Qigong Society provided free lodging for Chen in a room at the organization's office in Penang. Chen taught several qigong classes in Wise Qigong theory and practice to qigong practitioners in Penang. A year later, instructor Chen's student cohort grew. With sufficient tuition and supporters, Chen was able to rent a townhouse to use for his own center in the Pulau Tikus area. It was a beautiful townhouse with big windows and bright light. A huge garden was adjacent to the townhouse, which provided a large parking lot for his students. Chen was responsible for qigong teaching while a local middle-aged English-educated woman, Dolly, took care of administrative issues and contacts from local Malaysians. Due to Dolly's welcoming interpersonal communication style, a growing population of English-educated Chinese as well as Chinese-educated Chinese participated regularly in the practices at the center.

As Linda, an avid 43-year-old female practitioner who became an instructor at the Wise Qigong center in 2017 recalled, when she started learning qigong in 2005 with Chen, the number of registered students at the center rose rapidly. The center was filled with students in the morning for self-practice and at night with classes. Journalists from

³¹ Chen was trained in a more structured and rigid program for Wise Qigong professional instructors. Instructor Yat Yuet was enrolled in a more flexible and optional program for laypersons who pursue knowledge of Wise Qigong as a form of recreation or self-development.

a local Chinese newspaper, *Kwong Ming Yit Poh* 光明日報, reported on Chen's center on May 3, 2007 and June 22, 2008. On May 3, 2007, *Kwong Ming Yit Poh* reported that Chen's qigong center was operating with an American "auntie" practicing Wise Qigong in the garden on the lawn at his center. The article was titled "American Auntie enchanted by Wise Qigong—Efficacy makes Wise Qigong so good they can't ignore it."³²

Chen also invited his qigong classmates from his own graduating class following professional Wise Qigong instructor training to help him teach at the center in Penang. Kun, Sung, Yi, and Wen all had visited Chen several times between 2007 and 2010 as visiting instructors to provide special courses to Chen's students. Many local students even brought friends and family members to the center as a token of their pride in the healing power of Wise Qigong. They also followed the teachings of Wise Qigong to "make one's body and mind perfect, to liberate others, bring happiness to others."³³ When Chen left Penang for Germany in 2010, the aforementioned classmates who had visited him had settled in Penang and have continued developing their qigong teaching careers in Penang since then.

5. Publications and Teachings: Unity, Variations, and Students' Needs

Before Pang began his secluded life, Wise Qigong published its own magazine. Wise Qigong also maintains a good relationship with the press. On Teng Tian's Wise Qigong center website, he discusses the historical way in which Wise Qigong expands

³² In Chinese the headline goes: "有效便是好東西 美國阿嫂迷上智能氣功."

³³ The Wise Qigong's original Chinese slogan is 完美身心、造福人類、追求自由身心、生命解放.

its influence by spreading literacy.

Pang has published more than fifteen books over the years using pen names such as *Pang He Ming* 龐鶴鳴, *Pang Ming* 龐明, *Yin Zhen* 尹真 and *Zhen Yin* 甄隱. His earlier qigong writings are published under the name *Pang He Ming*. *He* 鶴 in Chinese means crane, and *ming* 鳴 means the sound cranes make when flying. *Ming* implies development and progress in the Chinese literary context: the Chinese idiom *daming dafang* 大鳴大放 indicates the whistling sound of progress and development. A famous qigong physical movement, the Crane-Flying Movement, or *He Xiang Zhuang* 鶴翔庄, imitates the movement made when a crane flies to generate practitioners' vigor, qi, and energy during a qigong exercise. Pang incorporates the Crane-Flying Movement into qigong movements of his own invention. He uses the name *Pang Ming* in later qigong publications. *Ming* 明 means brightness or enlightenment.

The other names under which Pang has published, *Yin Zhen* 尹真 and *Zhen Yin* 甄隱, have their own stories. *Yin Zhen* is used in Pang's Daoist and Chinese medicine publications. The name indicates a Daoist model of an ideal person who becomes a real Dao-embracing and thus extraordinary person. The name *Zhen Yin* is used in Pang's Buddhist meditation publications. It implies that the real pathfinder is a true hermit 真人真隱. *Zhen Yin* has its origins in *Zhen Shi Yin* from *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Some literary critics suggest that the name *Zhen Shi Yin* 甄士隱, which denotes a real hermit practitioner, is pronounced the same as *Zhen Shi Yin* 真事隱, which means a hidden truth. Combining the two, the double meaning is revealed as (1) a pathfinder who becomes a hermit to focus on his pursuit of inner alchemy and (2) a hidden truth that will be

disclosed by a hermit.³⁴

Pang's qigong theories, despite the books he wrote decades ago, are mostly transcriptions of lectures he delivered to his disciples that he turns into books. Anyone interested in Wise Qigong is encouraged to use Pang's recent official qigong publications as standard textbooks. They are edited and published by his disciples, Teng Tian and others.³⁵ Teng Tian, who established his Wise Qigong center in Hong Kong in 2007, is closer to Pang because he was among the first cohort of Pang's disciples in the two-year intensive Wise Qigong instructor training program in 1992. As noted above, the first cohort of disciples were taught by Pang face to face while students from 1993 onwards watched videos of Pang's previous instructions. Due to Teng Tian's affinity for and relationship with Pang, the publications Teng Tian edits are recognized widely as official textbooks of Wise Qigong for Chinese readers.

In addition to Chinese publications, there are English translations of some of Pang's books provided by his remote graduate students who were taught by Pang's disciples. These English books (translated from Pang's Chinese publications) can be found on the Internet at <https://www.amazon.com>, at prices ranging from US\$10–US\$70. Lee Wooi Bok is the most productive author and translator of Wise Qigong's

³⁴ Among the books Pang has published are: *The Principle of Traditional Practices of Dao* 傳統修身法理, *The Importance of Qi in Acupuncture Practices* 針灸心法淺談, *The Confucian's Way to become a Saint* 儒家內聖修持輯要, *The Way to Prove and Live a Zen Life through Meditation* 禪宗證悟理法輯要.

³⁵ Pang Ming's qigong publications edited by Teng Tian include: *The Guidelines to Cultivate the Body in Wise Qigong* 智能氣功調身要旨, *The Secret of Breathing in Wise Qigong Practice* 智能氣功調息秘要, *The Three-in-One Principle of Essence, Qi, and Spirit* 精氣神合一大法, *Wise Qigong Science for Instructors* (in two books) 智能氣功科學教材, *The Secret to Discipline the Heart in Wise Qigong* 智能氣功修心秘意, and *Wise Qigong Science for College Graduates with Pang Ming's Instructors* (in seven books) 智能氣功大專教材與名師講解系列.

theory and practice. Lee Wooi Bok is a Malaysian Chinese man in his forties who owns a pharmacy in Penang that is affiliated with the University of Science, Malaysia. He is English-educated but he speaks Hokkien and Mandarin Chinese at home. Lee Wooi Bok's father is a local senior Penang Wise Qigong instructor who had run a Wise Qigong center with Wei, a senior Beijing Wise Qigong instructor since 1992. Their collaborative qigong education business in Penang ended with disputes over money mutual misunderstanding, according to other local senior Wise Qigong instructors. However, in this family Wise Qigong business, Lee Wooi Bok grew up practicing Wise Qigong as a regular part of his life. As a professional pharmacist in Penang, he is well-versed in Western medicine and qigong in English, Mandarin Chinese, and Hokkien Chinese.

Many English speakers in Penang find Lee Wooi Bok's English lectures and books on Wise Qigong helpful for learning qigong. Local Penang English-educated Chinese Wise Qigong practitioners such as Peng Chew, a Malaysian Chinese man in Penang in his early sixties who graduated from Harvard University, bought Lee Wooi Bok's books and lectures. Mary, a Malaysian Chinese woman in Penang in her fifties, also purchased Lee Wooi Bok's publications on Wise Qigong theory to comprehend the theory better. Given Malaysia's relatively lower standard of living (where a meal—8 Malaysian Ringgit—and a drink—2 Malaysian Ringgit—in the local coffee shop costs US\$2.00 – US\$2.50), owning Lee Wooi Bok's English translation of Wise Qigong Theory means that they were willing to pay US\$59.00 to buy it. Both admitted the price of the book was quite high, but they value the investment in self-development in

knowledge and health. Both offered positive remarks on Lee Wooi Bok's teaching and writing communication style.

Insofar as Lee Wooi Bok did not consult Pang Ming about his Wise Qigong translations, or share his book's copyright with Pang Ming, many advanced Wise Qigong Penang instructors raised concerns about the correctness and validity of Lee Wooi Bok's English translations. Several local Chinese Wise Qigong instructors pointed out errors in Lee Wooi Bok's understanding of Pang's sophisticated theory. Several revealed privately to me their accusation that Lee Wooi Bok "steals Pang's ideas while making money for himself." One local master described Lee Wooi Bok as a "talented copy-cat" good at paraphrasing across languages from Chinese Mandarin to English and even to Malay when dealing with the Malaysian State bureaucracy. Lee Wooi Bok, according to Yat Yuet, has been savvy in packaging and advertising his understanding of Wise Qigong that applies to a wide range of contexts, from the Malaysian governmental bureaucracy to the Western publication system. Yat Yuet implied that skills that are useful for gaining political leverage and bringing fame and money to oneself are skills that serious Dao pathfinders dismiss. Nevertheless, what Lee Wooi Bok's students and patients admire about him is his synthetic perspectives drawn from his training in pharmaceutical knowledge, Western medicine, and the qigong healing system. His students (Peng Chew and Mary), and patients (Shin, an English-speaking Chinese woman in her forties; and Lin, a Chinese-speaking woman in her fifties) whom I encountered at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary all expressed admiration for Lee Wooi Bok's unique multi-linguistical and cross-disciplinary explanatory style.

Another similar case of a Wise Qigong instructor publishing books and

developing a teaching career qigong–related self-help courses to English and Chinese speakers involves Wei from Beijing, who has published several books that are popular among beginning Wise Qigong practitioners and members of the general public who are drawn to New Age spirituality and self-help discourses.³⁶ Wei has also attracted several Malaysian Chinese Wise Qigong practitioners who found the erudite theory and practices of Wise Qigong frustrating, such as the Kee Thang couple, who are in their sixties and come from Penang. They had been hardcore fans of Wei since 2007 after what they described a “mind-blowing” moment after taking Wei’s course: Wise Qigong finally make sense to them after their seven to ten years of hard work practicing qigong without knowing what they were doing. Their testimony describing Wei’s effect on their qigong practices has become a living advertisement for Wei’s qigong self-help courses, as they kept repeating their newfound passion for and aspirations to learn qigong guided by Wei to friends and family. The Kee Thangs own a beautiful townhouse in which they host Wei during his visits to Penang. The Kee Thangs even called their friends and family on the phone to urge them to attend Wei’s intensive five-day qigong self-help course for businesspeople in December 2015 that was designed to benefit both students and the instructor. After the course, the Kee Thangs hosted a party at their house with Wei, other Wise Qigong instructors, and students.

Like Lee Wooi Bok, Wei extends Pang’s qigong discourse to people who cannot appreciate or understand Pang’s theoretical system. Both publish books and teach alterations of Wise Qigong teachings in English and Chinese in Asia and Europe. Wei

³⁶ Wei has published several books that has new-age self-help perspectives such as *Live Life Passionately* (用愛護生命) and *Bring Your Soul Home With You after Work* (把心帶回家).

asked me to be “open-minded” when I introduced myself to him at an international Wise Qigong conference in northern mainland Malaysia in July 2014. Later, I heard from several “rigidly trained” Wise Qigong instructors (who had completed professional teaching programs and practice qigong seriously as a profession) who expressed dissatisfaction with Wei’s loose interpretation of Wise Qigong. Like Lee Wooi Bok, Wei is seen as using Pang’s prestige and his brand of Wise Qigong to boost his own legitimacy as an instructor while he, in fact, teaches an unorthodox version of Wise Qigong. Wei’s charisma as a conventionally good-looking man with his simple yet sophisticated college-trained communication style make him popular among students, especially middle-aged mothers and senior “aunties.” Moreover, his talented, famous, and beautiful wife, as both Pang’s goddaughter and an outstanding Wise Qigong instructor teaching ESP, legitimizes Wei as a Wise Qigong instructor. Like Lee Wooi Bok’s father, a prestigious senior local instructor, through his wife, Wei has become Pang’s godson-in-law. Moreover, he is savvy in translating Wise Qigong’s teachings to a wide range of contexts in business settings, where he incorporates contemporary self-help ideas. His interpretation of Wise Qigong combined with self-help ideas attracts women in general because his reflexive confessional style as a husband and son that uses as an example to invite students to reflect on themselves which gives women reverse recognition of their roles as wives and mothers in patriarchal families.³⁷

³⁷ Wei’s confessional style in his teachings demonstrates his reflections that he uses to “offer a glass of water” to his wife to show his care for her while she was doing housework is highly appreciated by female students, most of whom are wives and mothers. His recognition of mothers, which he signals by referring to nature as “Mother Nature” and singing the praises of all mothers in the world, makes sense to his students, male or female, in a Confucian patriarchal world. His emphasis on love, respect, filial piety, and understanding of each other in the family setting seems appropriate. From post-class testimonies in which every participant was asked to

Despite Wei's network and his multi-linguistically and cross-disciplinarily explanatory style, several "rigidly trained" Wise Qigong instructors, including the president of the Penang Wise Qigong Society, Wai Seng Kei,³⁸ considered Wei's teaching of Wise Qigong "misleading" or *wuren zidi* 誤人子弟 because his teachings block his students, mostly from Singapore and some from Malaysia, from experiencing a deeper and more profound discovery of qigong, thinking that qigong is just that—a satiated feeling of being loved. Wai Seng Kei thinks the softer explanation of being loved is a good thing and no one can say it is wrong. However, what is wrong with Wei's teaching, according to Wai Seng Kei, is the instructor's set-in-stone interpretations as a model for disciples to follow. He believes this approach stifles disciples' imagination and creativity and impedes their progress, making it difficult to advance toward developing their potential, wisdom, and talent, especially in the area of

share their feedback of the five-day course on stage, most participants were passionate and excited about the growth they had experienced in only five days.

³⁸ Wai Seng Kei came from Kuala Lumpur and has stayed in Penang for decades. He is in his mid-sixties and promotes Wise Qigong with deep passion and vigor. He started practicing qigong because his wife was diagnosed with cancer. He enrolled them both in a Wise Qigong healing course taught by Yang, an instructor who visits Malaysia and Singapore regularly. He took the qigong course for his wife because his wife could not participate due to her physical condition. Initially, he learned qigong in the 1990s to teach his wife. He continues to practice Wise Qigong today, hoping that his actions will influence his wife to practice qigong more frequently to improve her health. He practices qigong every day for two hours and even seizes time to practice *laqi* during traffic jams. Over weekends, he has watched Pang's lectures online and taught himself qigong in that way. At times he falls asleep due to the erudite nature of Pang's qigong theory. However, Wai Seng Kei thought that was part of the learning process, and thought that listening to the lecture while sleeping worked as well to unblock his qi blockages by receiving Pang's energy. Other senior Wise Qigong instructors evaluate Wai Seng Kei's understanding of Wise Qigong as quite accurate and accountable, although there may still be some room for improvement to correct the extremes of his personal interpretation. Wai Seng Kei, confirmed by Wise Qigong's efficacy as improving a human's intellect (or *kai zhi* 開智) and physical condition, is passionate about bringing recognition of qigong to Malaysian society and the government. He works as a business associate in an architectural engineering company. Despite his devotion to qigong, as a family-oriented man, he travels with his wife frequently to visit his children and grand-children in Australia several times a year.

ESP.³⁹ When a person stops making his or her body and mind perfectly in harmony and happy with the society and the environment,⁴⁰ he or she is acting against the goal of Wise Qigong.⁴¹

Wai Seng Kei invited Sung, a senior Wise Qigong instructor in Penang who came from China, to have dinner with Wei and the Kee Thangs in December 2015. The purpose of the dinner was to persuade Wei *either* to branch out to establish his own brand to teach qigong self-help courses *or* to stick to Pang's original teaching as closely as possible. Wai Seng Kei spoke as the president of the Penang Wise Qigong Society, trying to manage the appropriate direction for Wise Qigong courses to be taught in Penang. Sung, as Pang's disciple among the first cohort of professionals to graduate from the instructor training program, spoke as Wei's senior in the lineage of Pang's direct disciples.

³⁹ Wai Seng Kei commented about Wei's heterodox teaching style during the interview: "I still emphasize that to practice Wise Qigong we should not limit ourselves. We have to see further. Go for unlimited things to learn. Being loving (like what Wei teaches) is great. Love transforms our body, mind and spirit. Love is one of the ways to lead a healthy life. But Wise Qigong has more to it than that. Wise Qigong has stages of profoundness for practitioners to discover and to transcend themselves. 我還強調智能氣功我們不要侷限在這個這樣近，我們要看遠，我們要看遠一點。我們有無限量的東西我們要學習。這個愛當然是好：愛是改變我們身心靈，這種愛的這種方法。但是我們還有很多很好的層次要進、要去昇華。"

⁴⁰ In Chinese, it is: *hexie huanchang wanmei shenxin kaifa zhihui* 和諧歡暢 完美身心 開發智慧。

⁴¹ Wai Seng Kei's comment on Wei's heterodox teaching: "When you have not seen some better, deeper state in your practice, you may be drawn to Wei's teachings. But why don't we go further to discuss a higher level of doing qigong? His teaching definitely will impede his students from going deeper and further. They are stuck at a level. It is such a pity, such a waste to be stuck at one level just to feel touched. Yes, Wei's lectures are very touching, emotionally empathetic and a cathartic release. It is the power of the heart, the power of emotions. It is such a pity. They are good people doing good practice. But it is unfortunate for them to stop at the emotional level without going further, without going deeper in the practice. 當你還沒有進入一些更高深的一種境界的時候，你對這方面非常的好，接受。但是...我們為什麼不去更好地去探討高層次的呢？這一定的[會阻礙他們往前]。他就是停留在這裡啦。你很可惜到了那個層次停留在這裡。感動呀，太感動了，感動了，心的力量呀，很可惜呀，他們是好...但很可惜，就是說我們還停留在那個不能再向前了，不能再更高深的層次去探討了。"

Sung's role is to ensure that Pang's teaching is passed down correctly. Sung supports Wai Seng Kei's position regarding the promotion of orthodox Wise Qigong. But Sung and Wei are both close disciples of Pang and both come from China. The Kee Thangs attended the dinner as hardcore Penang supporters of Wei to continue promoting his version of Wise Qigong to fulfil Wise Qigong's mission—to liberate and bring happiness to all mankind, or *zaofu renlei* 造福人類. At that dinner, Wai Seng Kei and Sung failed to persuade Wei to either branch out or change his orthodox interpretation of Wise Qigong because Wei refused to accept that his version was unorthodox. According to Sung, Wei acted strongly and emphasized his legitimacy as indicated by Pang's support. As Sung recalled, Wei revealed a surprisingly stronger side of his personality that was often unseen in public. Sung, who has stayed in close contact with Pang and other senior Wise Qigong instructors, in fact knew that Pang did not approve of Wei and had not seen Wei for years. Nevertheless, for fear of making a scene in front of his fellow Malaysian Chinese, Sung did not disclose the fact that he knew that Pang disapproved of Wei's teaching. Sung did not want to interfere with his own spirit of national camaraderie by making a scene.

The Kee Thangs, being protective of their beloved guru, Wei, reminded others to recognize Wei's contribution to Wise Qigong, as he helped more students appreciate the erudite knowledge of Wise Qigong and Wei is popular and prestigious among Wise Qigong students internationally. The Kee Thangs, being sociable and diplomatic to Wai Seng Kei and Sung, also expressed something flattering to reduce the sense of conflict between Wai Seng Kei and Wei. Several days after the dinner, after Wei left Penang, the Kee Thangs hosted a house party to which they invited their family and friends,

including Sung, Wai Seng Kei, and me. On June 3, 2018, a photograph of Pang, showing him with a man who resembled Wei, and three unidentified people sitting together in a living room in front of a tea table with mugs, China cups, a China kettle, and plastic water bottles, was distributed through the Penang Wise Qigong WeChat room without explanation. Unable to trace the picture's origin, I checked with Wei to see whether he was the person in the photograph. He confirmed it was him and responded positively, displaying the warmer and softer side of his personality that he has shown consistently in public and throughout our interactions. Both Sung and Kun considered Wei to be a kind, sincere, and warm person who appears to believe deeply in what he preaches. They explained, however, that Wei did not have time to fully focus on his qigong advancement because he has been busy with administrative leadership and in teaching Wise Qigong since the 1990s.

As we can see, Wei and Lee Wooi Bok are popular among students who wish to understand Wise Qigong but are somehow blocked by the language barrier. What Wei and Lee Wooi Bok have in common is their ability to rationalize and spell out the process of learning for those who encounter barriers to comprehending the depth of Wise Qigong. Wei simplifies the richness and depth of Wise Qigong, making qigong knowledge applicable to people with business backgrounds, or those who play roles in Confucian family models. Lee Wooi Bok is similar to Wei regarding his talent for bridging the worldview of pharmacists to qigong, borrowing ideas from languages such as Malay, English, and Mandarin Chinese. They both are comfortable teaching qigong in English or Chinese. Both have traveled to Europe, Malaysia, and Singapore to teach

qigong courses. Although they teach with contrasting approaches, they are logical communicators teaching qigong in a university lecturer style using PowerPoint slides and conducting courses in person and through online modules.

With Wise Qigong teaching that leaves students unguided, enabling talented students to explore on their own, many less talented students could not understand or appreciate the beauty and joy that comes with unraveling the mystery of learning. The Kee Thangs expressed their frustration with Wise Qigong teaching because they simply did not know what to feel without instructions. A male calligraphist in his seventies, Cheuk Siu-Kei, from Hong Kong, also complained about the lack of guidance in the traditional Chinese teaching style, including Wise Qigong and taiji, which he learned from different masters.⁴² He disliked his taiji master in Beijing for letting him explore on his own without informing him what to expect in the learning process. He generalized the pedagogy of the Beijing taiji master as a typical Chinese traditional way of teaching that is ineffective in promoting growth and learning. He preferred the Western logical pedagogy where the instructor breaks things down into steps that students can follow.

In a slightly different way, Anna from Hong Kong, in her early forties,⁴³ also

⁴² Cheuk Siu-Kei has a bachelor's degree from a university in California where he became a Christian. He has taken courses in cognitive psychology, learned taiji from masters in Beijing, and practiced qigong in Hong Kong. He indicated his own system of understanding blending Christianity, qigong, taiji, calligraphy, and psychology. He showed me the fusion of these ideas through mind maps on PowerPoint slides printed out for me during our interview. He said he loved the process of spelling things out logically to synthesize what he has learned. This way of learning and teaching is something he finds lacking in traditional Chinese education.

⁴³ Anna has a master's degree in psychology from the University of Hong Kong. She was married in 2000. She has an intimate relationship with her husband that has brought both of them a strong sense of "security or *anquan gan* 安全感" (他跟我他也有互相有安全感), a "stable or *wending* 穩定" feeling she needs for her personality. She has practiced qigong daily in Teng Tian's qigong center at Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong, since 2011. She occasionally serves as a teaching assistant in several of Teng Tian's classes. She even has the key to the center to practice qigong early in the morning when Teng Tian has not yet arrived. Anna says that her daily qigong

expressed her frustration with not being able to apply Pang's instructions for managing emotions. She thought that Pang was too advanced for her and that his solutions do not work for her. She understood Pang's solution, but she could not apply it to make herself peaceful when strong emotions strike her.⁴⁴

Wise Qigong's pursuit of an advanced way of life using scholarly language attracts followers. That ideal of an intellectual style also adds barriers to practitioners. A gap occurs between practitioners and Wise Qigong when they are not attuned to Chinese philosophy in its traditional language or taught in a traditional Confucian style.

routine gives her a great sense of stability and security. She was anxious and suffering serious vertigo symptoms before she began qigong. She went for psychotherapy for a year, refused to take the drugs provided by the therapist in her first year of therapy, opting solely for talking therapy. However, since talking therapy did not help alleviate her anxiety and vertigo, she started taking the drugs recommended by the therapist, a regimen that lasted three to four years and which severely affected her liver, according to her—although her doctors did not accept her reasoning. However, she was diagnosed as being in the initial stage of cirrhosis and the zero stage of cervical cancer in the hospital. She suspected the drugs she took over the years damaged her health and so she started turning to qigong for help. She Googled qigong online and found Teng Tian's qigong center. She recalled a somewhat fateful encounter with qigong and Teng Tian while thanking him for paying money to advertise the center online so that she could easily find the center when she needed it.

⁴⁴ During the interview, Anna said, "For instance, after I argued with someone, I could reflect on what I did wrong and accept my errors. That makes sense. But when we are in an argument, knowing that I need to reflect and accept my errors does not help my anger go away instantly. I just cannot do it. Why? I don't know. Maybe Pang can see things more objectively because he has strong self-control. With that high level of self-control, he can rationally analyze and evaluate the situation. But I don't have good self-control. I don't have enough qi in me. I cannot be as objective as him. All Pang's method teaches us to stay objective to the situation. It seems simple. But it is easier said than done. I have not accumulated enough qi in me to be able to reach Pang's level to deal with strong emotions. I think Pang should offer solutions for ordinary people. His advanced way, well, his advanced way is the direct way, the short cut . . . but it is hard to get to his level, his state of peaceful mind. What can I say? I am not powerful enough to transform myself, and I'm troubled by my incapability to do so. 譬如說跟人家吵架，你覺得你反省自己，覺得人家對的，你就，怎麼說？就接受，如果不對的，不理他，就是這麼講，沒有錯的，非常好，但是我們在吵架的時候就不會這樣，做不到，對，我們做不到，為什麼做不到？我不知道為什麼做不到，因為他能夠很客觀地看一些事情，他的控制力很高，在控制力很高的情況下，他可以很理性地分析整個情況，但是我們在這個沒有控制力那麼好的，氣沒有那麼足的，你根本沒有可以這樣客觀，他很客觀的，我覺得他所有的方法，他跳脫出來看這件事情，好像我們覺得有問題，你跳脫出來，這個Anna是這樣覺得，好了，就是這麼容易，但是我覺得我的氣沒有到那個 level 做到這件事情。所以應該龐老師出一個平凡版，他那個高級版的，真的，但是他的高級版真的最直接的。…對對對，那個狀態的問題，還有就是很……怎麼說呢？力量沒有那麼大，就改不到，所以都是一個很苦惱。"

Some practitioners are frustrated by their inability to apply Wise Qigong's solutions because they are left behind without guidance to progress to the advanced state of mind in peace to make the solutions work for them. Such practitioners often leave the practice while others keep trying to find teachers like Wei and Lee Wooi Bok, who can translate Wise Qigong in a modern, logical way using a Western medical vocabulary. However, Wei and Lee Wooi Bok are seen as extremely heterodox instructors who misrepresent Wise Qigong because their teachings do not align with Wise Qigong's unified discourse and their behavior shows disrespect toward Pang.

This internal conflict originates in Wise Qigong's position. Wise Qigong positions itself as Chinese science taught by instructors who learned primarily through a traditional teaching style passed down by their teachers. As Sung emphasized several times in his lecture, the Chinese way of teaching is better because memorization is the first step enabling a student to familiarize himself or herself with a new system while still young and good at memorizing. He compared the traditional Confucian educational system with the modern Western-influenced educational system. He thought that Confucian education emphasizes memorization over analytical thinking, for good reason: (1) children are good at memorization when young irrespective of what is right or wrong before they develop critical thinking; (2) children should learn as much as possible before they are able to think analytically. Otherwise, according to Sung, children may learn nothing; but rebelling defeats the purpose of learning. He argued that memorization allows children to soak themselves deeply in a Chinese literary world to learn about sentimental emotions expressed in poems: when they grow up and feel sentimental in a specific context, the literary texts and the accompanying sentiments that

fit their sentimental feelings will instantly pop up in their minds. Thus, reciting the poems makes them feel understood by the poets. They may feel less lonely since their emotions resonate with ancient people who presented their feelings on paper hundreds of years ago. Sung is saying that a shared existential feeling or emotion between Chinese people expressed by Chinese literary traditions with their meanings and symbols speaks to Chinese readers.

To ensure that Chinese offspring are connected with their ancestors, and to ensure that traditional Chinese literary traditions and the particularly Chinese shapes of emotions described through Chinese texts are being felt, embodied, and passed down to offspring, several Wise Qigong instructors, such as Ju in Shenzhen, have opened traditional Confucian schools for elementary school children. The curriculum includes qigong practice and memorization of Chinese texts and poems such as *dizi gui* 弟子規, providing guidelines that encourage young children to be good people and serve their seniors.

In addition to elementary school teaching, Wise Qigong is also attempting to increase its influence with high school students. The Chinese language and literature teachers at Nan Tou Senior High School 南投中學, a prestigious school known as “the root of education in Shenzhen or *Shenzhen jiaoyu de gen* 深圳教育的根,” established in 1801, organizes selective courses on Chinese literature and cultural embodiment with edited textbooks directly translated from Wise Qigong theory. Three teachers—Mr. Teng, Mrs. Gong, and Mr. Gong—have organized camps, courses, and workshops to induce students to participate in active learning of Chinese literature through qigong learning at historical sites during the summer and in a remodeled, traditional Confucian-

decorated classroom with wooden tables, desks, and Chinese calligraphy in the classroom during the semester. Due to the history and prestige of the school, which is known as “The Phoenix College or *fenghuang shuyuan* 鳳凰書院” in the Qing dynasty, the teachers have gotten funding to improve their students’ understanding of Chinese civilization.

Wise Qigong, with its element of Confucian teaching, attempts to conserve that traditional method. In the modern world where individual differences are valued, and where many people are trained in the Western education system, Wise Qigong’s promotion of the traditional style causes inner conflict or a sense of inapplicability in some students. The contradiction involved in situating Chinese science as part of the tradition and technology makes “serious conservatives” (like Wai Seng Kei, Sung, and Kun) uncomfortable with new modern pseudo-science suitors (like Lee Wooi Bok, Anna, and Cheuk Siu-Kei). The tension between striving for unity and accommodating diversity can be seen in another controversial interaction in a conference between Wei’s interpretation and the conventional embodiment of Wise Qigong.

6. Unity and Diversity

Wai Seng Kei’s decision to manage Wei’s course content was triggered by a conflict that occurred in July 2015 at a conference in Malacca for advanced Wise Qigong instructors in Malaysia. Wei’s student Meng, a local Malaysian female qigong instructor in her fifties, guided the morning’s collective qigong practice. She guided everyone in a non-conventional way to a degree that confused the majority of the senior

instructors, who were unfamiliar with Wei's teachings. The evening discussion turned into a heated debate that divided the conference participants into two factions. Participants, especially leaders of centers from other regions of Malaysia, took turns sharing their thoughts on the morning's collective practice. Practitioners who were familiar with Wei's teachings or who were sympathetic with Meng expressed strong support for her dedication to qigong. The master of ceremonies explained that Meng was the only person who agreed to take on the responsibility of guiding the collective practice because no one wanted to take on this important role. The master of ceremonies praised Meng for her courage in doing this for everyone on short notice and thus lacking sufficient preparation time.

Wai Seng Kei, Sung, Yat Yuet and others were firm, however, in their belief that a unified standard of collective qigong practice should be applied in public to avoid confusion. Sung even described an example involving his classmate, Tee, who was reprimanded by Pang by slightly revising the order of the terms "respect the Dao then respect your teacher 重道尊師 *zhongdao zunshi*" into a common saying, "respect your teacher and then respect the Dao 尊師重道 *zunshi zhongdao*." Tee was punished by not being allowed to guide collective practice in public for years. Sung explained that Pang designed qigong movements to be performed in a certain order for particular reasons that outsiders may not understand. According to Sung, any slight change can alter the energy or vibration within a person, and that can lead to a large change in the collective. What is more, when many people, hundreds or thousands of people, practice qigong, it is very hard to control the flow of collective energy. The guiding person on stage, who serves in a role that is like the conductor of an orchestra, is responsible for ensuring that

every individual member synchronizes well with the collective. A minor mistake by the conductor may lead to confusion among practitioners. For those who are unstable psychologically and emotionally, a slight disruption can lead to physical excitement and emotional explosions. Anything could go wrong in the collective practice that may turn into chaos or worse, a disaster. The responsibility of the instructor is to ensure that the separate pathways of energy flows from practitioners synchronize smoothly with each other, and thus a slight change that disrupts the flow for many practitioners can be a more serious mistake than it appears. Sung touches on the idea of *hunyuan lingtong* 混元靈通 by assembling qi-field from the public, a core doctrine we will discuss later.

After this incident, Wai Seng Kei became convinced that Wei's unorthodox teaching methods, if not "misleading," might seriously affect the formation of orthodox Wise Qigong practice. Wai Seng Kei is seen by Kun as a person who may be a bit extreme or *jiduan* 極端 in his responses and understanding of qigong. However, according to Kun, Wai Seng Kei is also a person who in fact knows Wise Qigong quite deeply and accurately due to his diligence in practicing qigong daily for two decades.

One can argue that the problem Wise Qigong faces in maintaining a unified approach to pedagogy lies in the seclusion of Pang under political pressure. Nevertheless, what may add fuel to Pang's waning leadership is the diversified, personal interpretations of an already expansive, synthesized embodiment of Chinese civilization—Wise Qigong. The lecture Kun delivered on unity and diversity in Wise Qigong at the international Wise Qigong conference in July 2015 indicated a challenging historical moment for Wise Qigong's survival.⁴⁵ His lecture suggested a

⁴⁵ Kun instructed participants to draw a fish prior to attending the conference, and then he compared those drawings during the conference. He asked if anyone had seen exactly the same

way of resolving the fragmented unity among the devoted practitioners as well as external pressure to dissolve Wise Qigong in particular and the qigong industry in general.

7. The Doctrine of Wise Qigong

The Wise Qigong School in the 1980s and 1990s required all students to memorize the Wise Qigong mission statement. It was even included as a question on their final examinations. Sung also asked all senior instructors at the Malacca conference in 2015 to memorize the Wise Qigong mission statement. The mission statement reflects a Communist Revolutionary vision that marks Wise Qigong as the forerunner to all New Qigong with new approaches to lead people of the New China to achieve peak physical and intellectual condition. One of the innovative methods of Wise Qigong is the way qi is conducted and viewed in relation to one's body.

Wise Qigong's revision of traditional qigong, according to Pang, makes it less at risk of qigong deviation or *zuohuo rumo* 走火入魔, a term that refers to indigenous symptoms of "losing one's faculties" (Chen 2003, 79) or being possessed, a state often mentioned in Chinese martial art novellas and Daoist practices. Kun explains that Wise Qigong uses an innovative way of training, through an external connection to qi or *kaifangxing gongfa* 開放性功法, for practitioners to connect with external natural qi

fish in any two of those drawings. No one answered. He thus drew a conclusion, using fish drawings as an analogy to qigong practice, that the fish they drew are similar to qigong practices: they never understand and practice qigong in exactly the same way as others understand and practice qigong, but they practice qigong, like they drew fish on the paper, according to their own experience and imagination. His lecture provided a solution to a diverse tradition where diversity and personal preferences, fueled by prejudice and differences, led to a further division of the already fragmented unity.

(*waiqi* 外氣 and *hunyuan qi* 混元氣) instead of internal qi (*neiqi* 內氣). He suggests that internal qigong practice may involve many difficult, life-and-death moments during one's development that requires the master or someone who knows how to manage a given situation to take care of the practitioner. In contrast, with an external connection to qi the Wise Qigong method is safer. This claim of design uniqueness has made Wise Qigong a new system of qigong that synthesizes traditions yet overcomes the drawbacks involved in qigong teachings in the past. It not only wards off people's fear of what might happen if they do not practice qigong due to the negative impression of qigong deviation, but also encourages more people practice qigong en masse for self-care.

Although Wise Qigong practitioners consider Wise Qigong unlikely to generate qigong deviation, when many practitioners gather to practice qigong as a community, as Sung mentioned, the collective qi may be too stimulating for people who are already emotionally unstable. Sung's reference to qigong deviation as a stigma associated with qigong that scares many others away from practicing is prone to being misunderstood as an unfortunate "side effect" of one's cure without taking into account practitioners' physical and mental conditions prior to qigong practice.

Wise Qigong, they promise, will liberate practitioners from instinctual responses by making a higher intellect available to solve problems in daily life. This revolutionary tone resembles the tone suggested by socialist ideals—the belief that human progress will occur through dialectical and historical materialism.

Happiness, harmony, composure, and respect are key themes in Wise Qigong related to its goal of individual development and pictures shown to the world. Its goal of harmony, happiness, nature, and composure, or *hexie huanchang ziran duanzhuang*

和諧 歡暢 自然 端莊, was even displayed on a red cloth on stage at the international conference in 2015 in Kulai, Johor in Malaysia. To achieve this inner and external balance and harmony lies in Wise Qigong's theory (*hunyuán* holistic theory or *hunyuán zhengti*) and method (establishing a qi-field or *zuchang* 組場).

The *hunyuán* holistic theory starts with accepting that the world originates in a unity, *hunyuán qi* 混元氣, when the yin and yang energy had not been divided or *yinyang weipan* 陰陽未判. The whole purpose of qigong practice is to understand the history of the “scientific” development of the cosmos, and to create a process that blends diverse life forces into one unity. The parts should serve the whole, like an individual walking on the right path, the Confucian middle way, to contribute one's strength to society. This leads to a term that all Wise Qigong practitioners use frequently, *hunyuán lingtong* 混元靈通, meaning that when diverse qi blends well into one, everything works efficaciously (*ling* 靈) and smoothly (*tong* 通).

When qi is not flowing smoothly, things do not work out. No efficacy of *ling* works, and people feel emotional and physical pain. This becomes the foundation of the concept of *tongze butong tongze butong* 痛則不通 通則不痛. This literally means that when you feel pain, there is blockage; when the blockage is gone, you feel no pain. When qigong's concepts of pain and blockage are applied at the individual level, all inflexible thinking and illness are caused by blockages, and vice versa. Once one's meridians are blocked, the pure universal energy cannot enter.

This universal energy could be extended to representations of a utopic Other, or a greater self, as Wise Qigong argues. We will elaborate on this idea in coming chapters. When there is mental and physical blockage, one is being kept in one's insular and stale

circle that creates an unstable or unhealthy condition for health and well-being. However, through qigong meditation practices, one has to unlearn what one has learned from society, and to re-discover a natural way to link with the Dao, or the universe, by unblocking the blockages step by step. Sometimes, in the “unblocking” process, it is difficult to endure what is called a reversible reaction or *liangong fanying* 練功反應.

According to Wise Qigong’s healing cases as demonstrated by its professional healers, many patients undergo symptoms that appear to be worse in the process of unblocking the blockages before the disease can be healed. They explain that the reversible reaction is a sign that toxic elements are being released from one’s body before health returns. Metaphorically, to survive a painful recovery through the process of reversible reaction means self-growth spiritually and physically. After a painful recovery, one becomes stronger in mind and body. Persistence in qigong practice in an effort to overcome painful recovery leads to *haogong* 耗功 in Wise Qigong. This term literally means “consumption” of qigong through time and effort. Many practitioners exhibit a passion attitude toward *haogong*, as it were “toughing it out when the going gets tough” in qigong practice when pain increases, which is often directly recognized as *liangong fanying*, seeing it as darkest just before dawn.

When pain disappears, blockages are unblocked (*tong* 通), which is a sign of qi efficacy (*ling* 靈). It is also a manifestation of *hunyuan* holistic theory, wherein the parts and the whole are blended and synchronized into a unity. This concept leads to the qigong practice of establishing a qi-field or *zuchang* 組場, the distinctive innovation of Wise Qigong. Practitioners establish qi-fields through a ritual at the beginning of every qigong session. Students are trained to be connected to other Wise Qigong practitioners

all over the world to maximize their collective energy to heal the individual through collective synthesis of energy while all contribute their own energy to the collective.

Hunyuan holistic theory and the practice of establishing a qi-field both imply a self – other relationship in a community.

On the self–other level, Wise Qigong practitioners believe that diverse energies can be united if the commander (any trained person) can maintain stillness in consciousness to combine the diverse energy by unblocking blockages (differences between each individual energy field) and synthesizing all the distinct areas into one whole. This skill for fully empathizing with oneself while at the same time being objective and subjective is the foundation of all qigong healing approaches.

On an individual–social level, Wise Qigong (1) adopts the Buddhist philosophy as the core of its theory in consciousness training, (2) assimilates Daoist and Chinese martial art teachings into meditation practice, and (3) follows the Confucian attitude of making social contribution. To maximize one’s social service, one has to reform oneself *physically* into good health, *intellectually* into wisdom and empathy, and *functionally* as one discovers and plays to one’s strengths, especially at the level of ESP, or the advanced way of living.

For Wise Qigong practitioners, any progress towards self-development and any breakthrough in healing are based on one’s reaching the advanced way of living under Wise Qigong’s instruction. As the teachings instruct practitioners, the highest purpose in performing qigong is to advance to a second mode of life where people live long lives like deities—peaceful, happy, and healthy. “What is the purpose of living a long life

and doing qigong all day being happy and healthy?” I asked Sung in the car on the way to the Kee Thangs’s house party. “What is the purpose of working and making money in life? What is the purpose of life?” he answered. What he meant was that the most important thing in life is developing a sense of purpose through self-improvement. Wise Qigong, while developing from the Buddhist tradition of using consciousness mindfully, expands the mindfulness-developing category into physical form for wellness, health, and longevity.

The advanced way of life promised by Wise Qigong is based on Tri-Matter Theory or The Theory of Three Layers of Substance 三層物質理論.⁴⁶ According to Teng Tiang, it is a “scientific” theoretical discourse designed to prove the merits of the advanced way of life, which is the foundation of Wise Qigong. Pang’s Tri-Matter Theory, written in 1998, is a complicated theory in the language of physics that explains energy, materiality and the message.⁴⁷ Kun summarizes Tri-Matter Theory to outsiders in simpler language: The current scientific development recognizes only mass/energy equivalence ($E=MC^2$), which means anything having mass has an equivalent amount of energy and vice versa. However, Wise Qigong argues that *hunyuan* qi as a message 信息 or information with intent should be added to the mass/energy equivalence equation.

In other words, Wise Qigong promotes mass/energy–information/intent equivalence, which means (1) anything having mass has an equivalent amount of energy and vice versa, (2) anything having mass has an equivalent amount of information/intent

⁴⁶ Lee Wooi Bok mentioned the confusing English terminology involved in translating this complicated Wise Qigong scientific theory. The conference held at Tongji University used “Tri-matter theory” while the Xi-an 西安 Wise Qigong group uses “The Theory of Three Layers of Substance” in their conference advertisement.

⁴⁷ The energy, materiality and message is 能量、物質、信息 in Chinese.

and vice versa, and (3) anything having information/intent has an equivalent amount of energy and vice versa.

Wise Qigong further suggests three conditions whereby mass, energy, and information/intent alternate being manifested while the other are hidden: (1) when mass manifests physically, energy and information/intent are hidden; (2) when energy manifests physically, mass and information/intent are hidden; (3) when information/intent manifests physically, mass/energy are hidden.⁴⁸

Lee Wooi Bok points out the blurry part of this theory about the interpretation of qi, which happens at the level of logic as well as at the level of students' understanding. First, he asks whether qi is a form of energy or a form of information/intent. It cannot be both at the same time, as the theory claims. He considers himself a serious scientific researcher and has to determine whether qigong healing is energetic healing or information/intent healing.⁴⁹

Second, he revealed a barrier to understanding the new theory when most of his students who first were being introduced to the concept of qi in three forms: matter, qi, and mind (形氣神). With this idea, qi as matter, qi, and mind, it is more difficult for students to accept qi as information/intent (or “*hunyuan*”).⁵⁰ Lee Wooi Bok further points out that the three parallel interpretations of qi proffered by various Wise Qigong

⁴⁸ Kun's original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: 目前科學公認的物質只有實體性物質(質量)和場性物質(能量),且質能是守恆的($E=MC^2$)。智能氣功認為混元氣(信息)是第三層物的存在形式,質-能-信息守恆,且任一物質同時具有這三種存在形式,只不過以實體物顯現時能量與信息處於隱伏狀態;以場性顯現時質量與信息處於隱伏狀態;以信息顯現時質量與能量處於隱伏狀態。

⁴⁹ Lee Wooi Bok's original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: ...到底要如何詮釋氣?大家也得明確點。氣是能量?還是信息?外氣治病是能量治病,或者是信息在起作用?我們搞研究的都得很清楚。

⁵⁰ Lee Wooi Bok's original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: 意即如果先學習了形氣神,先入為主的認為氣,就僅是一種能量,再理解為混元就比較難接受。

teachers conflict with each other internally and thus are confusing to practitioners. First, qi is interpreted as information/intent in the Tri-Matter Theory of healing or as ESP in the advanced way of life. Second, qi is interpreted as energy in the theory of matter, qi, and mind (形氣神), which is widely accepted by general public. Third, three categories of qi exist in the human body: external qi from humans' limbs (*quti hunyuanqi* 軀體混元氣), internal qi from humans' organs (*zangzhen hunyuanqi* 臟真混元氣), and the qi of consciousness of the mind (*yiyuanti* 意元體), which is taught in Wise Qigong's beginner's courses.⁵¹

Lee Wooi Bok suggests that Wise Qigong's internally inconsistent categories of qi confuse many practitioners. He suggests that Tri-Matter Theory aims to include human consciousness as information/intent, and this theory could be proven by conducting experiments to show how information/intent could be transformed into energy. Wise Qigong's theory further proposes the original *hunyuan* qi as a simple message that contains information/intent and *hunyuan zi* (混元子), the smallest unit of *hunyuan qi*, as the unit where messages are exchanged. Lee Wooi Bok considers these theoretical proposals too deep for most in the general population.⁵² Lee Wooi Bok draws on terahertz radiation as an example of a scientific research finding that suggests a field of wavelengths as also a form of energy—a discovery that is close to Wise Qigong's argument but is yet to be proved.

⁵¹ Lee Wooi Bok's original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: 既然說人的氣包括了軀體混元氣、臟真混元氣及意元體，那三層物質理論說的意識是一種信息跟形氣神說法的“氣是一種能量”，就可能讓好些人糊塗了。教學時，問到這個，絕大部分同學都沒法答覆。

⁵² Lee Wooi Bok's original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: 三層物質理論說信息能轉化為能量，更重要的是人的意識是一種信息。個人認為一切實驗都該以驗證“意識是一種信息，信息可以轉化為能量”為主。我們說原始混元氣屬於簡單信息、混元子可以稱為信息點。可是這些概念太尖端，一般人不好理解。延伸過去太赫茲 (terahertz) 是種磁場，是能量物質，但我們也同時說氣是一種信息，又說信息跟能量是不同層次的物質，估計又是好多人難理解。面對嚴謹科研，這是重要環節。

Wise Qigong's practitioners with scientific backgrounds tend to equate scientific discovery with Wise Qigong discovery. When there are similarities, they believe, scientific research proves Wise Qigong's theory to be correct, truthful, and convincing. This provides post hoc confirmation to support Wise Qigong through science, instead of the other way around, as Wise Qigong claims that it supports science by leading science and Western medicine away from their weakness, the blindside of logical thinking. This drawing of terahertz radiation together with Tri-Matter Theory, in fact, confirms Wise Qigong practitioners' desire for Wise Qigong theory to be recognized as a scientific theory. However, such a post hoc rationalization should not be a problem for practitioners because Wise Qigong Theory is supposed to be more advanced than science in the first place. The gap between scientific research and Wise Qigong Theory is not due to the backwardness of Wise Qigong, as many skeptics see it. The problem lies in practitioners' slowness in making qigong progress. This implies the need for more diligent work in qigong practices as well as experiments through which to develop one's wisdom and intellect in ESP so that one can prove the depth of Wise Qigong wisdom. In short, the problem lies in practitioners' lack of practice (which can and should be improved by their devotion and actions).

Although most Wise Qigong practitioners accept what Pang proposes, the Tri-Matter theory can be too complicated and too new for many devotees to fully understand. According to Lee Wooi Bok, the problem with Tri-Matter Theory lies in how Wise Qigong distinguishes qi energy from qi information/intent, seeing them as separate categories. With this distinction learned from the beginning of the teaching, devoted practitioners find Tri-Matter Theory hard to comprehend because they find it difficult

to understand how the two distinct materials can be the same material. This seems logically impossible. For instance, if information/intent is unlimited in time and space, then is energy unlimited in time and space? Lee Wooi Bok said, “Energy can be shielded, but not information. How can information/intention sent from 7,330 miles away produce photons? The energy travelled 7,330 miles? Nope. It was the intent (of a human) or the information of a human that consists of all kinds of energies within. With the intention of working to trigger the photomultiplier, the information/intent has brought the change of intent to the photon.” Here, his position supporting Tri-Matter Theory, which sees qi as information/intent, posits the proactive use of one’s consciousness as the nexus of all transformation. However, many of his students find this doctrine confusing. Lee Wooi Bok thinks there are two major aspects that make it difficult for Wise Qigong’s science to be taken seriously internationally.

First, the definitions are loose when translated from Chinese qigong theories into scientific terminologies in English.⁵³ Second, qigong experiments are not persuasive because (1) most qigong devotees cannot yet accept Tri-Matter Theory; (2) qigong experiments mean very little from the standpoint of scientific standards; and (3) even the most persuasive qigong experiments are seen as exceptions or rare cases.⁵⁴ Lee Wooi

⁵³ Lee Wooi Bok’s original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: 當然，如果這些研究僅是要在中國內氣功圈內發表，那可能就不必說清楚。但這不是嚴謹科學研究。中文文化跟英文文化有很大的差別，英文內一個字眼就代表一個事物，嚴格的說，英文內是沒有同義詞的，中文則不一樣。If the terminologies are not clearly defined, it can be very frustrating.

⁵⁴ Lee Wooi Bok’s original words in our written correspondence in Chinese: 過去的一切三層物質理論實驗，都是說發氣，如發氣生磁、生光、生電。而絕大部分的練功人都認為氣是種能量，絕大部分練智能氣功者都不清楚混元的概念（看看程博士上海的峰會），更別說海外科研者。那近距實驗就被認為是能量A轉化為能量B，屬於現代科學領域的東西，僅證明成功實驗者功力高，說服力不大。從科研眼光來看，這是低端的實驗。而且這個模式的實驗也著實夠多了。我們發表在Nonlocality Journal “氣功的信息-能量 生物等恆：以龐明的三層物質理論來解說外氣治療的機理” 報告內就提出了接近20個。孫儲琳發氣種子可以在數分鐘內發芽，給日本請去了研究，連ATP的變化都測出來，但是科學界完全當“又來了個特別人”來對待，就如蘇聯當年的生電人（燈泡拿在手中就亮了），給傳為故事。轉看海外，意大利佬7千里外生光實驗，說的是意識生光；國際意識研究所做的遠程意識主導REG隨機事項啟動儀，拉丁做的遠程雙

Bok demonstrates an objective evaluation of Wise Qigong's limits both as a scientist and as a qigong practitioner. However, a physics professor from Tsing Hua University 清華大學 refutes Wise Qigong's Tri-Matter Theory as “nonsense” (*hushuo badao* 胡說八道).

The Tri-Matter Theory is a new direction that Wise Qigong has taken recently. A regional conference was held in 2016 and an international conference was held in 2018 to elaborate on the application of Tri-Matter Theory.⁵⁵ Since Wise Qigong promotes self-control or the conscious use of qi as the most important element of the training, Tri-Matter Theory supports the concept that human consciousness or desire is the basis of transformation. Kun suggests that, “from the message/intent level, all time-space is reachable, there is no distinction between past, present, and future 信息層面是時空整體的，沒有過去、現在、未來。” He later confirmed with me that if all time-space is reachable at the message/intent level, then, with the flow of consciousness, all is

縫實驗，說的都是意念，實驗的名稱、概念、目標都很明確。

⁵⁵ President Xi Jin Ping is friendlier than previous leaders toward qigong, as he emphasizes the development of traditional Chinese culture. Wise qigong practitioners have even claimed that Xi learned qigong when he was younger. The practitioner from Hong Kong said that a family member of Xi's was ill and was treated by a qigong healer when the political environment was more open to qigong activities. In 2017 qigong was incorporated as a competitive sporting activity in the National Games of the People's Republic of China 全運會. On June 10, 2017 Zhu Qing, a member of the Chinese Academy of Science, gave a lecture on “using your body to observe the Zhen Qi and the Qi pulse 用身體觀察真氣和氣脈” at the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine 北京中醫藥大學. The lecture was well-received by the audience while Zhu Qing mentioned how his Zhen qi practices had brought happiness to his life. Official Chinese media reported the lecture with highlights. For instance, *Youth China*, a Chinese Young Communist newspaper, reported how the qi practice has been developing as long as Chinese history, for five thousand years—qi practices could be found in the Yellow Emperor's Canon of Classic Medicine or *huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經, and in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. According to *Youth China*, the practice of qi has been a part of Chinese culture and moral ethics. The qi practice has become the foundation and essence of Chinese civilization. Online newspaper <http://www.ntdtv.com/xtr/b5/2017/07/11/a1332937.html> accessed on June 15, 2018.

possible “所以信息面看來 (1) 可以穿越時空 (2) 意識流動 - 什麼都有可能.”⁵⁶

The message of “all is possible” or “impossible means I’m possible” is pervasive in Wise Qigong training. Belief is the basis of the existence of qi, of action to control qi, and of the transformation of qi and substance in an object. That is the core of healing, self-development, and transcendence of one’s body, sickness, and all restrictions. This point is elaborated further in the next two chapters. We turn next to consider my relationship and connection with my interlocutors at the Wise Qigong and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary.

8. My Engagement with the Wise Qigong and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary

I met Dolly and Chen in person in 2006 at their center. When I started my master’s degree fieldwork on qigong in 2005 and 2006, an alumnus’s wife from my alma mater in Taiwan, Ting Ting, knew about my research topic on qigong and urged me to visit the Penang Wise Qigong Society. She had many friends who were fervid Wise Qigong participants and told me that Wise Qigong was growing and I could not ignore it as a researcher. I took her advice, followed the address she gave me, and checked out the Penang Wise Qigong Society in the Jelutong area. It was a plain office located on the third floor of an old flat with stale wall-to-wall carpeting. Pang’s picture hung on the wall facing the door so that no one could miss the picture when walking in. However, this center did not make an impression on me because it was very office-like: the tables and chairs were set up to accommodate meetings only. People in the center seemed busy with administrative work and planning logistics for events. There was no

⁵⁶ Personal communication on the Chinese social media site WeChat on June 14, 2018.

theme or decoration in the office that expressed the institution's personality. I left the office quickly having found nothing worth noting.

A decade later, on a train to Malacca with Penang Wise Qigong Society members to a conference, I learned that the center was where Chen lived. No wonder that, during my visit to the center in 2006, a female member in her fifties, Ms. Fan, told me to visit Chen's Wise Qigong station in Pulau Tikus. That was a memorable visit.

It was a sunny morning. As I walked in from the lane into the residential area trying to find the center along rows of beautiful houses, I saw a white building with a large empty garden covered with grass that was somewhere between light green and light brown. There were several cars parked beside the garden. Two local female senior citizens in their sixties or seventies walked out of a car that had just parked, wearing casual, loose exercise outfits. I followed them into the center. They went upstairs directly without talking to me. As I browsed around and looked at the center's bulletin board, I noticed pictures of several senior "aunties" conducting "experiments," comparing the differences between the onions to which they sent qi and those to which they did not. The onions to which they sent qi everyday were taller and looked more vibrant. Yet I was unimpressed by and bored with the visual testimonies of qigong practitioners.

Then the center's manager, Dolly, with whom I had communicated in English first and then switched to Chinese over the phone, walked by. She led me into the office, explained to me the classes they offered, and showed me piles of Wise Qigong books on a table and more on a bookshelf. I flipped through some of the books, which included testimonies to qigong healing, Q&A guides to qigong techniques, and treatises

promulgating technical qigong theories in academic language that were hard to penetrate in a few glances on a hot humid day on a tropical island. As I was waiting for Chen to return for a class, Dolly let me go upstairs to see people practicing qigong. The two senior women whom I saw earlier were practicing qigong in a bright room. The sun lit up their faces and illuminated their wrinkled skin. They were quiet and elegant. The room was filled with otherworldly serenity as they danced in slow motion. With their eyes closed, they were not aware of my presence, and were seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were performing in front of me. I stared at them, sensing an unknown, magnetic force within them. I was touched by their inward-looking focus and the artistic aesthetics they displayed from the inside out. As I was wondering what that magnetic force was, Dolly came and called me to meet with Chen downstairs.

Shifting from an otherworldly feeling back to the ordinary world, my short meeting with Chen was mundane and dull: I introduced myself briefly, mentioning that I was conducting qigong research in Penang. Chen then described Wise Qigong, explaining its contribution to theory and its mission. His facial expression as he ran through a list of grand contributions of Wise Qigong seemed distant. My impression of the center, however, was influenced by the vibrant energy I sensed from Dolly and the two practitioners; I noticed a long list of student names on the bulletin board, with many diverse qigong classes offered.⁵⁷

In January 2011, I returned to Penang for preliminary fieldwork. I visited the center again, this time with my mother. We walked down the lane and found the

⁵⁷ This discovery resonates with Ackerman and Lee's observation (1997, 81) about lay devotees possessing "know how" (81), such as networks for promoting their faith broadly, and social skills and management resources enabling them to organize events to gain greater social recognition.

townhouse again. To my disappointment, the center was quiet and desolate. Chen was not there. A man in his forties from mainland China has taken over the place. He was Sung, who seemed reluctant to speak to me. I introduced myself, the purpose of my visit, and handed him my researcher's name card. I then asked about his qigong courses. Sung was a man of a few words. He told me he taught only one course, for advanced practitioners: if I wanted information about beginners' courses, I would have to wait for Wen to come back because she was the instructor for most of those courses. I thought Wen was a local administrative manager like Dolly. I learned in 2016 that Wen was not only the center's registered owner but also a popular instructor among students ranging in age from thirty to eighty.⁵⁸

A car drove into the parking lot. A woman in her late thirties holding a four-year-old girl in a pink dress walked into the center. The little girl ran into the room and started dancing and singing on stage. Shocked by the difference in the impression I had of the center in 2006 when meeting Dolly and the encounter with an otherworldly space with two local practitioners, the family-owned business style of Sung and Wen and the little girl raised some questions about Wise Qigong. What is this organization? Why do

⁵⁸ Given the division of labor between Sung and Wen as a household couple and business partners, we can see the Chinese patriarchal stereotype of males in charge of directions and theory development and females in charge of mundane details and teaching logistics. A hierarchy of senior and junior is also implied—Wen referred to Sung as her big brother *da shi xiong* 大師兄 or her senior as he was among the first cohort of students who had been taught in person by Pang, while Wen was enrolled in the same program many years later. From Sung's dismissive attitude toward my questions about course enrollment details in 2012, he gave me impression that he was ranked higher, and made me think of Wen as the center's manager or secretary. Actually, the center's local manager is Mrs. Cheung, a Malaysian Chinese who graduated from the University of Malaya, a smart woman and a mother of two. She, like Wei, had introduced qigong to many among her family and friends, sharing a profound embodiment of Chinese civilization with healing effects, which induced them to enroll in Wen's and Sung's courses, which at the same time brings tuition fees and social recognition to qigong instructors.

these Chinese instructors appear and disappear like nomads? Why have Chen and Dolly disappeared? Who is Sung and who is Wen? Why did they appear and take over the center? Are they con artists? With these questions in mind, I started to feel uneasy and skeptical about Wise Qigong. I took my mother with me and left the center quickly.

In the summer of 2012, I visited Penang again for a second round of preliminary fieldwork. Mr. Kim, a local architect, a Christian, and an alumnus of my alma mater in Taiwan, took me on a half-day city tour to heritage sites and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, which his architect colleagues built. From there I saw an advertisement about a Wise Qigong lecture scheduled and delivered by Hong, an instructor from mainland China who taught qigong in Ipoh, scheduled to take place soon. I attended the lecture. Bodhi Heart Sanctuary hired a female Malaysian Chinese translator in her early thirties to interpret Hong's Mandarin Chinese lecture into English. However, the translator did not practice qigong or understand any Buddhist ideas so her translation was out of sync with Hong's lecture. Hor Kwei Loon, a Malaysian Chinese man in his mid-fifties, a speaker on Buddhism for forty years, and the manager of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary since 2007, helped the translator with her interpretation.⁵⁹ Although he claimed that he did not speak Mandarin Chinese at all, his translation was quite accurate. I introduced myself to Hor after the talk, thanking him for the translation. He told me he speaks only Cantonese and was merely guessing at what Hong was saying in Mandarin Chinese. Nevertheless, because he practiced qigong and Buddhist meditation, he could grasp the essence of

⁵⁹ During the qigong course that Yi conducted at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, a male Malaysian Chinese translator in his early thirties was hired to interpret Yi's Mandarin Chinese lecture into English. According to local English-educated practitioners, however, the translation did not capture the essence of qigong, exposing the translator as a non-qigong practitioner. These two incidences show that qigong courses can be translated accurately only by someone who has similar qigong experiences and the language skills to interpret a qigong instructor's words.

Hong's lecture and translate it into English. He knew I was conducting research on qigong in Penang and would return for a longer time for my doctoral research.

I returned to Penang in July 2014, focusing intensively for three months on the Spiritual Healing Qigong Association,⁶⁰ the organization on which I wrote my master's thesis. I visited Bodhi Heart Sanctuary in October 2014 to attend Hor's *dharma* lecture. However, Hor was out for an event. Chan, a frequent participant in and donor to Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, gave a *dharma* talk instead. After his talk, I introduced myself to him and asked him for information about qigong classes. He referred me to Mrs. Chan, who was a serious Wise Qigong practitioner and was part of the core group that hosted Yi, a senior Wise Qigong instructor from Beijing. Mrs. Chan kept telling me how great Yi was as a teacher and healer and that I should not miss his course during his visit in March 2015. Her good words about Yi aroused my curiosity. To be notified of Yi's qigong course in March, Mrs. Chan told me to contact Lin, who was in charge of course enrollment and student contacts.⁶¹

⁶⁰ The members of the Association in 2014-2015 were mostly English-educated Chinese around forty to sixty years of age whose occupations ranged from homemaker to doctor to salesperson to artist to manager of a private cosmetics company to staff member of an international school to businessperson to teacher, etc.

⁶¹ Several retired couples were frequent participants in Bodhi Heart Sanctuary lectures (the Chan, Fat, Hein, Iris, Ann, Victoria, YT, and Ai couples, to list a few). They are Chinese Malaysians mostly with children who had begun building their own families. Their pre-retirement occupations included school teacher, local bank manager, high-tech company engineer, businessperson, pharmacist, lawyer, management consultant, etc. English is the main language spoken in class and post-class potlucks at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. Most regular attendees are English-educated but speak Hokkien Chinese, Malay, and/or Cantonese. A few are Chinese-educated who speak Hokkien Chinese, Malay, and/or Cantonese. They had participated together in meditation retreats in Burma or Malaysia. They launched life-freeing activity projects monthly. They provide scholarships and deliver food to the poor through house visits. They visit retirement homes before Chinese New Year to care for residents—bathing them, feeding them, and entertaining them. I participated in the life-freeing activity and visit to the retirement home. I was urged by Chan to entertain the elders by singing a song by Teresa Teng Li Chun 鄧麗君.

While waiting for Yi's course from October to March, when the course would be offered, I continued my participation in the Spiritual Healing Qigong Association, whose members are mainly English-educated Chinese. Meanwhile I also visited two qigong groups, Guo Lin Qigong 郭林氣功 in the park, led by Mrs. Fong, and the qigong healing group led by Loon. Both Mrs. Fong and Loon are Chinese-educated Chinese women. Mrs. Fong was a homemaker throughout her life and was then in her sixties. As a widow, she recalled her husband slapping her. Now as a grandmother sharing her house with her daughter and son-in-law, she helps her daughter with their family business by packing and shipping products, cooking for the family, and taking care of her three-year-old grandson. Loon, who graduated from a university in the United States, returned to Penang to work for the company under the supervision of my father. That was the reason my family had lived in Penang. I went to The International School of Penang (Uplands), where Christine works as a teacher. Christine is the wife of the leader of the Qigong Association, where I stayed for two months in 2005 during my preliminary master's fieldwork.

In addition to attending their regular qigong practices, the leaders of the three aforementioned organizations invited me to family events throughout my 2014 – 2016 stay in Penang, including a Chinese New Year family reunion dinner at home, family tomb-sweeping activities in graveyards on Tomb Sweeping day, and funeral ceremonies for family only to worship their ancestors together. I attended those activities both as a researcher from the United States and as a family friend from Taiwan. Their family members also met my mother when she visited me for two months from July to September 2014 and during the Chinese New Year in 2015. In March I then started my

qigong learning with Yi at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, which lasted for two weeks. After he left Penang, I continued to practice qigong at the Wise Qigong Penang Gelugor station led by Peng Chew, a consultant with a Harvard degree and a donor to Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. Peng Chew told me about the international Wise Qigong conference in Kulai, Johor, in July 2015, which would be conducted in Mandarin Chinese, a language Peng Chew does not speak as an English-educated Chinese. Most members of the Wise Qigong Penang Gelugor station were English-educated and no one was planning to attend the conference due to the language barrier and schedule conflicts. However, Peng Chew knew the leaders of the Persatuan Qigong HuaXia Pualau Pinang 華夏氣功智能文化中心 would attend the conference and put me in contact with them to travel together to Kulai, Johor, Malaysia as Wise Qigong Penang participants.

On the way to the conference on the plane, I sat next to Sung, whom I realized was the person I met in 2012. He recognized me as a Taiwanese doctoral student from America and he remembered my mother. Mrs. Cheung, the center's local manager, a graduate of the University of Malaya and a mother for two in her forties, was with us on the trip. I was with Sung all the time during the conference. As one of Pang's first cohort of students, Sung connected me to colleagues and friends who had been serious promoters of Wise Qigong for their entire careers. At the conference, I met Wei, Kun, Lee Wooi Bok, Zhou,⁶² the Kee Thangs and several others. Returning from the conference, I started taking Sung's theoretical Wise Qigong course both at his center

⁶² Zhou is a senior male Wise Qigong instructor from mainland China in his forties. He started his training in martial arts when he was little. He translated his knowledge of martial arts into Wise Qigong teachings. He is currently a professional Wise Qigong healer in Guangdong. He has many middle-class patients with heart problems, cancer, or diabetes. He was Wen's classmate in the Wise Qigong professional instructor's program.

(Persatuan Qigong Huaxia Pualau Pinang) and at the Penang Wise Qigong Society with Wise Qigong senior instructors. I met and interviewed several Penang Chinese Wise Qigong practitioners from both centers. These middle-class people ranged in age from about forty to about eighty years old, and included both men and women.

During my course work in Persatuan Qigong Huaxia Pualau Pinang, I connected with many local practitioners. In the weekly theory class at the Penang Wise Qigong Society, I met the president, Wai Seng Kei, and other senior practitioners such as Yat Yuet, Ms. Fan, and others. With them, I went on a train to a conference in Malacca devoted to elevating Wise Qigong senior instructors' mastery. At that conference, I met Mrs. Loh, the manager of the Penang Butterworth Station. She enrolled me in Kun's courses at Butterworth for two months, in October and November 2015. From there, I practiced qigong and interviewed several local female qigong practitioners from the middle class and lower classes who were forty to seventy years old.

In December, Wei conducted a five-day workshop in which I participated. At that workshop, I met the Kee Thangs and their friends. The style of Wei's class and other students' responses was different from what I experienced in other qigong courses. Both Wei and his students focus more on self-reflection, guilty emotions, love, responsibilities, and caring in the Chinese Confucian patriliney in the name of Wise Qigong. They practiced the first-level Wise Qigong movement The Lift-Qi Up Method, or *Peng Qi Guan Din Fa* 捧氣貫頂法, with Wei's reminder that form was less important than emotions and feelings when carrying out a qigong movement. Wei even quoted Pang's new interpretation of *deyi wangxing* 得意忘形, explaining how one qigong

practitioner forgot about his form (the correct posture and movement) due to immersing himself so deeply in the essence and emotions.

Wei's reminder differs from other instructors' teaching of Wise Qigong. Although Wei's teachings align with Pang's reminder to prioritize inner feelings over concerns with form in formal collective practice,⁶³ his emphasis on individual freedom of form differs from that of other instructors. Both Kun, based on his martial arts background, and Sung, based on Pang's face-to-face teachings, believe that correct posture generates positive energy flow in the body, which is crucial for healing. With an extended reading of Kun's and Sung's positions, *deyi wangxing* 得意忘形 describes the state in which the practitioner is so focused in her practice that she forgets herself, including her control over the form. However, before reaching that state, one has to practice many times to get the posture right in the first place. There are many conflicting elements of pedagogy and new interpretations of Wise Qigong in Wei's teachings.

In addition, I also visited Lee Wooi Bok's pharmacy and interviewed him for two hours. I participated once in Lee Wooi Bok's Wise Qigong station at the Penang Chung Lin Private High School. At the same high school, Penang Wise Qigong held a one-day session led by Sung. I participated in that event and met Hong. I interviewed him for an hour at the location.

I left Penang in January 2016 and traveled to Hong Kong in February 2016. Through Sung, I connected to Sung's classmate, Teng Tian, in Hong Kong. I took his course for three months and twice accompanied him to a conference and qigong camp

⁶³ This is written in Pang's book, *Introduction to Wise Qigong* (智能氣功入門): “需要注意的是，糾正姿勢的鍛煉，不可在正式練功時去體會，而應在非正式練功時，對照要求逐個仔細體查。否則，就違犯了練功時要專一、集中的要求，從而影響練功效果。”

in Shenzhen. I also traveled with him to an international Wise Qigong conference in Kuala Lumpur with three other Hong Kong practitioners including Cheuk Siu-Kei. At his center, I interviewed many middle-class qigong practitioners ranging from thirty to ninety years old, including a Chinese Catholic nun who was fifty years old.

A conference themed “The International Academic Symposium on the Tripartite Matter Theory” was organized in May 2016, first at Fudan University and then later moved to Tongji University in Shanghai. The theme of the conference reflects Wise Qigong’s doctrine deeply—the three-level materiality theory (三層物質理論) of mind, matter, and qi (形神氣)—but without being blatant about qigong to avoid threatening emotions and arousing fear in lay people and the government. The practitioners at the Shenzhen conference in April, 2015 were very excited about it: Yuan, a Wise Qigong instructor, a Western medical doctor with training in Chinese medicine, and many other Wise Qigong practitioners in China were fervidly conducting scientific qigong research on producing electricity, the mode of quantum distribution, and magnetism.

In Shenzhen, there are ten to twenty practitioners, including a PhD postdoctoral researcher majoring in molecular biology, who work collectively and regularly “doing qigong experiments” on the production of heat, electricity, magnetism, etc. One instructor even announced the conference excitedly on stage, welcoming participants to register creative new experiments. They then shared the news of some groups they knew who had designed experiments to show the effects and efficacy of qi. Some manipulate qi to generate electricity. Some manipulate qi to lose weight. Some senior practitioners send qi to union plants to increase productivity and growth. The conference was like a

competition over “scientific” experimental design to demonstrate the power of qi. During the conference in Shenzhen, Teng Tian mentioned that people he knew in Hebei and Beijing province broke the record for their collective experiments. Many seemed excited about the upcoming conference. At the Shenzhen conference, the master of ceremonies mentioned how many practitioners around China were working hard to find time in their tight of work and family schedules 排開家庭因素 to come together to conduct experiments for Wise Qigong.

The passion Wise Qigong instills in practitioners to design and demonstrate “scientific research” *keyan* 科（學）研（究） experiments to prove the Truth of Dao 證道 is seen similarly in America in the 1960s – 1970s camp of Objectivity. This organization also attracted college students, philosophy professors and elites. In this research, Shermer defines what science is not, and what science is: “Science is not the affirmation of a set of beliefs but a process of inquiry aimed at building a testable body of knowledge constantly open to rejection or confirmation” (Shermer 1997, 124). He explains that, when “a truth becomes more important than the *search* for truth, when the final results of inquiry become more important than the *process* of inquiry, when reason leads to so absolute a certainty about one’s beliefs that anyone who is not for them is anathematized as against them, and when supposedly intellectual inquiry becomes the basis of a personality cult,” one has abandoned science (Shermer 1997, 114).

Some online critics are suspicious regarding the real efficacy of Wise Qigong, as many skeptics are toward all qigong disciplines. This skepticism leads some critics to see qigong groups as cults, or at least as being cultish. The characteristics of a cult, according to Shermer (1997, 119 – 120), include several traits:

1. “Veneration of the leader”: showing respect for the leader, his invention, and the traditions he brings to his students.
2. “Inerrancy of the leader”: a belief that the leader is an advanced human being with great morality or character and that he cannot be wrong in any sense.
3. “Omniscience of the leader”: total acceptance of all the leader’s ideas in every respect and in all subjects ranging from philosophical thinking to mundane triviality.
4. “Persuasive techniques”: employing a range of approaches, from illustration to enticing showcases to proving the validity of the group to recruit others.
5. “Hidden agendas”: the true nature of the goals and missions of the group is not disclosed fully to the public.
6. “Deceit”: some information of the society is withheld by the inner circle. It is a social system that is not transparent, hiding some embarrassing events that would bring a negative image to the group.
7. “Financial exploitation”: devotees and recruits are asked to donate money for the development of the group.
8. “Absolute truth”: a strong faith that the leader or the group has obtained the highest level of truth
9. “Absolute morality”: a strong faith that the leader or the group has developed a system of moral standards that apply to all human beings. Those who practice the moral values will be accepted as better human beings; those who do not practice them will be dismissed as outsiders.

Wise Qigong of course would dispute the impression that Wise Qigong is cultish insofar as several Wise Qigong masters even refute the religious nature of Wise Qigong. Kun, in his qigong 101 class, preached with pride that Wise Qigong, unlike Falungung, has transcended religious influence, becoming a new school of qigong that is atheist-oriented. This is a historical adaptation or reformation of qigong, partly due to the Chinese Communist Party's influence in reshaping qigong "in the service of building a New China" in the 1950s and early 1960s (Palmer 2007, 5). However, Sung suggests that Wise Qigong has a religious nature within it, because faith is fundamental to healing or self-transformation (信則靈 *xin ze ling*). Wise Qigong's masters' responses to criticisms of Wise Qigong vary from person to person. Kun suggests that the stronger one's skepticism the harder the challenge it becomes for Wise Qigong to accept and move forward. Yi, however, adopts a protective stance toward criticism by acting skeptically toward the skepticism outsiders pose to Wise Qigong. In other words, he marked the boundary between being insiders and outsiders by wondering whether the critics have a hidden agenda designed to destroy Wise Qigong (或許他們有其不可告人的目的?!).

Although both Kun and Yi have contrasting attitudes toward outsiders' skepticism toward qigong, they are serious devotees of Wise Qigong and promote qigong despite the difficult situation. Political control in China acts an unknown factor in the development of qigong. The previous convention was cancelled due to government disapproval, according to the Wise Qigong organizer's reply to participants' e-mails. However, the postponement may also have been due to Wise Qigong's inner conflict. Teng Tian told me that the convention might be postponed because three parties could

not reach an agreement about organizing the convention. They tried hard to communicate with each other, but each had his or her own reasons. Pang and Teng Tian were concerned about their disagreement and hoped that they could reach agreement and fix the procedure in time. Then, at the same time, practitioners from other provinces in China were passionately conducting experiments to demonstrate their progress with “effective, repetitive results,” such as heating up water to boiling temperature. It sounded as though Wise Qigong practitioners were ready to demonstrate their strengths and prove their worth to the world, but they were deprived of the opportunity to perform the transformative power of qi as manipulated by human beings through qigong due to state disapproval. According to Teng Tian, the sudden cancellation of the convention disappointed many people. This may be a truthful report because Wise Qigong participants showed passionate fervor for attending Wise conferences in 2016 in Malacca and Shenzhen.

The sociopolitical environment is hostile to qigong professionals, especially those who make a living teaching qigong or healing patients of cancer or other diseases through qigong. The Chinese government’s control is tight. The state does not recognize the value of qigong, although Teng Tian said Xi Jin Ping learned qigong when he was young and thus should be friendly to qigong.

People were so disappointed in the cancellation of the conference that they reconsidered the distinctiveness of qigong. In a conversation with me, qigong’s distinctiveness was brought up by Kun and Zhou. Zhou thought that everything would to run its course and it is natural to experience the vicissitudes of highs and lows in any course of development, including qigong’s. He meant that, although qigong’s

development in such a harsh environment is prone to wane or even be extinguished, its distinctiveness is only in the name. He was confident that qigong would revive under another name or form because the essence of qigong—knowledge and techniques of energy, self, and transformation—is deeply rooted in Chinese civilization. Similarly, Kun thought that qigong is hard to kill because, throughout history, all poets, writers, producers, Chinese medical doctors, martial artists, Daoist and Buddhist meditators and Confucian and gongfu practitioners are all qigong practitioners in one way or another. In addition to allowing qigong to be distinctive naturally according to unfriendly sentiments and governmental policy, many qigong instructors teach qigong under a different name, such as taiji, as the embodiment of Chinese civilization and language.

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The interactions I had with qigong folks include traveling together regionally and internationally to qigong activities or conferences. I interviewed practitioners and instructors semi-structurally: I asked them open-ended questions about their reasons for engaging in qigong or meditation and their experiences doing so. This would often lead some female practitioners to disclose their own inner worlds, their understandings of qigong, and their conflicted emotions that arose in their relationships with family members such as husbands, children, and mothers-in-law. My connection with them also opens opportunities for them to claim recognition not only for me but also for my family, my supervisors, and my affiliated institutes. Yuan encouraged me to “connect Wise Qigong with some research institutes in Taiwan to collaborate on Qigong Scientific production of magnetism and electricity to promote Wise Qigong elsewhere

because the Chinese government's political restriction erects barriers to the development of qigong scientific research.” He said that “it is hard for qigong scientists to get a funded project or gain recognition from the State.”⁶⁴ Wise Qigong works very hard to establish a connection with research institutes. They see themselves also as a research institution that can contribute to energy sources through the concentration of collective consciousness—the power of belief and visualization.

On June 16 – 17, 2018, an international conference themed “an International Conference of Qi, Consciousness and Human Biology, and a Mindfulness Technique Training Program,”⁶⁵ organized by Jiangxi University of Traditional Chinese Medicine 江西中醫藥大學. Pang, as a distinguished professor (特聘教授) at Jiangxi University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, wrote an article for the conference about the nature of qi, consciousness 氣與意識的本質, and the theory of mind, matter, and qi (*xing, shen, qi* 形神氣 or 三層面理論). The speakers at the conference include Ellen Langer, a tenured professor from the psychology department at Harvard University, and Sara. W. Lazar, an assistant professor in psychology at Harvard Medical School and an Associate Researcher in Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital. Many Chinese speakers came from prestigious scientific research institutes in mainland China.⁶⁶ The speakers’

⁶⁴ What Yuan said in Chinese: “看看能否跟台灣的科研或學術機構合作，搞這方面的研究：意識生磁、電，及意識影響量子分部模式等。由於大陸的學術政治氣氛較強，給科研增添了許多障礙，如：很難得到正式立項、成果也難得到認可。”

⁶⁵ The theme of the conference in Chinese is “氣——意識與人體生命科學、國際學術研討會、及專念操作技術培訓班。”

⁶⁶ Below is a list of speakers provided in the advertisements, blogs, and panel information. The speakers are affiliated with prestigious research institutes in Chinese medicine, biology, the Confucian School, physics, medicine, statistics, nuclear energy, and electronics. They are: (1) Zhang, Vice President of the Chinese Qigong Medical Association 中國醫學氣功學會副會長, Dean of Biological Research, the Medical School of Jianxi University of Traditional Chinese

disciplines ranged from qigong to Chinese medicine to biological engineering to psychology to Confucian studies to nuclear power to practical physics. The list of speakers demonstrates social support from multiple professions and areas that Wise Qigong attempts to involve in its work: education, philosophy, science, biological engineering, Confucian studies, bio-medical and social treatment of cancer, etc. One of the speakers, Minghui, an Associate Professor at the Medical School of Tsinghua University 醫學院副教授 and the Chair of the Institute of Cancer Cell Treatment Medical Center 醫學中心細胞治療研究所所長, claims to have found a solution to cancer treatment in its experimental work, as reported in the news in 2016. He also recognizes the importance of social care and a humanistic approach to biomedicine “從生物醫學走向社會醫學.” Skeptical voices in cyberspace suggest that he should be more upfront about his employment of an unconventional approach by calling it “experimental treatment.”

Medicine 江西中醫藥大學基礎醫學院生命科學學院院長; (2) Ming as an Associate Professor from the Medical School of Tsinghua University 醫學院副教授 and the Chair of the Institute of Cancer Cell Treatment Medical Center 醫學中心細胞治療研究所所長; (3) Da, Professor of Overseas Education from Xiamen University, Mentor of New Sinology of Xiamen University, Committee member of the Global Confucius Institute 海外教育學院教授新漢學博士生導師、全球孔子學院基地教授委員會委員; (4) Yue from 國務院發展研究中心學術委員會委員 President of China Development Publisher 中國發展出版社社長 President of China Development Observance Magazine 中國發展觀察雜誌社社長 國研文化傳媒股份有限公司董事長; (5) Shou as an expert in nuclear power in China who enjoys tenure with a special State Council of the Republic of China’s stipend 中國核動力專家、終身享受國務院政府特殊津貼; (6) Chun, the manager of Beijing Material Science Optoelectronics 北京物科光電技術有限公司晶體項目負責人 and former assistant researcher in microgravity at the Institute of Physics, the Chinese Academy of Science 曾在中科院物理所工作，從事微重力晶體生長研究。1998 評定為助理研究員; (7) Hen, Director of the Undergraduate Moral Development Center, Harbin State Vocational School 哈爾濱州職業學院大學生德育研究中心主任; (8) Yu, Dean of the College of Electronic Trades, Wuhan Qingchuan University 武漢晴川學院電子貿易學院院長; and (9) Lin, who worked at China Jiliang University and benefited from a governmental stipend 曾在中國計量科學院長度處工作，享受政府特殊津貼。

Another speaker, Da, is a Professor at the College of Overseas Education from Xiamen University 海外教育學院教授, a Mentor in New Sinology of Xiamen University 新漢學博士生導師, and a committee member of the Global Confucius Institute 全球孔子學院基地教授委員會委員. He is a historian whose publications cover the “*Hunyuan* logical development of energy, qi, and spirit” 混元體：道教精氣神論的邏輯發展 in Daoism, and “*Hunyuan* qi’s significance in Daoist practices” 混元氣在道教生命修煉上的意義, “The Confucius Institute and Chinese Cultural Expansion” 孔子學院與中國文化傳播初探, and “The Chinese Cultural Strategy: The Global Education of Chinese Language and Culture” 中國文化戰略：全球化視野中的對外漢語教學. His interest in the Confucius Institute’s management of Chinese cultural expansion and the cultural logic and significance of Daoist practices seem quite close to Wise Qigong’s goal of defining and developing Chinese culture in a new direction and expanding its influence internationally with ethnic Chinese and nationalistic undertones.

When I refer to an ethnic Chinese undertone, I mean the tendency to define Chinese as members of an ethnic group by associating them with particular cultural practices and physical tendencies. For instance, in 2014 during the potluck lunch after Yi’s class at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, Yi told us that eating chicken wings and pigs’ feet would benefit our mobility and energy in qigong practices. He encouraged us to eat more chicken wings and pigs’ feet to improve our energy level. I repeated what he said to confirm what I heard, followed by a question about the internal logic behind this practice, namely that “food cures better than medicine.” He quoted Pang’s books as his source of this information, and explained to me that animals run, and the physical parts that make animals run requires high levels of energy. He explained it in a way so that

most people on the spot could relate to it and thus no one questioned it. He then turned to me and asked if I eat chicken wings, pigs' feet, and internal animal organs. I said, "yes," before helping myself more rice from the bowl. His facial expression relaxed, and he confirmed that I am "still a Chinese" even though I studied at a university in America. In this context, Yi categorized me in the Chinese group because I eat food such as chicken wings, pigs' feet, and internal animal organs that some foreigners may be hesitant to eat. In this context, my eating habit is seen as consistent with Chinese cultural practices.

Another example that illustrates the linking of physical tendencies with an ethnic group occurred in 2015 with Yi as well. When I asked for his advice on improving my squatting skills, a core Wise Qigong movement, called *dun qiang* 蹲牆, I demonstrated to him how my physique was not designed for squatting, something that had been true since I was much younger. While I wondered whether my biology suggests that I should perform other Wise Qigong movements instead,⁶⁷ he refuted my proposal by telling me that "all Chinese should be good at squatting since they have been trained to squat in the squatting toilet since they were small" (蹲廁所、茅房). "All Chinese people," he knew, "could squat all day eating bento and resting." He was suggesting that the Chinese, who are trained to use squatting toilets from an early age, shared a trained ability to squat for long hours. He thus connects the ability to squat with Chinese-ness, and then extends the squatting ability of Chinese-ness to their physical features. In this incident, he accepted me as a "Chinese" (where in the previous incidence he still had doubts about

⁶⁷ I later asked Sung the same question, and he suggested that I perform other Wise Qigong movements due to my physical limitations, as he saw my demonstration before him and other Wise Qigong advanced instructors in Penang in 2015.

my “Chinese-ness” because he did not know whether I eat chicken wings, pigs’ feet, or internal organs). Since he accepted my Chinese-ness at that moment of my inquiry about squatting, I should have fit into the category by being able to squat like everyone else. He equates Chinese physics with a certain training and production in a particular time and space at home and in school. This is Wise Qigong’s ethnic Chinese undertone, which means defining a Chinese person by the physical tendencies shared by the Chinese ethnic group.

When I refer to a nationalistic undertone in Wise Qigong, I mean the connection between pride in seeing qigong as a part of the Chinese heritage (language, culture, and history) and taking responsibility for enhancing and expanding Chinese culture through recruiting and demonstrations. In other words, the insider/outsider marker of Chinese is language, culture, qigong practice, history, and the desire and behavior to recruit more people into qigong practice. Sung mentioned that grand master Pang once said in the 1980s and 1990s that foreigners should learn to speak Mandarin Chinese to understand and perform Wise Qigong well. Before 2014, Wise Qigong was taught by Lee Wooi Bok and Wei in English to spread the teachings of Wise Qigong worldwide to more non-Chinese speakers. One may argue that the instructors’ language skills could expand their global market while satisfying their ethno-nationalistic pride for expansion and liberation.

Tian, a Western medical doctor himself, quit his Western medicine practice in a hospital in Shenzhen. He found qigong healing combined with Chinese medicine more effective. His life, according to him, became more meaningful when began conducting his medical practice through qigong. He thinks his previous life practicing Western

medicine did not provide inner satisfaction. He told me with pride in 2016 in Hong Kong over Cantonese *dimsum* and tea that Chinese medicine and Wise Qigong are the best systems he has found so far to lead a good, holistic life. He seems proud to be a doctor and a person who is able to blend the three medical systems together. Yet, because of that, his ranking of qigong practice as the highest among the three shows his deep appreciation of Pang and his invention of Wise Qigong knowledge, as well as his embrace of his Chinese heritage as part of his chosen Chinese identity. A subtle sense of nationalistic pride came through his verbal and facial expressions. Additional examples of the embodiment of and sense of belonging to a Chinese community through qigong practice is illustrated in the next chapter.

The aforementioned Wise Qigong international conference, in addition to including scholars from Chinese universities and research institutes, also invited meditation mindfulness experts from Harvard University and Harvard Medical School to support the mindfulness technique training program at the Wise Qigong theory conference. Wise Qigong continues to make meaningful connections with scientists and researchers to demand recognition of and respect for Wise Qigong and to contribute individual intellectual social status and credentials to the unity of Wise Qigong as a collective community of Chinese science. The socialist undertones and the passion within many Wise Qigong practitioners, who embrace the dream of building a qigong city, a fantasy that reflects how they wish things could be, manifests whenever Pang appears. Teng Tian posted an article attaching a recording from Pang's public lecture and his photograph at the initiating ritual of the construction of a qigong city by

shoveling dirt as a symbolic start of the construction.⁶⁸ One participant in the group gave two thumbs up as response.

Sung, the co-leader of the international Wise Qigong conference in Kuala Lumpur with Teng Tian, showed his excitement at seeing more than two hundred people performing qigong in public. He took many photographs of this mass qigong session in Malaysia for “uniting practitioners all over the world” on a larger scale, which reminded him of the qigong glory and good old days in the 1990s in China. When Pang shows up or when there is an international conference of Wise Qigong, the whole Wise Qigong community demonstrates great excitement, as if a Communist revolution were taking place—they believe that Wise Qigong, the way to live an advanced way of life, will overturn the old and instinctual way of life, pushing forward to a new, synthetic, dialectical stage of progress. This living ideal keeps them going, and that desire ignites their passion to keep pushing forward, to keep developing Wise Qigong to be recognized by the Chinese state and the world. We now turn to how Wise Qigong was introduced in Penang, with ignited passion for interacting with Malaysian practitioners.

⁶⁸ The article could be found online here, issued by Wise Qigong on WeChat:
<https://goo.gl/7a17Vf>

CHAPTER IV

ALTERITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

QI, THE GOOD OBJECT, AND THE IDEAL GIANT SELF¹

1. The Other-Worldly Ling

The international Wise Qigong conference held in Kulai, Johor, Malaysia in July, 2015, reunited 800 Wise Qigong practitioners from all over the world, including Malaysia, Singapore, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The ritual singing of the qi-establishing song helped put everyone in the right frame of mind practice qigong.

As a giant, you stand tall reaching the sky
You stand firmly on the ground 頂天立地
Your body is relaxed
Your consciousness is expansive into the universe 形鬆意充
You wholeheartedly respect the qi field
As you honor the qigong society, you feel a sense of serenity within you 外敬內靜
As you feel calm inside, your heart is as clear as a mirror
You appear collected and respectful from the outside 心澄貌恭
You are in full concentration without a distractive thought 一念不起
Your consciousness is with the universe now 神注太空
Your consciousness returns from the space and shines on your body 神意照體
That makes you feel relaxed
You are now bathing in abundant qi—tranquil and happy 周身融融

After singing this song, practitioners are led with their eyes closed (wearing white T-shirts distributed by the conference organizer) to the *hunyuan* healing circle, which opens the conference. In the *hunyuan* healing circle two people stand next to each other, one to the right (person B) and one to the left (person A) with their arms raised high, both sending qi to a person who walks between them (person C), who covers his

¹ My use of the words “alterity” and “transcendence” is inspired by Joel Robbins (2009).

or her navel to receive qi from the others. The other participants are divided into three queues: one follows person A, one follows person B, and one follows person C. The three queues are arranged in a circle like a dragon moving its tail toward a central point.

Two-thirds of the practitioners first send qi to the others while one-third receive the qi. Then those who send qi to the others switch to receiving qi from the others. The ritual master calls out “*Hunyuan* 混元,” and the rest of the party answers energetically, “*lingtong* 靈通.” “*Hunyuan*,” says the ritual master from the microphone; “*lingtong*,” says the crowd with intense energy.

The ritual master asks practitioners to think about family members who are sick so that they can participate in this qi-field together with them. He further explains that having 800 participants together, including several well-received advanced Wise Qigong Masters, will expand the power of the qi-field for the conference. The participants also visualize their ailing body parts so that they also receive healing energy from the conference. The ritual master further directs everyone to think concretely about how their illness or injury is being healed by the collective energy. The ritual master then calls out *bingle* 病了, which means “got sick.” The crowd answers with conviction “*haole* 好了,” which means “get well!” “*Bingle*,” “*Haole!*” “*Bingle*,” “*Haole!*” “*Bingle*,” “*Haole!*” These phrases are shouted back and forth for about five minutes, while qi-receivers hold their navels as they walk and receive the energy sent from the two rows of qi-senders.

The ritual master then asks everyone to imagine a sick person who is in the process of healing. This person can be anyone they know or even themselves. The ritual master directs everyone to visualize the healing energy being channeled to the sick

organ or body part. They shout collectively, in a firm voice, “*Hua* 化, *San* 散,” which means “transforming and dissipating negative energy. “*Hua! San!*” “*Hua! San!*” The rhythm gradually speeds up and the voices grow stronger and stronger. “*Hua! San!*” “*Hua! San!*” “*Hua! San!*” “*Hua! San!*” After shouting/singing “*Hua! San!*” for four minutes or so, they switch to a slower and longer word, *tong* 通, which means “unblock.” “*Tong . . . Hunyuan ling tong . . . Tong . . . Tong . . .*,” as all practitioners extend the pronunciation of *tong* for thirty seconds and imagine ailing parts of the body being healed.

The ritual master asks the group to picture themselves receiving the universal *hunyuan qi*. The collective healing ritual takes place as the group continues moving in a *hunyuan* healing circle, with their eyes almost closed, immersed in an inward-looking yet highly focused state. If an outsider were to step into the conference, he might think that he has entered some sort of otherworldly arena, or worse, that he has encountered zombies walking in queues engaging intensely in their own world while following the ritual master’s instructions obediently, responding to the ritual master’s cues immediately and collectively. Following this parade, participants circulate in the *hunyuan* healing circle, gradually inching closer and closer to the center. This mass of 800 people, vibrating as they pronounce the word *tong* in a prolonged collective utterance, makes the whole ritual a powerful exercise in collective synchronization. After the ritual, participants sing the alma mater of Wise Qigong, which is a classic song sung frequently at the beginning of most Wise Qigong gatherings:

We come from different places all over the world 我們來自四面八方
For a shared mission 為了一個共同理想

To explore the mystery of life and to liberate life 探索生命奧秘，爭取生命解放。
We arrive at the Big School of Wise Qigong to practice qigong overcoming pains to make our mind and body perfect 來到智能功大學校，刻苦練功，完美身心。
We admire the qualities of harmony, happiness, being natural and dignified, ESP, nobility, and goodness 和諧歡暢，自然端莊，智能超常，道德高尚!
Our goal is to liberate all lives. Set all life free. 生命自由解放!生命自由解放!
To attain the ideal of a peaceful world! To attain the ideal of a peaceful world!
To walk on the main path! 共同奔向大同世界!共同奔向大同世界!大道康莊!

Participants sing this song excitedly. Some even start marching in place. Many Wise Qigong songs are sung throughout the conference. Sound and singing are both used frequently in Wise Qigong practice. The next day, one female participant from Penang who is in her early thirties reported that she dreamed she was singing the alma mater the night before. This incidence shows that songs can be powerful in drawing people into the zone that is conducive to qigong learning, or, in Wise Qigong's terminology, the qigong "zone" (氣功態).

While practicing qigong in the qigong zone is intense, new methods of qigong teaching and socio-political issues related to the geographical expansion of qigong were discussed at the conference: the topics included the unity and diversity of Wise Qigong pedagogy, the process of incorporating Wise Qigong into the Malaysian state system, and new interpretations of the practice of treating family members with kindness through qigong practice to elevate character.

At the three-day international conference most participants were Chinese-speaking Chinese, as the entire conference was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. All participants wore the T-shirts the organizers ordered for this event with their own pants. Most men wore *gongfu* pants while most women wore workout pants. The majority of the practitioners had grey hair, ranging in age from fifty to eighty. Younger-looking people in their early thirties or forties are often assumed to be Wise Qigong professional

masters trained by Pang Ming, although most speakers at the conference wore their own Chinese *gongfu* suits to distinguish themselves from the crowd. Master Kun wore a plain white Chinese *gongfu* suit with dragons printed on the top. Master Shou wore black: he demonstrated his *gongfu* movements on stage by rotating his wrists rapidly and flexibly. That unique movement induced the audience to applaud him. His demonstration was recorded and later posted on YouTube after the conference. In his lecture Master Wei shared how he shows love to his spouse: several middle-aged female practitioners around me were so affected by the talk that they cried. Master Wei has many students in Singapore who deeply adore him because of his New Age style of interpreting Wise Qigong.

Wise Qigong participants, especially middle-aged male practitioners, seem to enter a heightened state of consciousness when they sing Wise Qigong songs. They know many songs, and they march when they sing. Their excitement reminded me of military training. Some practitioners shared their peak qigong experiences during breakfast or dinner with others at their tables. They described to each other how many hours they practice qigong every day at their stations, and how classes are taught and conducted at their centers. Such conference encounters stimulate isolated practitioners and strengthen their devotion to Qigong. Many conference participants appeared to be fervid devotees in heightened states of consciousness. The collective effervescence they exude when practicing qigong together with 800 others refashioned the participants: Mrs. Chua said she was healed and became a new bright-eyed person after the conference, and she promised to herself that she would bring this inspiration home to her daily classes. In contrast with the heightened and intense qigong experiences I

witnessed at the international conference, regular Wise Qigong class interactions, to which we now turn, are relatively subdued.

2. Outsider Responses

Master Yi, seemingly in his thirties, is a Han Chinese from mainland China. He is about 5 foot 3 inches tall, with dark skin with a very flat short haircut. Master Yi visits Penang every year in March for a month. His wife, a serious practitioner of Wise Qigong and a Muslim, stays in Beijing when he is on this trip. Before he visits Penang, his disciples from the BHS publicize his visit on their social networks and advertise him as a powerful and kind healer.² Moreover, they market his services as effective yet reasonably priced: 30 MYR (Malaysian Ringgit =8 United States dollars [USD]) for 15 minutes healing and 50 MYR (=13 USD) for 30 minutes of healing. The offering of low rates with strong word-of-mouth recommendations matters to Malaysian Chinese seeking alternative healing services because they see it as a low-risk investment with a high return rate in the form of an emotional reward.³ The host of Master Yi in Penang,

² Many of Yi's disciples, especially the organizer of Yi's healing programs and qigong courses and the local host when he visits Penang, are donors and frequent attendees at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. Through this connection they rent a classroom at BHS, which welcomes the various traditions of visiting Buddhist or alternative healing scholars or practitioners hoping to teach classes. All these classes are open to the public, except for Muslims, according to Malaysian religious regulations. BHS is a place full of trees and natural sunlight with reasonable rent for many Buddhist practitioners who are open to learning new traditions to heal or improve themselves as they seek Dao. Although some local Penang Wise Qigong instructors, such as Hong and Kun (both from China), had given one lecture, respectively, in BHS to spread Wise Qigong teachings to a broader audience locally, most Wise Qigong Penang centers have their own stations outside of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary.

³ Kun and Sung, who are originally from China, started their Wise Qigong centers in Penang and Butterworth around 2007 but complained about Malaysian consumers' concerns about price. According to their experience, a majority of Malaysian consumers of Wise Qigong in particular and religious healing services in general are quite economically concerned about tuition fees and healing charges. Compared with their Wise Qigong colleagues who teach Wise Qigong in China and Hong Kong, Chinese clients are more willing to pay the price of services and tuition

Peng Chew, is the leader of the Wise Qigong group in the Gelugor area as well as a meditation practitioner at and donor to Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. Peng Chew's social network usually accepts his recommendations because of his "persuasive" identities: as a serious Buddhist meditator, an advanced qigong healer, and a successful businessman who works as an international consultant with a bachelor's degree from Harvard University.

One day in March 2016, after Master Yi's healing session at a private healing center,⁴ he spoke of a video clip that had gone viral online. It presented news about people flying across the Yellow River dressed in Daoist practitioners' outfits. Yi described how that moment would usually go unnoticed and thus how precious it was that it had been documented.

Hearing what Yi said, I giggled. I thought he must be joking. Unaffected by my giggling, he continued to elaborate on how grand it would be to witness it. I started to realize that he was not joking. Embarrassed at my improper insensitivity and disrespect, I checked the facial expressions of Peng Chew and the translator who was there with us. They both listened keenly with smiles on their faces, as if they did not sense anything

fees for self-development. Kun observed that the charges for group self-help courses taught by a beginning instructor in Shanghai started at 186 USD or 1,000 Chinese Yuan while many students in Penang complain that Master Kun's tuition of 300 USD or 1200 Malaysian Ringgit is too pricey, without considering that Kun claims to have been rated as the highest quality qigong healer from China, teaching a one-on-one Wise Qigong 101 class for 36 hours. Master Sung also preferred to teach in Hong Kong because the tuition fees could be higher. However, he also pointed out the difficulty of meeting living expenses when he and his family taught Wise Qigong in Hong Kong.

⁴ Master Yi offered qigong instructions in the morning, had a potluck lunch with disciples at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, and began teaching a meridian study group for an hour after lunch. He then offered healing sessions in the late afternoons and evenings at a nearby private energy healing yoga center, and on some evenings in the Spastic Center where the English educated members convene weekly for their qigong practices.

wrong. Yi kept talking about how those people flying over the Yellow River could serve as role models for advanced Wise Qigong practitioners.

As my experience with qigong grew over time as I learned from fifteen Wise Qigong Masters and interviewed over sixty practitioners, I started to see a pattern to outsiders' skeptical responses. When first hearing anything about qigong's efficacy, many people without prior exposure to qigong or religious backgrounds laugh, giggle, roll their eyes or avoid eye contact with the persuader. Most do that spontaneously, within five seconds of hearing about qigong's efficacy in giving practitioners seemingly extraordinary powers. It is a physical–psychological defensive reaction generated by one's belief or ideology formed by previous knowledge acquisition. A hidden contempt surfaces through such instinctual reactions. Seeing this occur over and over again, first in myself then later in others, I now see two views simultaneously. For skeptics, defensive giggles or eye movements happen naturally. For qigong enthusiasts, however, the defensive attitude of disrespect or ignorance toward qigong demonstrated by others' body language is quite obvious.

In a qigong-unfriendly environment in mainland China, qigong masters who teach qigong as a profession live difficult lives. According to Kun, qigong education in general had been restricted in part because of the notoriety of *falungong*, which was banned by the Chinese government beginning in 2000 and running at least until 2015. The Chinese authorities viewed qigong with suspicion because they saw it as similar to *falungong*. Public assembly in general is allowed only for groups comprising fewer than two hundred people. Thus, in theory, qigong practitioners could gather in public in China to do qigong as long as fewer than two hundred people at a time were involved.

Still, the public was keeping a skeptical distance from qigong mass gatherings in parks. In 2016, when Wise Qigong practitioners from Hong Kong and Guangdong province were practicing qigong, facing the lake on the meadow in an open space at the Unicorn Outdoor Mountain Resort (麒麟山療養院), a national hospice in a park in Shenzhen, they were approached by a passerby in his late forties. He looked at them closely, and then asked them loudly in a suspicious tone of voice, “What are you doing? Is this *falungung*? It is banned.” One of the instructors, Yuan, quickly replied, “This is Wise Qigong, a qigong that has been acknowledged in the Physical Education class curriculum for secondary schools in China. This is not *falungung*.” Following that incident, though, they were asked by the hospice manager to conduct qigong activities indoors to avoid public misunderstandings that might inconvenience the hospice.

Due to the state ban of *falungung*, qigong is under constant unofficial surveillance by both the state and the public, which has developed considerable distrust of any cultural practice perceived to be “superstitious,” or unscientific, challenging qigong for lacking scientific evidence supporting its claims. Moreover, qigong masters are often suspected of being con artists because they lack official certificates issued by the government. Also, qigong, resembling taiji but with a negative image due to *falungung*, is unappealing to younger Chinese, who see yoga as a spiritual and trendy sport for middle-class, fitness-conscious young ladies and working mothers, while viewing taiji as a fashionable workout for athletes and grandmothers in parks. It is difficult for anyone hoping to make qigong a career in this difficult market: should they continue seeking legitimacy from the public or students, or take up an alternative vocation?

Once, on our way to Sung's Wise Qigong theory course for local Penang senior instructors, he lamented the differential treatment he experienced in comparison with the treatment experienced by his qigong colleagues who had shifted into teaching yoga. He told me in private that several Wise Qigong professionals he knew "reluctantly" "forsaked" qigong to become yoga instructors, as yoga has become popular in China. He said his colleague made a fortune teaching yoga, as he had many students, "unlike his condition in Penang."

I met two hardcore Wise Qigong professionals in Hong Kong: Zhong, who has invented movements that blend taiji, bagua 八卦, and qigong, was one of them. He teaches his invented movements in Hong Kong at the Institute of Chinese Taiji-wisdom with other instructors who come from multiple Chinese martial art traditions.⁵ Moreover, Kun attacked yoga as a discipline when he saw his students stretching their bodies naturally with the yoga instructions they learned elsewhere following intensive "non-moving" qigong healing sessions. Kun elaborated to his students that yoga emphasizes form (surface) only, an emphasis that misses the most important things, qi (essence), and that qigong practice would have a fundamental, positive effect on humans. Kun's aggressive demand that his students value qigong more highly than yoga, and Sung's lamentation, sensing unfair treatment that denies respect, popularity, and business profits in comparison with what yoga instructors experience, show their desire to prove qigong's efficacy.

3. Believe in qigong to heal yourself

⁵ The institute's (Institute of Chinese Taiji-wisdom Co. Ltd) official website is here: <http://www.rstaiji.com/>

Master Yi, who is usually kind and composed, shouts at one patient on a Thursday evening in the garden of the Penang Spastic Center for children, a location where the group holds their weekly practices. The patient is a Malaysian Chinese lady in her late twenties or early thirties. “Don’t come,” “believe to heal,” “don’t come,” Yi yelled. His face and scalp first turned blue and then red. This conflict draws everyone’s attention. Nobody knows what happened, or knows what to do.

The apparent issue is, as Yi later explained to us, the patient doubted his healing skills. Her doubt, as a result, slows down the healing effect, making his healing less efficacious. She had injured herself on the right side of her waist while engaging in yoga two months earlier and the injury had become worse without proper treatment. She decided to try Yi’s healing session because it was convenient: (1) the center in Gelugor was a 10-minute drive from where she worked, at the University of Science Malaysia, and (2) the healing session that runs from six to eight p.m. fits her schedule because she can attend after work on her way home. She was introduced by her colleague, Nanasri, who was a regular member of the Gelugor qigong center. In other words, the patient was too busy to see a physical therapist. She chose qigong healing seeking a quick fix to her pain, and perhaps feeling social pressure after her colleague recommended it.

It is very uncommon, however, to see first-time patients being scolded by a healer in public. In addition, it is even more unusual for a kind healer like Yi to act out his offensive emotions at the risk of humiliating himself and his patient. His offense turned out to be the result of deep-rooted anger: two hours after the healing session was over, Yi was still venting about the patient: “If she did not believe in me and qigong, the healing effect decreases. It’s already taken her two months to heal. How long does she

still want to suffer?” I was surprised and puzzled by his overreaction to a seemingly petty thing. In his mind, he could not let the patient go even after the patient had physically left the center two hours earlier!

Yi insistently defended his healing efficacy and Wise Qigong’s validity. Not only did he demand recognition from his patients in this incident in Penang in March 2015, but he also did so in other contexts when I corresponded with him on WeChat on March 1, 2018. I provided some comments from online critics, who cited the theory of Chinese medicine to point out errors in Pang Ming’s Wise Qigong theory. Yi clarified the critique by illustrating the core viewpoint of Wise Qigong’s source of qi, observing that the origin of Wise Qigong qi is *hunyuan qi*, the qi substance prior to the existence of the dualistic divide of Ying/Yang polarity.⁶ After explaining this, he referred to the critics as ignorant, arguing that they misunderstand Wise Qigong theory. He further excoriated the critics for having two possible hidden agendas: (1) to destroy Wise Qigong, and (2) being biased in ignoring the successful healing rates of Wise Qigong healers listed online. Yi’s guarded response may have been aimed primarily to protect Wise Qigong. He may also be a direct and honest person who speaks his mind. One may also argue, however, that he is playing with the divide between insiders and outsiders, applying a form of emotional censorship to discourage insiders from examining weaknesses in Wise Qigong.

Ordinary Malays shackle themselves by internalizing a prescribed social

⁶ 智能功的理論不立論於陰陽，而立論陰陽未分的一氣混元的層面，因此，用內經中的陰陽理路來分析，是其沒有看明白或不懂智能功基礎理論的緣故！這些人並未真正了解或練過氣功，僅據有些人的誤解或錯解來否定智能功，難道智能功網上那麼多病例都是假的嗎？為何他們熟識無睹？或許他們有其不可告人的目的?! The critics comments online could be accessed at <https://goo.gl/wHXcAf> (accessed on June 14, 2018).

discourse that chains them to fear of intimate Others' sanctions in the form of magical curses. Peletz (1997) calls the Malays' internal sanctions based on social discourse a "cultural panopticon." The moral dilemma, reflected in feelings of guilt, ambivalence, the horror of rebellion, and patricide, prevent ordinary Malays from voicing disagreement with the Islamic resurgence. To show their loyalty to these Others, the Malays are forced to acquiesce to the state and patriarchy. If they voice their concerns about public policy disadvantages, thereby prioritizing private loss over the collective good, they are judged harshly as individuals and social groups members for betraying the community by leaving Muslims' welfare up to the ethnic Chinese. Internalizing these social judgments, Malay Muslims harbor ambivalent guilt, suppress their own dissent, and link their personal complaints to betrayals of Muslims' collective pursuits.

The internalized policing voice that suppresses ordinary Malays is culturally interpellated. As Althusser (1971) put it: "Hey you!" This "troubling" feeling that prevents Malays from "confronting" what they consider "morally offensive" (Peletz 1997, 262) is, in fact, a mental block that prevents them from voicing their dissatisfaction. This entanglement is formed under an indebted kinship panopticon: (1) it is wrong in the first place to confront the Islamic state when all Malays are born indebted to the collectivity; (2) one cannot afford to accumulate more social debt by disagreeing with *dakwah* resurgents because this will lead to social suicide—being killed by intimate Others. The mental block is a forceful, demanding interpellation from the Islamic state that binds the Malay psyche with cultural symbols and entanglements.⁷

⁷ The effort made by ordinary Malays, as I understand it, to suppress individual disagreement is an effort to pay off a perceived debt they owe to the Islamic state and patriarchy. They cannot afford to add to this debt by voicing resistance to the debt already owed. From the outside, it is a support from the *part*, albeit forced within the individuals, to the *whole* Islamic community.

The similarity between Yi and the Malays is seen in the group censorship that accuses members of betrayal if they do not completely support the group's direction. There is, however, an important difference: Wise Qigong is a community formed on the basis of brotherhood and sisterhood. The bonds formed between Wise Qigong practitioners is not formed by kinship, a relationship based on blood (nature), but by shared interest in qigong (culture). One may also argue that the Islamic religion itself is also a shared interest (culture). In that sense, the marker of an insider or outsider is again confirmed by one's interest in, care for, and support of the values and constitution of a particular social group. The most practical and popular way to support Wise Qigong's constitution is to educate others, and do more qigong by oneself, like most of the Wise Qigong Masters do.

Unlike Yi, most Wise Qigong Masters avoid confronting skeptics as the teaching of Wise Qigong is based on persuading others by rationalizing with them (以理服人). Also, the socio-political context runs against them. They turn inward and work harder to develop their (fantasized) qigong ability to support scientific and traditional Chinese cultural advances. Wise Qigong takes out its typical delayed "revenge" by playing along with mainstream social values enough to persuade skeptics into becoming converts, and enhancing their group solidarity by strengthening their relationship with abundant qi (elevating their confidence). That is, externally, deploying a strategy for gaining

The betterment of the Islamic community is imperatively prioritized over that of their non-Malay, non-Muslim counterparts, including ethnic Chinese, ethnic Indians, and Westerners. From the inside, despite ambivalent or troubling emotions regarding the Islamic resurgence, the fear of the curse leads them to conform to the Islamic state to protect and preserve their social existence and social recognition. Any altruistic choices may contain individual gains (Mauss 2000).

influence, Wise Qigong develops scientific and traditional discourses and networks with prestigious institutions (their defenses); internally, Wise Qigong designs aesthetic and meaningful practices to reduce alienation and shame by establishing healthy relations with the good object, qi.

Wise Qigong practitioners refer to Wise Qigong as the motherly root of Chinese culture and civilization. According to practitioners, qi provides nutrition for the body and the soul to make a person not just healthy but alive. In addition, Wise Qigong theory and its worldview provide “nutrition” and “food” to the mind (精神食糧). Qi in general, or *hunyuan* qi in particular, is the earliest and purest energy in the universe that was created when the world was still one. This same very qi is believed by Wise Qigong to unite all parts and divisions of humanity into a unity.

Wise Qigong also sees qi as a substance that current technology is not yet able to detect. They view qi as a fundamental object (substance) that enhances life. This is analogous to a baby’s reliance on its mother’s milk and family education to be shaped into a socially adaptable person. Wise Qigong also sees itself as representative of a new Chinese tradition that, consistent with the Communist’s party’s design for China’s development in the 1950s and 1960s, would lead the New China into an advanced stage of living.

I find the local (or emic) symbolic meaning of qigong as a motherly life-affirming and life-enhancing object similar to Klein’s (1957) psychoanalytic concept of a good object. She proposes that if one’s ego is affirmed and repaired by “the good breast,” “the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself” (Klein 1957, 3). In other words, a repaired relationship with a patient establishes a new person or a

new object that helps the patient alleviate pain caused by dysfunctional relationships. This new relationship with a good object, in fact, establishes a new good relationship with the self because the new, healthy relationship fosters new interaction with the self that trains the self to see oneself more positively (with greater stability, confirmation, security, and more loving patience and hopeful and optimistic interaction with others). This seeing oneself more positively (with greater confidence in oneself and social Others), thus creates a new positive habit through which one can interact with a good object that brings positive outcomes, processes, and feelings out of the interaction.

When I speak of defenses (mentioned previously in connection with Wise Qigong's expansion of its influence through networks and knowledge traditions), I mean the ways in which Wise Qigong practitioners defend themselves as a collective in the face of the notoriety of qigong due to its perceived resemblance to *falungung*.

4. Defenses: Qigong, the “hidden treasure” in science and history

Several days later, after a healing session at a private mansion of a wealthy local English-educated Chinese family, Yi showed me some digital versions of arguably prestigious research publications on qigong efficacy in boosting crop production in Hebei province in China. Two years later, another Wise Qigong teacher, Sung, also shared a qigong report that resembled a scientific journal paper: full of quantitative data and a narrative confirming the effects of qigong experiments on humans, animals, and plants.

As many serious devotees would agree, Wise Qigong positions itself as a helper of science and a hidden advanced treasure that science “believers” ignore Wise

Qigong's scientific publications, which speak academic language in format and content on the efficacy of qigong, express Wise Qigong's desire to show that qigong is science yet is more advanced than science insofar as the current technology cannot keep up with advances in qigong. The publications confirm faith in qigong to qigong devotees who might experience cycles of doubt. The journal-like articles purportedly documenting qigong's positive effects also have successfully persuaded a significant number of middle-class and lower-class skeptics to "convert." The aforementioned accomplishments, which confirm many followers' faith in qigong, encourage qigong enthusiasts to design experiments to prove the transformative effect of qigong on plants as well as humans.⁸ The Bean Sprouts Growing experiment, to which we now turn, is among the most popular qigong experiments on plants.

A. Bean Sprout–Growing Experiment

Wise Qigong followers who wish to demonstrate its efficacy often cite the Bean Sprout–Growing Experiment to make their case. The experiment begins by dividing some bean sprout plants into two groups: a control group that receives no extra qi from practitioners and a comparison group that receives qi from practitioners several times a day. They report that the plants which receive qi from practitioners outgrow those that do not. Pictures of the two groups of plants are shared on physical and virtual bulletin boards at qigong centers, on websites, and to social media groups on WeChat, Facebook,

⁸ Pseudoscience, "*by which I mean claims presented so that they appear scientific even though they lack supporting evidence and plausibility*" (Shermer 1997, 33). "When a truth becomes more important than the *search* for truth, when the final results of inquiry become more important than the process of inquiry, when reason leads to so absolute a certainty about one's beliefs that anyone who is not for them is anathematized as against them, and when supposedly intellectual inquiry becomes the basis of a personality cult" (Shermer 1997, 114).

and WhatsApp. Qigong enthusiasts want people to “see with their own eyes” that qi not only exists but also increases plant productivity and vitality. They then infer from the experiments that qi would will help humans as well. The hidden agenda here is that qi can be manipulated by practitioners based on the skills they learn in Wise Qigong to make conscious use of qi.

The implied message in Wise Qigong’s core spirit is that trained qigong practitioners with advanced skills can bring about both quantitative and qualitative transformation. That is, with proper Wise Qigong training, human consciousness or desire can cause structural change in an object—helping it heal, grow, and produce. Sangren (2012) suggests that, although the Chinese value the idea of *ren ming* 認命 or acceptance of one’s destiny or fate, and therefore, under Buddhist and Taoist influences, strive to be receptive to and harmonize with nature, people, and the environment, the great energy they exert trying to alter their fates through complicated rituals suggests otherwise. Sangren (2012) suggests that Chinese religious women accept their fate by worshipping the Goddess of Mercy, yet their piety manifests their desire to change the circumstances and social relations that frustrate their desires. The denial of desire, then, drives Chinese women to pray to the Goddess of Mercy even more earnestly. As Sangren (2009, 2017) argues, desire affects Chinese women and men differently, reflecting patriarchal gender differences in Chinese society. In other words, as a universalist, Sangren (2017) argues that while Chinese men and women may harbor similar desires and share a cultural psyche, they are treated differently in Chinese society. This causes the expression of their desires to diverge in practice, reflecting how desires are manifested through gendered distinctions produced by society.

For Wise Qigong devotees, Wise Qigong theory is the best paradigm for living. A paradigm is a framework within which to live, a philosophy with a methodology that instructs people to lead a stable lifestyle that brings satisfying results. For Master Sung, however, Wise Qigong is a “scientific paradigm that is yet to be proved by practitioners and yet to be widely accepted, which is a shameful thing because people are throwing Chinese traditions away, the most precious thing they have, pursuing Western scientific thinking and ways of living.” Sung repeatedly complained in his classes and in our private conversations that “Chinese nowadays do not value Chinese traditions such as qigong which is, however, the most precious thing Chinese have” (氣功是我們老祖宗的寶貝呀). Chinese people now go for “Western” education, pursuing logical thinking 都去學西方那一套邏輯. In his view, and in the view of Wise Qigong devotees, ESP (intuitive thinking) that blends with logical reasoning forms the best combination for living in the world, in contrast to logical thinking that Western education promotes as a superior methodology for acquiring knowledge in contemporary society. Sung sees Wise Qigong as a paradigm that could compete with and be supplemented by science and “Western” logical thinking.

There is a divide between these categories that pervades Wise Qigong: modern and traditional; the West and Chinese traditions; logical reasoning and extrasensory perception. The latter seems able to perfect, improve on and supplement the former. The undervalued Chinese tradition that is based on ESP is waiting, a Wise Qigong devotee would say, for *you* to prove whether the ancestors’ sayings are correct. Not until you do qigong like the ancestors do can you figure out whether the ancestors are right. By admitting Wise Qigong’s strength in developing ESP while refuting logical education,

Sung and others ward off skeptics' attacks on Wise Qigong as unscientific and irrational. This is a matter of persuasion and argument. Sung's refutation of the idea that science and reason are more advanced than ESP when instilled through Chinese traditions also caters to some people's (perhaps unconscious) nationalistic sentiments. Here "unconscious" means one's effect of the Law (Lacan and Fink 2004) or an instituted fantasy formed by the structural imposition of social ideologies or values on individuals, limiting their autonomy (Sangren 2017).

Wise Qigong promotes a paradigm that combines heredity with humanity. Wise Qigong offers a simple, immediate, consoling morality and correspondingly simple meaning. "It is a very human response to believe in things that make us feel better" (Shermer 1997, 276). Shermer defines "a paradigm as a model shared by most but not all members of a scientific community, designed to describe and interpret observed or inferred phenomena, past or present, and aimed at building a testable body of knowledge open to rejection or confirmation. In other words, a paradigm captures the scientific thinking of the majority but most of the time, it coexists with competing paradigms—as is necessary if new paradigms are to displace old paradigms" (1997, 39). As we saw in the Wise Qigong mission statement in the previous chapter, Wise Qigong follows a manifesto to provide a holistic perspective to liberate humans so that they can progress ontologically, psychologically, sociologically, even if they cannot attain perfection 完美身心.

In both Kun's and Teng Tian's Wise Qigong classes, which were held in Butterworth and Hong Kong, respectively, when they talked about the qigong sprout experiment, they referred to Dr. Masaru Imoto's experiment that was presented in the

book *Messages from Water* that involves two cups of water where Dr. Imoto cursed one cup but sang praises to the other cup. The result, he claimed, was that the cup of water he cursed crystalized into unhealthy shapes. In contrast, the cup which “heard” positive “messages” from humans crystalized beautifully. The conclusion he drew from the experiment is that the messages, although unseen, are passed on to living beings. Wise Qigong practitioners and BHS practitioners brought Dr. Imoto’s experiment to test Wise Qigong (1) to affirm that humans should praise people often to avoid sickness and cancer, and (2) to prove the existence of messages and energy although they are invisible.

Critics of Dr. Imoto’s experiment suggest that many details of the experiment were not released and thus they could not examine whether the experiment could be repeated. A practitioner from Wise Qigong in Penang has applied this idea to his own experiment, which involves talking to two bowls of rice instead of two bowls of water. The practitioner took photographs to show that the cursed bowl of rice was moldy on the second day while the praised bowl of rice lasted five days in normal, “healthy” shape. The pseudo-scientific experiments Wise Qigong practitioners conduct often have an obvious agenda, namely to prove Pang’s Wise Qigong theory correct. According to Shermer, however, as we have seen, “science is not the affirmation of a set of beliefs but a process of inquiry aimed at building a testable body of knowledge constantly open to rejection or confirmation” (Shermer 1997, 124). However, experiments that demonstrate the existence of qi, especially those that can transform the physical condition of a substance or object, are intended to further persuade practitioners to believe in and start practicing Wise Qigong. The Human Finger–Growing experiment

seems to be the most effective demonstration for “converting” newcomers to Wise Qigong.

B. Human Finger –Growing Experiment

The Human Finger–Growing Experiment is a very common experiment that is demonstrated in every first Wise Qigong class. Students are asked to visualize one of their fingers growing longer than the others. In Yi’s class in 2014, a middle-class Malaysian Chinese lady in her fifties saw her left index finger grow about 0.5 centimeters. She exclaimed with wonder, “Look at my finger. Look at my finger!” demanding attention and affirmation from me. Her left index finger looked extremely longer than usual while my finger looked the same.⁹ Seeing her finger extended before me, I wondered if reality differs from perception, yet we all tend to see perception as reality. “The core of the qigong theory,” as Yi explained to the class, “is to break your common sense to believe you could achieve something you previously considered impossible. Impossible means I am possible. The more focused you are, the stronger your faith is, the stronger your support system and qi-field is, nothing is not achievable. It starts from your belief in yourself, others, and qi.” The first class usually provides participants with qi experiences, embodied impressions of the effects of qi. In addition to scientific communities, Wise Qigong also reaches out to local, state, and international institutes for attention and recognition.

⁹ As an English-educated Chinese Malaysian, she graduated from a prestigious high school in Penang and earned a bachelor’s degree in the United Kingdom. Her husband is a businessman and her former high school classmate. They went to the UK to study at about the same time, and returned to Penang to settle down. They live in a well-appointed house in a wealthy area in Penang and have three children. They lead a middle-class lifestyle, often dining at a private club and participating in qigong meditation societies.

The phrase “the impossible is possible” establishes the mentality that it is possible to transcend all restrictions. First, consider the quest for immortality based on practicing qigong to maintain one’s health. Teng Tian provided information in his class about how many Daoist and Buddhist practitioners have lived as long as 400 years. For instance, he illustrated this claim by relating the legend of one practitioner who saw *Jizu* Mountain 雞足山 open and saw many practitioners who are 400 years old sitting inside. These legends and stories were told in his Wise Qigong classes repeatedly and his students seemed to listen without skepticism. I heard no one complaining about the absurdity of the qigong history of citing human longevity through practicing qigong. I did, however, hear complaints from his Hong Kong students about his history lecture on the Communist Party or the riots in Mong Kok 旺角 where people stoned each other during Chinese New Year celebrations in Hong Kong in 2016.

Desire theory might help to explain these differences in this context. When Hong Kong students hear about things that do not parallel their values, they resist listening to a lecture about the Communists Party’s historical formation, even though I find Teng Tian to be a good story-teller. Hui, a marriage therapist and mother of two children in her late fifties, hated it when Teng Tian talked about Communists and the political history of China because it takes Teng Tian’s focus away from qigong. However, Anna accepted Teng Tian’s lecture on the perspective of energy. She thought that as long as Teng Tian was happy, no matter what he talked about, students would equally receive good energy from him. The key, according to her, is Teng Tian’s good mood, which generates good energy. She was more concerned about receiving positive energies from the classroom than focusing on the content of the lecture. Anna also marveled at Teng

Tian's way of non-stop speaking, which she thought never failed to grab his students' attention. When Teng Tian talked about how people could live long lives, however, nobody in class demonstrated any disbelief in these stories. I suspect that whether these stories are true or false did not matter much as long as they gave hope to practitioners to be able to live long lives as long as they practice qigong. Since most of the practitioners came to qigong practice after they being sick, the longevity legend promoted by the Daoist practitioners speaks to their (possibly unconscious) desire to live long prosperously. These stories are soothing and comfortable to them because they, too, are qigong practitioners, and think it would be nice if they could also live long and prosper like the people in the stories Teng Tian narrated in class.

Both the sprout-growing experiment and the finger-growing experiment are attempts to draw uninitiated practitioners into deeper involvement with Qigong experiments. The more people involve themselves in such activities, where they are asked to be "open-minded," and the more prone and open to new ideas and experiences they are, the more willing they will be to spend time in the community and become more sympathetic to it. Meanwhile, when an outsider finds herself surrounded by Wise Qigong practitioners, she is invited to join them and be part of a unity. Wen, a Wise Qigong instructor in her early forties from China, has invited me several times to join her guided qigong movement class on WeChat, as she records her speeches and spreads them instantly to all members of the qigong group. Such postings continue to expand Wise Qigong teachings and spread related news on WeChat to educate, influence, and connect people from all over the world. In addition to social group expansion and maintenance through WeChat, Wise Qigong in Malaysia has also expanded into the

Public Health ministry, which suggests that (1) Wise Qigong's social connections in Malaysia are quite strong, and (2) the Malaysian government tolerates incorporating religious healing or alternative healing methods into its governance.¹⁰

C. Recognition from the Malaysian Government

In contrast with the negative social view of qigong that is widespread in China due to the public fear of *falungung*, qigong has been incorporated into the Malaysian governmental public healthcare system since 2013. A local Wise Qigong instructor who is also a pharmacist affiliated with the University of Science Malaysia as well as with Wise Qigong healers, his patients and students in Malaysia, and Chinese medicine appealed for and found resources that made it possible to earn official recognition of qigong and Chinese medical healing from the government. Some Wise Qigong instructors and enthusiasts have passed the licensing examinations issued by the government. Being licensed by the Malaysian government is crucial to qigong masters

¹⁰ In Taiwan, where the medical system is ranked among the top three in the world, the state's governance of the medical system is quite strict, and the general public tends to go to Western-style medical clinics or hospitals for medical services due to a mature system of state-supported medical insurance where most people are covered for low fees. In this context, the public tends to prefer Western medicine while exhibiting prejudice toward non-Western medicine, including Chinese medicine. As a result, examinations and official acceptances of Chinese medical doctors are limited in number per year. The majority of Taiwanese prefer adopting Western over Chinese medicine, except for those who are devoted to the Chinese medical healing system, who are more concerned with *yangshen* or health-oriented physical cultivation. In China, according to Wise Qigong Master Sung and Master Kun, although the Western medical system is not fully developed, most people in China still rely on Western medicine more than Chinese medicine. In Malaysia, although state-owned hospitals are supported by state insurance at affordable fees even for lower-class citizens, most Chinese Malaysians would rather pay more to get into private hospitals. The strong religious sentiment in Malaysia, vis-à-vis the atheist and scientific-oriented sentiment in China and Taiwan where Western medicine is favored, explains why Malaysians tend to show faith in and act to obtain care from alternative healing systems. It is this particular socio-cultural context that makes Malaysia's incorporation of Chinese medicine and qigong healing into the state's governance of the health system unique.

from mainland China, who need to prove their credentials in both Malaysia and China when they treat patients with qigong healing.¹¹

D. Recognition from International and Academic Institutes

Insofar as qigong may be undervalued by contemporary society, some international recognition means much to the Wise Qigong Masters who dedicate their lives to promoting qigong. Qigong masters would remind others, especially bystanders who mistake qigong for *falungung*, that Wise Qigong became a recognized sport in China in 2017. Wise Qigong has also been incorporated into the physical education course curriculum in junior high schools in China. These developments that reflect increasing acceptance of qigong by the Chinese government have been encouraging to the Wise Qigong community.

Because Wise Qigong positions itself as a higher education institution in China that can help practitioners solve personal problems through the teachings of Chinese scientists and neo-Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist synthetic pathfinders, it attracts many middle-class scholars, scientists, professors, researchers, and teachers in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and mainland China. This list, of course, includes Peng Chew, the “Harvard guy” and the host of Yi. In this way, these middle-class practitioners actively introduce Wise Qigong into their affiliated organizations. For instance, a top-ranked high school

¹¹ As official and serious as state-issued alternative medicine licenses in Malaysia may sound to others, especially those from countries where medical licensing is highly competitive and rigorously selective, it seems that this is not the case in Malaysia. Muichuee, in her early seventies, was issued a qigong healer license without much effort on her part. Even with the license, she dared not treat patients because she did not have sufficient healing experience. She recalled the ease with which she obtained her license by referring to it as “kopi-o license,” which says in effect that it was as easy as ordering a black coffee at a local café.

in Shenzhen has incorporated qigong into its selective Chinese cultural heritage course because two of the high school's Chinese teachers are fervid Wise Qigong devotees. Another qigong enthusiast in his early thirties, a post-doctoral researcher in a laboratory at Shenzhen University, links qigong and science by designing experiments that examine the effects of qi. He has practiced qigong for two decades, since he was eleven years old. In addition to expanding its teachings into contemporary scientific and educational organizations, Wise Qigong, has in fact grown out of a creative synthesis of elements of Chinese cultural heritage: the core spirit of Confucianism influenced by Buddhism, Daoism, Chinese medicine, and Chinese martial arts.

E. Qigong theory and Confucianism mutually support each other

Wise Qigong's strength is its breadth, as it incorporates multiple Chinese philosophies into its teachings. The leading master of Wise Qigong, Grand Master Pang Ming, writes books on qigong and meditation as well as Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist practices in a scholarly communication style that appears sophisticated. Most of Pang's disciples I have met worship him through praising him, attaching Wise Qigong slogans to walls, referring to and rereading Pang's books to check their qigong movements and theoretical understanding, or carrying Pang's photograph with them in their wallets. There are, however, some disciples who have left the group in dissatisfaction. Sung mentioned several times that several of Pang's disciples thought of themselves so highly that they started to see Pang's teaching as useless, especially those who had been "corrected" by Pang. The pride and arrogance that come with making progress is considered a natural phenomenon in Wise Qigong's theoretical understanding. Sung

and others explain it in the online Wise Qigong forum, arguing that, when one's qi is growing quickly, the body and psyche make the subject feel like a millionaire overnight.

Although Wise Qigong explains the formation of pride in a materialistic way (as if qi is measurable), for skeptics and non-qigong practitioners it is understandable that, when a strong sense of self-sufficiency begins to emerge within a person, he becomes reluctant or less motivated to maintain the balance between give-and-take social relations. In other words, as Sangren (2017) argues, a narcissistic inclination strengthens when the desire to be recognized is thwarted. The desire to be seen and to be recognized by society motivates an individual to become a certain type of person who matches a specific social standard, yet the required deference thwarts one's "narcissistic" desires and propels the individual either to break off from social relations (through independence) or continue to work on one's development (through reform). Such deference, as manifested prominently in Wise Qigong's guidelines, which call for showing respect for the Dao and the teacher (尊師重道), is being violated by Pang's disciples who have left Wise Qigong.

In a sense, from the Wise Qigong perspective, those who question Pang's theory or validity, failing to show deference, break the top guideline of Wise Qigong's social contract. Those who leave no longer align with the unity or the collective goal of Wise Qigong; they are seen on a negative light because they have violated the principal guideline, inviting self-destruction and social destruction at the same time. By self-destruction I mean social exclusion from Wise Qigong, and Wise Qigong has a theory about qi according to which deference brings a smooth flow of qi through one's body that will bring health and harmony (following the logic of Dr. Masaru Imoto's

experiment—how positive consciousness brings happiness and health to one’s body and mind). By social destruction I mean that leaving the Wise Qigong community removes supporters in whom Wise Qigong invested time and money that could have been used to strengthen and expand Wise Qigong teachings.

Wise Qigong’s scholarly tone, with its complicated combination of science, Chinese philosophy, and Chinese medicine, attracts many middle-class practitioners, Chinese teachers, university professors, martial arts devotees, scientists, and researchers who are interested in making sense of the complications of life and maximizing their energy and resources in all aspects of life. Wise Qigong theory is quite erudite and difficult to understand without proper training through classes and practice. Because Wise Qigong is rooted deeply in Confucian philosophy, however, its qigong theory generally parallels Confucian principles. This parallel makes its full-of-jargon, hard-to-grasp theory easy to accept by Chinese practitioners who are familiar with Confucian teachings.¹²

¹² Some may argue that Wise Qigong seems similar to *Yiguandao* (一貫道) because they both synthesize multiple sources of religion, overlapping Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. *Yiguandao*, which literally means Consistent Way, has a stronger religious element, blending Islam and Christianity in its practices. Wise Qigong, aligning with the Chinese Communist Party’s atheistic position, claims to differentiate itself from other traditional qigong schools who develop mystic or religious explanations. Wise Qigong, in contrast, provides a theoretical explanation that resembles scientific explanations with Chinese characteristics—referencing Chinese medical and Chinese martial art systems of knowledge. Open about its religious sentiment, *Yiguandao* connects its original source with the Infinite Mother (無極老母) and other motherly figures. A Malaysian Chinese woman and a cancer recovery patient, Ms. Chia, in her mid-sixties from Guolin (郭林) Qigong, invited me to witness her *Yiguandao* “Enlightenment” ritual (開光儀式) in Penang in 2014. She pulled me aside in Youth Park on a Tuesday morning where Guolin Qigong Penang Station members gather weekly for their collective practice. Ms. Chia spoke of a “once-in-a-lifetime occasion” (難得的機會) about a master visiting from Taiwan to conduct the “Enlightenment” ritual in the religious group with which she had been affiliated for over a decade. She told only me (and no one else in the Guolin Qigong group) about this because I seemed open-minded, I am from Taiwan, and I would not look down upon any religious practice. I attended the lecture, which Ms. Chia presented as a local speaker explaining

I observed a pattern in virtue of which qigong practitioners buy into the theory while not being fully sure of what it is. Due to Wise Qigong's explanations of qi flow as a means of maximizing human productivity, and general support of Confucian teachings, the idea is that practitioners need only to draw conclusions from Confucian teachings that they had learned through their traditional Chinese upbringing. Nevertheless, Wise Qigong acts like a Chinese "science" that proves that Confucian teaching is reasonable, informed by wisdom that has been unknown to and uncherished by generations of Chinese who misrecognize Confucianism as backward and ideological. The underlying message is: Chinese ancestors knew more than we thought they knew, and here are the reasons and information that Wise Qigong provides to unravel its hidden worth. For instance, humble respect for the elderly is heavily stressed in Confucian teachings. Wise Qigong explains this doctrine in technical terms, holding that when people show respect, especially to the elderly, the resulting qi flow generates good energy physically. That in turn generates positive social interactions.

the basic origins of the Infinite Mother to the newcomers. The lecture was followed by the "Enlightenment" ritual, which was conducted by a master from Taiwan in a long white gown. After these ceremonies, the doctrine of blending five religions and the infamous swearing to keep this group's deeper information secret—if one breaks the promise, she would be penalized by Dao by being hit by lightning and die tragically (天打雷霹)—I realized that I was participating in a group that sounds like *Yiguandao*, a religion I was warned to stay far away from by Goh, a qigong healer in her early fifties whose mother was a fervid *Yiguandao* devotee who forced Goh to attend all *Yiguandao* ceremonies. Perhaps due to the negative preconceived idea associated with *Yiguandao* by the media or friends, the group used a vague institutional religious name to avoid using the well-known *Yiguandao*. I asked Ms. Chia at the end of the ceremony if the group was *Yiguandao*. She confirmed that it was. In contrast to *Yiguandao*'s under-the-radar posture and threat of punishment by a higher force, Dao, Wise Qigong prides itself in its atheistic view, acting as a revolution within traditional qigong to lift traditions out of devotees' imprisonment by blind religious beliefs while on a mission to educate "religious" "science" followers about the hidden treasure of the scientific character of China's traditional cultural heritage. In terms of food restrictions, *Yiguandao* has strict dietary regulations for its devotees, who must become vegetarians, while Wise Qigong promotes diverse sources of food (all kinds of meat and vegetables) in multiple colors (found in black beans, yellow corn, red beans or meat, green vegetables, white meat, rice or squash).

One could rationalize this doctrine insofar as being respectful makes students humble, receptive, and thus coachable. This brings positive results physically and socially. Wise Qigong's sophisticated explanation, however, gives the old Confucian teaching a refreshing taste by focusing on the individual rather than patriarchy: when people are respectful, the qi flow in their bodies is smooth, pure, calm, and open to exchange, which itself brings benefits. The Chinese "science" that is couched in technical qigong jargon in fact functions as an expression of religious mystery, an aura emanating from an advanced unknown world that people aspire to. In addition, the authenticating effect of Confucianism in turn promotes the legitimacy of Wise Qigong theory, even when it is full of jargon and scholarly, preventing most people from fully understanding its worth.

The authenticating effect of Confucianism is explained as the following example in Wise Qigong teachings regarding the traditional Confucian family-penalizing ritual. When children make a mistake, they are disciplined by being forced to kneel down on their knees facing a wall in isolation and to reflect on their errors. Although social isolation and kneeling are generally considered mental and physical punishments of children, Kun argues that qi theory supports the idea that kneeling brings clarity to the mind. A short interval of social isolation creates a positive quiet environment that invites deeper reflection on one's misconduct. In reference to Kun's argument, the Confucian punishment is, in fact, a form of loving protection that structurally and physically helps children think things through and correct their own behavior. The hidden message is: Wise Qigong provides evidence to support the hidden value and wisdom of Confucianism and Chinese culture that could be developed into Chinese science. The

hidden agenda is: Wise Qigong, as a conduit of Confucian teachings, is validated by Confucianism and should and could enjoy widespread acceptance like Confucianism.

Chinese people in Malaysia are very familiar with Confucian values from the typical home education. Wise Qigong theory helps Chinese practitioners see old-school Confucian doctrines in a new, “scientific,” yet familiar, “traditional” way. Their explanations of qi sound rational and scientific yet also mysterious, because non-experts usually cannot judge whether the Chinese medical system is correct, but the explanations sound sophisticated when couched in academic language and they sound right because they accord with Confucian values. Mr. Guan, a Wise Qigong devotee for eight years, a man in his early sixties in Shenzhen, China, summarizes Wise Qigong’s teachings in a word: “Goodness”—it helps cultivate his character, virtue (*de* 涵養道德), positive mindset (*hao* 想好) and a healthy body, all of which make him a better human being.

Even though Wise Qigong stems from a traditional Chinese cultural heritage, it uses its positioning as a Chinese science to set itself apart from other “superstitious, backward and unscientific” traditions. It prides itself in being the highest intellectual qigong institution in China, developing qigong science and contributing to the advancement of all the challenges of human life. Its richness in Chinese philosophies attracts practitioners from similar backgrounds. Wise Qigong serves as spiritual food for its devotees in China, Hong Kong, and Malaysia in a capitalist world where wealth is immensely and rapidly accumulated yet people are spiritually impoverished. Middle-class and lower-class people are hungry for inner wealth to anchor their endless pursuit of material accumulation. Lower-class people usually adhere firmly to physical

practices, believing they can bring positive results to the mind and body as long as they trust in the group or the instructor. The scholarly tone and philosophical depth of Wise Qigong appeals more to middle-class devotees who need a spiritual compass.

The class background may affect the practitioners' response to different ways of qigong practicing. Lower-class practitioners usually prefer intensive physical movements in qigong practice while upper middle-class practitioners tend to enjoy intellectually understanding in qigong more than intensive physical. For instance, at a conference for advanced Malaysian Wise Qigong instructors in Malacca in 2015, lower-class senior instructors complained about needing to practice qigong more according to Pang's *haogong* (耗功) instructions than to Sung's explanations of the erudite theories and history of Wise Qigong. However, Pang also encourages his disciples to improve their practice in Wise Qigong by learning Wise Qigong theory (理上開竅). In other words, there are two paths to improving under Wise Qigong, according to Pang's instructions: one is through understanding how qi operates by learning and reading, and the other is through practicing qigong physically. Nevertheless, knowing and practicing are both important and supplement each other.

Kun's students at his center in Butterworth were mostly lower-class middle-aged women. Four of eight had problems with their husbands, and one in particular suffered from serious depression due to work-related stress as a manager and owner of a small company who also must be responsible for being a mother, an elder sister, a wife and a daughter-in-law. Kun spent time lecturing to these students about his own interpretation of Pang's new book on Confucianism and Chinese Zen Buddhism while asking them to kneel down in *jinggong* (靜功) practice, which is similar to a meditation posture. In this

way, he designed his qigong course to enable his students to practice qigong while understanding Wise Qigong theory at the same time. Sung preferred lecturing on Wise Qigong theory to students more than leading them in qigong practice. His lecturing style involved presenting pictures from the Wise Qigong center with Pang and Pang's students and video clips showing scientific discoveries and qigong recordings of healing and collective public practices from Wise Qigong hospitals and Wise Qigong schools. His way of demonstrating Wise Qigong's past glory and large-scale practices and social acceptance seemed to attract an educated Chinese middle-class audience in Malaysia. His devoted students are educated, smart, middle-aged females from Penang: Mrs. Chua, in her late fifties, has a bachelor's of science degree from the University of Malaya (she was widowed in 2016, and is a mother of two children, with one child studying at a university in China), and Jing, a retired professional from a local prestigious bank in her late fifties.

Although Wise Qigong is believed to provide healing methods for improving practitioners' mental and physical condition, lower-class and upper middle-class practitioners embrace Wise Qigong in distinct ways. Wise Qigong also aims to attract lower-class farmers by offering tips for boosting crop production. Wise Qigong targets intellectuals and the upper middle class by providing a complicated yet seemingly overarching ontological system with which to explain how things that seem to happen to them randomly actually reflect a coherence that brings comfort or satisfaction. Jing loves reading traditional Chinese books such as *Classics of Poetry* (詩經) in her free time. Thus, the Wise Qigong reading group led by Sung satisfies her desire to understand Chinese classics and philosophies through qigong practice. The class demarcation

affects how Wise Qigong is received and enjoyed according to one's taste for learning as shaped by social position and education. Wise Qigong also uses this class distinction to design distinctive ways of learning to expand Wise Qigong to new audiences of diverse class backgrounds.

The middle-class Chinese Malaysians, Mrs. Chua and Jing, for instance, have been pursuing answers to the meaning of life through Wise Qigong practice, and by participating in workshops where they read traditional Chinese texts to understand the purpose of life and the meaning of living in Malaysia. Mrs. Chua and her husband (before he passed away in 2016) ran a Chinese spiritual lecture business to teach local Malaysian Chinese how to be “new” Chinese by reading traditional Chinese texts and interpreting those texts with new meanings. For instance, in one of Mr. Chua's lectures, he interpreted Confucian social conduct and responsibility to a new audience, *zhongxiao renai* 忠孝仁愛, in an unconventional way. He interpreted Confucian social conduct by taking it out of its historical context and putting it in a modern context to make sense of people's lives in Malaysia. That reading attracted, and even “illuminated” (as Jing puts it), his followers such as Jing and others who had participated in Mr. Chua's lectures for over a decade. I saw their desire to find life's meanings reflected in their participation in Mr. Chua's lectures and Wise Qigong practices. Wise Qigong, as a school from China that synthesizes traditional Chinese philosophies, attracts them, filling their voids with philosophical ideas given physical and mental embodiments to find aesthetics in life. Wise Qigong's core spirit of “I'm possible” reflects Chinese cultural meanings that make it alluring, especially for middle-class Chinese.

5. Impossible is I'm possible: meaningful and aesthetic Chinese experiences

The core of Wise Qigong teaching is the application of the “impossible is I'm possible” mindset. This spirit is shown in the Tri-Matter theory where the use or maneuvering of consciousness by a trained person can transform everything the trained person desires. The use of consciousness to transform things is also unbounded in time and space. When I asked Kun in 2014 if I could think of myself joining a Wise Qigong international conference in 2018 while practicing qigong to tap into the 800 participants' qi-fields, he told me that the power of consciousness has no boundaries and no time limits. He confirmed my conclusion that when it comes to consciousness control, from the viewpoint of Tri-Matter theory, “anything is possible.”

This “anything is possible” idea helps patients trust in themselves, in the process of recovery, and in the healer's skills. In contrast to the patient who distrusted Li's healing, under this “impossible is I'm possible” guideline her skepticism about the healing process interferes with her healing procedure. Her skepticism shows disrespect for Li, violating his values and the belief on which he built his career as a professional qigong healer. This challenge to prove oneself to others is nevertheless a living fact that all qigong healers (and perhaps all human beings) have to face every day. As a paradoxical conundrum, skepticism kills trust (an act of giving before taking—establishing one's connection to others) and transformation (take after giving trust—benefiting one self). The more skeptical one is, the less qigong masters are able to prove its legitimacy, which is true from the standpoint of both parties for different reasons.

For qigong masters, faith and sincerity are key factors in activating transformation; without faith, transformation stops—qi becomes ineffective. Efficacy

works because there is a psychosomatic dimension in the healing process, as argued by Levi-Strauss in “The Sorcerer and his Magic.” The faith of the healer, the faith of the patient, and the faith of the healing community are crucial to the healing process. In the biomedical healing system, a placebo effect happens with some patients when they believe the drug they have taken will improve their physical condition, even if they were given vitamin C instead the actual drug. The placebo effect induces positive healing results when patients believe in the efficacy of a medication while the nocebo effect induces negative results when patients do not believe in the efficacy of a medication or perhaps even think it might harm their bodies. Both the placebo and nocebo effects demonstrate the psychosomatic side of healing, whereby one’s belief or distrust is crucial to healing. Wise Qigong Masters encourage patients to believe they will be healed, which is a valid strategy based on the placebo and nocebo effects. This perhaps explains why skeptics are not healed because they believe that they will not be healed by qigong unless they see the results of the effects of qi before they trust in it. According to Wise Qigong logic, however, skeptics have to believe that Qigong can heal (mimicking the placebo effect) to generate positive healing results.

Strong belief in healing, whether for specific maladies or for overall transformation of life is heavily emphasized in Wise Qigong. This is the spirit of “impossible is I’m possible” that is embodied in all Wise Qigong practices. The “impossible-is-I’m-possible” attitude can be applied to the distinctive needs of multiple audiences. For the desperately sick, patients with rare or difficult-to-cure diseases such as cancer or diabetes, this open-to-possibility attitude lifts them up, giving them meaningful support and hope that they will become healthy. The effects of Qi on

physical change also include growing in height, correcting one's eyesight, controlling (high or low) blood pressure, gaining heat for the body in the cold, prolonging one's memory retention when preparing for examinations, beautifying oneself, reducing (or increasing) one's weight, and boosting work productivity in any field from farming to teaching as a professor. For instance, seven high school teachers in their late thirties from Shenzhen, China, took the Wise Qigong Daoist fasting class to lose weight after pregnancy. According to Teng Tian from Hong Kong and a local senior instructor, Mrs. Loh, most qigong practitioners they had known in person over the previous two decades had been put in contact with qigong due to long illnesses that seemed to have no cure or for other fitness-related needs.

For instance, Mrs. Loh herself came to Wise Qigong in 2006 because her father was sick with diabetes. She was introduced by friends and read about the prestige of Wise Qigong in a newspaper in Penang. To make sure her parents received qigong education and learned the practice, she drove her parents to a Wise Qigong center in Pulau Tikus for a "recovery class" that had been conducted for patients every day for three years. She said that after seeing her father get better through Wise Qigong practice, she has become a serious practitioner and a fervid promoter. At the time I spoke with her, she was working on persuading the principal of Han Chiang High School, an independent Chinese secondary school in Penang, to add Wise Qigong to the school's physical education curriculum.

Anna, a married woman in her mid-forties from Hong Kong, has a master's degree in psychology from the University of Hong Kong. She was married in 2000. She has had an intimate relationship with her husband that has brought both of them a strong

sense of “security” or *anquan gan* 安全感 (他跟我他也有互相有安全感), a “stable or *wending* 穩定” feeling she needs to fit with her personality. She has practiced qigong daily at Teng Tian’s qigong center in Tsim Sha Tsui in Hong Kong since 2011. She occasionally serves as a teaching assistant for Teng Tian. She even has been given the keys to the center to practice qigong during the early hours when Teng Tian has not arrived.

Anna reported that her daily qigong practice routine gives her a great sense of stability and security. She was suffering from anxiety with serious vertigo before she began practicing qigong. She underwent psychotherapy for a year, but she refused to take the drugs provided by the therapist in her first year and opted solely for talking therapy. However, since talking therapy did not relieve her anxiety or vertigo, she began taking the drugs recommended by the therapist. She maintained the drug regimen for three or four years, which she believed severely affected her liver, although her doctors did think accept her reasoning. She was, however, diagnosed in the initial stage of cirrhosis and the zero stage of cervical cancer. She suspected the drugs she had been taking over the years had undermined her health and so she turned to qigong for help. She Googled “qigong” online and found Teng Tian’s Wise Qigong center. She recalled this, implying that it was a fateful encounter with qigong and Teng Tian while thanking him for paying money to advertise the center online so that she could easily find it when she needed it.

The examples above suggest that most who become serious Wise Qigong practitioners have witnessed qi effects in transforming either their or others’ health conditions. In addition to acknowledging physical improvement, most enthusiasts are likely to invest more time and energy in qigong when they find the Chinese cultural

depth in Wise Qigong meaningful and aesthetically pleasing. Wise Qigong, apart from its healing capacity, functions as self-help values generator with Chinese characteristics. By “self-help” I am referring to the ways in which practitioners seek to overcome emotional weakness by immersing themselves in a system of thought or a set of doctrines as they seek to transform their behavior without needed professional medical or psychological assistance. By “Chinese characteristics” I mean the aesthetic experiences that are shaped when one’s background is influenced by Chinese literature and history. With this formation of a taste for “Chinese aesthetics” in mind, we can see how Chinese populations are attracted to qigong practice by the aesthetics it embodies for some Chinese Malaysian practitioners. Several Wise Qigong centers in Malaysia and Hong Kong sell their course packages together with international travel to historical sites in China.

According to Sung, some newcomers and experienced practitioners are willing to invest in qigong tours that take them to Daoist and Buddhist historical sites in China with qigong masters. Sung even advertised his Wise Qigong tours in China by representing them as a blend of experiences that will transform travelers through qigong practice (*hunhua zhilu* 混化之旅). For newcomers who want to sample qigong “authentically” without long hours of tedious practice doing “boring” inner work, the qigong tours of Daoist and Buddhist historical tourist sites provide multi-dimensional levels of engagement with Wise Qigong. These tours balance the fun and excitement of sightseeing connected to Chinese culture with activities that embody the Chinese spirit through small doses of qigong practice. Qigong masters claim that practicing qigong at tourist sites provides the right energy to practitioners because they are practicing at

historical locations where other qigong practitioners have meditated for years. Small doses of Chinese heritage at historical sites give Malaysian Chinese a sense of connection to the history, ancestors, spirits, and the energy, spirit, or shape of a site at which numerous pathfinders have accumulated energy by physically making a pilgrimage.

Qigong outsiders, like the relatives Mrs. Chua invited to join the trip, were curious about how their Chinese ancestors lived and how elements of Chinese heritage such as Daoism formed in such an environment. The trip to China with the qigong folks informed Mrs. Jing's relatives about China and in effect brought Chinese culture to Malaysia. Qigong devotees like Mrs. Chua and Jing believe, according to the Wise Qigong theory of qi-fields, that as the number of people bringing their qi (partial) energy to the site (whole) grows, the more powerful will be the collective qi-field. The energy can be stronger based not just on the quantity of the participants, but also the quality of the energy can be further enhanced by the depth of practice in which the practitioners engage. In other words, Wise Qigong holds that, at a Daoist historical site like the *Wudang Mountains* 武當山, the origin of Daoism, intensive practice by many advanced Daoist practitioners throughout the years make the site vibrate with strong, positive energies that maximize anyone's energies just by being present.

The purpose of the trip, according to Sung, is to blend oneself into the cultural energies at historical sites (文化混化之旅). In other words, through qigong the travelers are expected to learn how to open themselves up to absorb and allow external energies to reshape their minds and bodies. Jing and Mrs. Chua, both Chinese educated, have participated in trips led by Sung and his wife Wen to several historical sites, such as

Mount *Huangshan* 黃山 and the *Wudang* Mountains. Jing, who enjoys reading the *Book of Changes* or *Yiching* 易經 and learned to read its hexagrams, finds it meaningful for her to consume Chinese culture more deeply by reading and traveling to historical sites. Although she was not planning ever to get married, she was open to romance (但可以交男朋友), traveling, and reading, which help her orient her life as a Chinese person physically, culturally, spiritually, historically, and psychologically.

To further enhance this multiple layer of meaningful connection with Chinese culture, Jing was investing more time and energy into a deeper engagement with qigong. The profound aesthetic experience that Mrs. Chua draws from qigong brought her back to it again and again, motivating her to bring more friends and family to qigong classes. Both Mrs. Chua and Jing enjoy the body–mind synchronization in flow. Mrs. Chua loved to speak of her qigong sensations. Jing was more reserved about hers, but she mentioned that these qigong emotions were also documented in Chinese literature. Jing reported that she experiences the descriptions of scenes with fog and bodily sensations in the poems she read, which are embodied in her, a living qigong practitioner. For instance, when Jing started seeing images and feeling sensations in her qigong practice that were similar to the scenes that poets described in the poems she read, she felt that the Chinese version of truth, goodness and beauty were being embodied in her. Before her qigong experiences, she thought the poets were imaginative and descriptive. After experiencing her qigong sensations, she now understands that such a beautiful state of mind does exist. Yet she is a part of that tradition of beautiful minds in a community of qigong practitioners over the course of history.

For example, the poem “Mansion of the Yellow Bird” (黃鶴樓)¹³ by the poet Cui Hao (崔顥) describes how deities have flown away with the birds as the birds and the deities are not returning to us, leaving it empty where we are. He then describes how clouds floated on top of the trees in the forest, and how sunshine shone on the river, and beside the river the grass was green at dawn. He also describes how fog and steam over the lake makes the author feel melancholy. Jing marveled at how the beautiful scenes she read about in Chinese poems are in fact real sensations to the poet and to her. She says she feels what the author felt hundreds of years ago in real time. This means that the whole of Chinese civilization touches her physically and emotionally. Her ability to embody Chinese “truth, goodness, beauty” not only confirms the hidden wisdom in the Chinese cultural heritage but also strengthens her identity as a participant in the Chinese cultural heritage with which she identifies. Her identification with Chinese culture propels her to read traditional Chinese philosophical texts and practice qigong. That identification has shaped her into a model that the ancient Chinese ancestors followed.

My reading is: Jing’s desire to be identified as Chinese through reading and practicing qigong is confirmed through her “authentic engagement” with her cultural heritage. This authentic Chinese experience in turn confirms her identity as a Chinese person. In other words, she wants to fill the void created by her lacking Chinese-ness as a Malaysian citizen. She then pursues the Chinese texts and inner cultivation to fill in that void with spiritual food for thought, which gives her a feeling of authenticity because she becomes the thing she lacked and is filled by the very thing she desires. She

¹³ 昔人已乘黃鶴去，此地空余黃鶴樓。黃鶴一去不復返，白雲千載空悠悠。晴川歷歷漢陽樹，芳草萋萋鸚鵡洲。日暮相關何處是，煙波江上使人愁。

is no longer the self that lacked the substance (Chinese-ness) without the spiritual support (of Wise Qigong). She has become a person enriched by Chinese-ness and the moral guidance provided by Wise Qigong and other traditional Chinese texts.

Traveling in China and practicing qigong to synchronize their mentality with that of the Chinese poets feeds into Chinese qigong practitioners' search for Chinese-ness, both the embodiment and the symbolic systems that make their Chinese identity substantial and meaningful. Both pursuits bring them a strong sense of cultural belonging. Jing finds herself part of the Chinese heritage (DeBernardi 2004) by experiencing what many Chinese have experienced for generations. Moreover, the embodiment of Chinese aesthetics brings spiritual fulfillment to Jing because a sense of pride arises when she feels she belongs to something larger than herself yet is also part of her. From an actor's perspective, a sense of pride indicates that one identifies as an insider in a culture (Piers and Singer 1953). With that sense of spiritual authenticity filling the void of her identity, Jing feels she is living more fully as a person as she connects to Chinese aesthetics and the meanings embodied in her and her Chinese ancestors. From the analyst's viewpoint, Jing transcends her own limits as a person bounded by her body, knowledge, language, time, space and life's banality by projecting herself onto an alterity—Wise Qigong, the embodiment of Chinese cultural heritage—to compose her own very identity, and to answer her existential questions.

These stories enable a Wise Qigong practitioner to transcend her body and consciousness to unite with something larger. The qi-field is a product of a special time and space, but is unlimited by space because everyone can be part of the collective qi-field by controlling consciousness to “attend the qi-field” in the imagination. The

transcendence of one's physical and mental boundaries satisfies the human need to transcend the banality of life by merging with others (Shermer 1997, 86), which is seen as a desire shared by many of not all people. The qi-field is, however, a community that is not bounded by physicality, geography, or space. It is an imagined community that ideally merges all differences into one unity. All individuals (the parts) synchronize with the collective (the whole), yet contributing an individual share (the part) to the collective (the whole).

When a Wise Qigong practitioner sees herself as a projection of a radical alterity, this is a partial recognition of the Other. This partial recognition, understood from an analytical perspective, is called alienation (Sangren 2000), because of the displacement of one's attention and one's desired recognition onto the radical alterity. This act negates the self while demanding social recognition as a means of investing the self with value. It is thus seen as placing value elsewhere than the self, which makes it false consciousness or misrecognition. Because humans need social Others to survive, however, this (dis)placing of one's value into the hands of others is inevitable. A paradox emerges when effacing one's personality (to match the social mold) coexists with narcissistic hoarding to buttress the self's personality. An ideal that can harmonize this paradox of the division into the self and the Other and resolve the conflicts of interest between them would be to merge them together as a collective. In the case of Wise Qigong, this is a community that shares a mission and embraces the model of a Wise Qigong person who can maneuver qi with consciousness to transform herself and others.

It is worth noting here that, although Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese may have linguistic advantages over English-educated Chinese in understanding deeper qigong concepts, the groups' desire to understand Chinese culture through qigong is the same. The English-educated Malaysian Chinese depend more on translators or translations while obtaining information from English religious and qigong books. Through employing idiosyncratic qigong expressions, both English- and Chinese-educated Chinese Malaysians confirm their Chinese cultural identity. The all-is-possible mindset gives them confidence that they can achieve their wishes, from improving one's health to being more productive at work to accumulating outer and inner wealth. Thus Wise Qigong functions as a self-help system with Chinese characteristics. These factors explain why my Chinese informants practice Wise Qigong. Below I suggest an underlying reason—a universal need for Wise Qigong enthusiasts and humans in general to build a restorative relationship with the “good object” through a qi-establishing ritual.

6. Qi-Establishing Ritual: The Giant Self and *The Great Together*

Before every qigong session, Wise Qigong practitioners establish the qi-field through a ritual in which the image of the Giant Self connects with the universe (the good object). The poem shown in the beginning of the chapter that was read at the start of the international conference functions like guided meditation, preparing practitioners to enter the proper mode of qigong practice. The Giant Self is also an ideal Self in Wise Qigong society. One is “open”—relaxed and open to exchanging energy with the universe. This can be seen as two relationships: (1) individually: a person transforms

into an ideal Giant Self;¹⁴ and (2) interpersonally: a person is open to the public—the qi, the vital energy in the universe—which can be extended to one’s relations with social Others. The boundaries between the self and the social ideal are blurred because individuals aim to enter a pro-social state to become the ideal Giant Self. The Giant Self, who has altruistic intentions, is in Freudian terms the ideal ego (1962). It is also the voice of the Law (Lacan and Fink 2004) that motivates individuals to grow into new Confucian role models. Qi, as the good object (Klein 1957), induces the self to grow into the Giant Self, following the unconscious lead from the Law (Lacan and Fink 2004) or ego ideal (Freud 1962).

The ideal self who opens up to the public is referenced in Confucian texts, a tradition from one of the motherly Chinese roots that Wise Qigong, borrowing Confucian values, synthesizes into its teachings and on which it bases its prestige. In *The Great Together* (禮運大同篇), the ideal self–other relation in society is as described below:

When the Great Way is practiced, the world is for the public with strongly altruistic concerns. Society chooses and utilizes those with virtue and integrity. People value trustworthiness and cultivate harmony with each other more than anything. They treat other people’s parents and sons as their own. Senior citizens have harmonious and happy days at the end of their

¹⁴ The Giant Self is seen as the ultimate condition of harmony, health, and happiness for Wise Qigong practitioners. They try to enter this state of mind in every qigong session, if not in everyday life. To do this a person undergoes training to learn to control the focus of consciousness, as far as it zooms out into the universe, and as deeply as it zooms into one’s body. One’s body is as profound as the universe. In fact, one’s body is a representation of the universe. This is also a skill that qigong healers use to place themselves empathetically on the same page with patients. They zoom their focus in, into, the patient’s body and exist with her in that state to feel the patient’s pain in their own bodies. This is how empathetic diagnosis works. After a diagnosis, healers detach themselves from patients, and zoom their focus back to themselves or to nature. Therefore, zooming in and out of one’s consciousness with high concentration is a key practice that can be applied in healing oneself and others. Being focused, calm, relaxed and composed are the key elements in Wise Qigong that enable one to control one’s own consciousness.

lives. Those in their prime days find their purpose and passion in their profession. The youngsters develop and grow according to their inclination and personality. All minorities are taken good care of: widows, orphans, elderly people without spouses, children, grandchildren, the handicapped, the ill, etc. Males contribute their strength in their positions in society; females find places where they feel they belong. Money is not the only criterion for evaluating one's worth. Everyone cares less about money and more about meaning in life. People do not even save money in private accounts because they despise the insular inclination of hoarders. They are ashamed of themselves for not contributing their strength to society with altruism. Therefore, people don't behave narrow-mindedly: no one engages in theft or robbery or scams or rebellions. No one locks the door or closes their doors to avoid crimes because there is no crime at all. This is The Great Together.¹⁵

The text above shows an ideal give-and-take social ideology: treating others like extensions of themselves so that altruism and care naturally emerge. In this way the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are blurred. The ambiguity of boundaries enables the act of caring for oneself and others to be enacted at the same level. This is of course an ideal state that is very difficult to achieve, according to Kun. One should still however strive for the ideal state to correct his insular behavior, prioritizing social service and individual contributions over self-centered interests. In this way, one transforms from an ordinary self into a perfect Giant Self, a being who is open to social exchange, suppressing individual urges, relieving the physical pain and mental blocks that lead to insular behavior, thereby contributing to the collective goal, achieving the ego-ideal that aligns with the goal to which the individual and the public commit themselves in Confucian teachings.

¹⁵ Original Chinese text of the Confucian work, 'The Great Together.' 大道之行也，天下為公，選賢與能，講信修睦，故人不獨親其親，不獨子其子，使老有所終，壯有所用，幼有所長，鰥寡孤獨廢疾者皆有所養；男有分，女有歸，貨惡其棄於地也不必藏於己，力惡其不出於身也不必為己，是故謀閉而不興，盜竊亂賊而不作，故外戶而不閉，是謂大同。

Note that with its emphasis on Confucianism the role model of the Giant Self, which demands altruism and social giving, is similar to yet different from Buddhist teachings about the extinction of the self. As Pang explains in Wise Qigong publications, exercising sufficient self-control to endure pain to make room for pleasure involves a “no-self” spirit, or the extinction of the self. When a Wise Qigong healer diagnoses a patient’s sickness by empathetically telepathizing, the healers are practicing no-self: to put their own egos aside so that they can concentrate on feeling, intuiting, or diagnosing their patients’ bodies. Yet the Confucian call to provide services to liberate people sounds more ambitious than the Buddhist wish to save oneself first and/or others first from samsara or suffering. There are specific traditions in Buddhism that predetermine the priorities in Buddhist practice: in general, Theravada Buddhism values progress toward self-enlightenment above saving others. Mahayana values serving others as a Bodhisattva and putting one’s final recognition as a Buddha last.

Wise Qigong, following the Buddhist method of observing one’s mind from a sitting position and looking inward downplays the inward-looking side of the practice. Rather, Wise Qigong highlights the social return from the self, extracted from Confucianism as manifested in the ideal state of *The Great Together*.

The ideal state of *The Great Together* parallels the Giant Self’s social exchanges with the universe (and social Others). The essence of the practice is to suppress the insular, self-centered, hoarder inclination to allow oneself to be open to social exchange with a collective concern in mind. Like the idea of *The Great Together*, the Confucian middle path (中道) represents the center and signifies the right path. When one notices that her conduct is driving her away from the right path, she should correct it and redirect

herself back to the main path (歸中). The peripheral paths that lead one away from the central main path are considered hideous, unheroic, and even evil, like the underground path a rat runs (偏門歪道、旁門走道). These Confucian symbols of central integrity against peripheral undergrounds are borrowed by Wise Qigong to support its ideas pertaining to (1) how one's conscious choice of correct conduct brings positive social reinforcement; and (2) how misconduct, social misalignment, and sickness produce a vicious cycle. Wise Qigong Shou explains that when one is not walking on the right path (by engaging in misconduct), he is begetting negative energy within and external to himself that will drag him down in the long run. The emphasis on choosing the ego-ideal, the Giant Self that prioritizes the right way or the middle-path over the sick rat's underground, is reiterated in a similar way in the Wise Qigong theory of pain and blockage, which I discuss later in this chapter. We next discuss the internal logic of healing and the functions of Wise Qigong rituals.

7. Healing Logic of Qigong Rituals

In Wei's adapted Wise Qigong class, a version altered to suit busy people in today's world, he provides a new interpretation of Wise Qigong. First, he asks practitioners to see themselves as babies in level-one qigong practice. He interprets this by posing as a baby embracing himself. In a movement in which practitioners embrace their calves while kneeling, he directs his students to imagine themselves in the womb, feeling free, safe, and happy, connecting to Mother Earth. Second, in the ritual that establishes the qi-field that takes place prior to every session, he instructs his students to imagine the Mother's loving energy pervading the whole space in the room. By

perceiving loving motherly energy around oneself, he explains, a soft, healing energy arises from within. Practitioners reported that they would instantly relax into themselves just by imagining supportive, motherly energy around them. During the qi-establishing ritual, that is, practitioners enter a relaxed physical state with intense focus. In this state, practitioners are taught to be open-minded, open to connections, which opens or relaxes the mind, lowering one's guard and reducing skepticism, which in turn leads to open suggestibility. This is a mental state similar to what occurs in group hypnotherapy where people are mesmerized and soothed by external stimuli (Kirsch 1999). For instance, I asked Sung, "Why would Daoist practitioners engage in qigong all day?" Instead of answering my question directly, he asked, "Why do people enjoy reading all day? What do they gain?" What he suggests is that there is a sense of inner fulfillment that cannot be substituted easily by other pleasurable objects (events). My question showed that I had neither understood nor experienced the ultimate pleasure of qi.

Note that Grand Master Pang openly denies that qigong practice is a form of hypnosis in his publications on Wise Qigong theory, methodology, and movements. It is an understandable stance to take because for Wise Qigong and other qigong or Chinese medical practitioners, qi is a real substance and it has a real effect on people, animals, and plants in the world. Plus, it is the substance that can liberate all humans from sickness, pain, and weakness. For them, qi is an advanced substance insofar as qi functions more efficaciously than science, biomedicine, or Chinese medicine. Qi provides nutrition. Qi is the only fundamental substance that is crucial for survival, analogous to the relationship of a mother to a child. To place group hypnotherapy with Wise Qigong healing together at the same level when examining and comparing their

healing effects healing violates the hierarchy of placing Wise Qigong higher than anything else in the world. It also ignores qi's function of reducing the "physical" healing process into a psychological process. Thus, by putting them at the same level, I risk putting myself into the position of misunderstanding Wise Qigong's superior liberating healing efficacy.¹⁶ It is not in social scientists' interest, however, to promote qigong or clinical hypnosis, but rather they seek to understand how healing practices from alternative medical systems (which seem different) function in general ways. This comparison of alternative cultural healing methods may point to universal physical and psychological human needs.

Wei's interpretation of the relationship between qi and humans as like the Mother to her children can be seen in the early development of the psyche as children depend on the fulfilling and sustaining nurturing given by their early caretakers. When humans are very young, their parents take care of them and the young take their 24-hour care, love, and attention for granted. Before we are born, we swim around in Mother's amniotic fluid, feeling omnipotent (Freud 1962).

A psyche that resembles this omnipotent feeling can be found in Daoist traditions. Daoist practitioners have long retreated into Nature to extract abundant energy by returning to "the womb of Mother Nature." Laozi 老子 is a Daoist figure whom Wise Qigong Kun respects (even more so than the more popular figure, Zhuangzi 莊子). The relationship between Laozi and his parents is the subject of a mysterious narrative of which there have been multiple versions. According to one version Laozi

¹⁶ Moreover, some Wise Qigong devotees may even suspect that I had a hidden agenda that involved deconstructing Wise Qigong—which positioned me as a potential traitor or destroyer seeking to put the brakes on Wise Qigong development.

did not have a father: his mother became pregnant after seeing a shooting star, when the higher spirits' qi covered Laozi's house; according to another version Laozi's mother was not married when Laozi was born. In one of the versions, Laozi's mother was pregnant for seventy-two years before Laozi was delivered. When Laozi was delivered, he came out of his mother's womb as an old man with grey hair who could speak instantly. This cast Laozi in the image of a wise intellectual from the moment he was born. In yet another version of the Daoist texts, Laozi is a saint and an energy which is the origin of everything, even his biological mother. Laozi became the ancestor of everything before anything existed (生於無始之時，無因而起，是萬物之先，元氣之先). Daoist texts portray Laozi as the origin of everything since he is recorded as having been born before the Yuan qi, the original qi. The idea that Laozi existed prior to the original qi recalls the *hunyuán* qi in Wise Qigong, a qi that existed before the yin and the yang energies. These Daoist myths about Laozi evince the desire to be omnipotent in a natural world, like a baby's experience swimming in Mother's amniotic fluid. This suggests that the desire to be omnipotent is found not only in Western psychoanalytic systems but also in Daoist myths of Laozi. Wise Qigong, as a continuation of Daoist teachings, also emphasizes omnipotent human agency, the belief that one can use one's consciousness to transform oneself and the things around one, what Wise Qigong practice posits as a form a ESP that makes it possible to live an advanced way of life.

The child's feeling of omnipotence when swimming in Mother's amniotic fluid is replaced by a sense of complete dependency on this Other. After a child is born, he is fed whenever he is hungry. When he feels uncomfortable and cries, his dirty diaper is replaced with a new one so that he feels comfortable and clean again. He is cuddled

when he feels unsafe. His needs are attended to and satisfied by his caretaker, usually Mother, who constantly looks after him. As he grows, he remembers the feeling of being nurtured, cared for, and attended to. Even after he has grown up, he feels nostalgia and seeks a replacement for this state of being fully nurtured, of feeling omnipotent. As he reaches adolescence, he starts to break his attachment to his parents psychologically. However, the longing to be taken care of with full attention, the desire to be understood without language or communication, and the desire to feel safe, loved, accepted, and attended to, remains. To fill the void left by this loss, humans seek new attachments from people (close friends, lovers, or mentors) or objects/ideas (such as religion, knowledge, work, or hobbies). The universal need to have companionship, synchronization of emotion—wishing for someone to echo and accord with one’s mood (Taylor 1985, 11)—is projected into one’s connection with various forms of alterity. When I refer to alterity I mean that an Other to which one projects oneself as the core formation of one’s identity or worldview.

In Wise Qigong, the best connection one could have with any form of alterity is with *hunyuan* qi, the original energy that resembles the amniotic fluid yet is better than the amniotic fluid. *Hunyuan* qi provides the best support physically and mentally, especially for qigong practitioners. It is the best restorative home to which practitioners can return by imagining they are practicing Wise Qigong surrounded by loving motherly energies, as Wei instructs his students to do. His students reported having a sense of safety and security as they picture their surroundings full of motherly supportive energies by maneuvering (*diao dong* 調動) *hunyuan* qi into their space.

Meditation, which can transform one's perspectives, is seen as a form of hypnotic healing (Pintar and Lynn 2008) because when hypnotized one is in a highly focused state with minimal distractive thoughts, which makes one highly suggestible to vividly mental images. Hypnosis, like other forms of healing communication, can be effective only with patients' voluntary participation. Hypnosis is used clinically to alter perception and adjust behavior.

As is the case with hypnosis, when qigong practitioners are in a qigong state, they are focused. With their eyes closed, their minds are sensitive and alert to external stimuli that provide vivid mental images. Differing from hypnosis, however, which people treat as a form of healing, qigong practice contains a religious sentiment that places qigong in a higher position that is sacred and mysterious. Qi is like a mother and a deity. Although Wise Qigong stresses its atheistic nature following the Chinese Communist Party's guidelines, qi is symbolically a good object that one ultimately is prone to desire. Who would not benefit from having a good relationship with a good object that sustains life and energy? This imperative to develop a positive relationship with the preconceived "best object" will in turn help practitioners develop good relationships with themselves.

There are two ways in which qi is conceived as the best object with which to be liberated from one's physical constraints: (1) as the beautiful thing and (2) as a progressive force that improves one's life although it does not necessarily seem pleasant or beautiful at the moment it occurs. Kant argues that religion is alluring because of (1) the beautiful things to which people are attracted, and (2) the sublime, the noble and grand sense of nature that generates awe and exceeds intelligibility. In a slightly

different way, in Wise Qigong the beautiful qi is first manifested, for example, in Teng Tian's retelling of his memorable experience doing 10 hours practicing the "pushing the mountains" movement or *chengbi* (撐臂) in his class in Hong Kong. Teng Tian related that, as he pushed through the pain after an hour or two, he then reached an ultimately peaceful stage that made him satisfied and happy, an emotional state that he has experienced only through qigong practice.

The second manifestation of qi, the progressive force, drives a process that practitioners cannot seem to understand fully, but the qi obtained through qigong practice is described by the president of the Penang Wise Qigong Society, Wai Seng Kei, as a painful process which nevertheless improves one's intellect and health. First, Wai Seng Kei described how the sensation of qi feels to him, varying from one time to the next:

Sometimes I have stronger sensations, sometimes it is weaker. It varies from time to time. Sometimes the sensation is very obvious, for instance, the heart is pounding in a very clear way that I can feel.¹⁷

He then suggested that what he considers a blockage in the brain occurs, which he thought was normal before he started practicing qigong. He observed that the symptoms of that blockage at first became worse the more intense his qigong practice became:

Once when I did qigong in my early stage of qigong practice, I felt some light occurred in my brain when I was pooping in the bathroom with force. The light looked like fireflies moving in the air. The firefly vision kept occurring every time when I pooped with force that it became like a habit to me as if it was normal to "see fireflies." In fact, it was a message for me—perhaps there was a blockage in my right blood vein in the brain. When I used force, the energy near that blockage was moving. That is why I saw fireflies flying. It is a good thing and it is also a bad thing. The bad thing is it was a sickness hidden in my body. The good thing is it was actually a

¹⁷ The text of the interview in Chinese: "有時候我感覺比較強，有時候會弱，不是說很固定的。有時候感覺非常清楚的一些東西呀，你感覺清楚的，比如說心在動、心在跳、你就感覺很清楚的。"

message to remind me that something was wrong in my body.¹⁸

Then the symptom grew even worse after six months of qigong practice. He was so concerned about his condition that he consulted with Wise Qigong Master Zhen. He described his symptoms thusly:

Gee, on one evening, there seems to be “fireworks” happening in my head. After my daily qigong practice when I was about to go to bed, suddenly there were “fireworks” in my head that I could not sleep. I went to see Master Zhen in the morning at Bell Road and told him that I felt ill because there were “flashes of light” in my head on and off, on and off. He congratulated me and told me that the energies around the blockages were moving.

After that incident, I no longer had that problem: pooping has been smooth, and I only need to use little force to get it out. From this experience, I learn that there was sickness in me, a minor blockage in my blood veins in my brain that was hidden. I took it as a normal condition: the blockage was blocked, unblocked, and then blocked, and then unblocked. That was why there were “flashes of light.”

However, after [six months of intensive] qigong practice, the blood veins [and the qi passages] had become smoother and smoother. The blockages of this part of my body had been in the process of unblocking. After those “flashes of light,” my blockages have gone. That is why Master Zhen congratulated me because the blockages in my brain have been unblocked.¹⁹

Wai Seng Kei described three sequential states that he experienced during his qigong

¹⁸ The text of the interview in Chinese: “我練功的心得有一次呀，是這樣，以前我在早期練功的時候還沒有這種改變啦。我去用力大便的時候用力，我的頭這裡有些光，好像螢火蟲的東西在走的，在出力，已經成為習慣了，還沒練功以前。其實是給你一種信息來的，你可能妳的腦，右血管啊有一些阻塞，但是你一用力的時候他沖開了。他就好像一些營火一些給你。好也是不好，不好就是你有病態在裡面潛伏著，但是你用力的時候他有信息給你。這樣我成為自然。”

¹⁹ The text of the interview in Chinese: “有一次晚上的時候，哇整個頭好像開煙花。練捧氣貫頂或者撐氣過後啦，在睡覺的時候，突然間批批啪啪這樣，哇！慘囉，不能睡。我就找曾青川老師跟他說，老師我很辛苦啊，不停地閃閃閃。我親自去找他在 Bell Road。早上的時候去找他，他跟我說‘恭喜你啦。啊，什麼事啊？你的病態呀？就是練功在沖開。’經過那一次以後啊，沒有沒事了，大便很通暢，而且用很輕的力，他就解決了。我就這個經驗給我知說，我本來潛伏著這種腦阻塞得很幼的一種血管阻塞了，但是我習慣了不知不覺、又塞又通、又塞又通，就給你一些信息看到有光的東西。但是通過練功的時候他的血管張開、通開了，然後阻塞這一部份一直在通，一通全部通開了，一直開到完啊。以前是一直塞一直塞，經過那一次一放了鞭炮以後，哇！好了沒有了。所以他恭喜我是好事。那次我的腦血管很多東西都通了。”

transformation: (1) the firefly vision that he thought was normal turned out to be a symptom of his sickness; (2) the “flashes of light” state that he thought was abnormal turned out to be a symptom of his recovery, or the effect of his intensive qigong practice that healed his blockage; (3) the smooth defecation process that needs no extra force with no symptoms. His ability to perceive his sickness and symptoms had been transformed by Wise Qigong teachings led by Zhen. This implies that one may feel healthy but in fact be sick; one may feel sick but in fact be in the process of recovery. This is a core spirit in Wise Qigong healing: Common sense does not appear to be right; an alternative healing system needs to open the patient to the solution that feeling ill means recovering and feeling healthy could mean falling ill. A similar spirit is deeply rooted in Confucian Chinese culture, which admonishes adherents not to judge a book by its cover. In Chinese cultural contexts this expresses the same sentiment as “the wise appears to look dumb” because still waters run deep, *dazhi ruoyu* 大智若愚. The four-character phrase, *dairuo muji* 呆若木雞, is interpreted by grand Master Pang to give it new meanings: in his publications, Pang explains this phrase as a descriptor for the zone of qigong practice that practitioners may enter: that is, the facial expressions look dull when one is highly focused. All these expressions invite practitioners to follow the suggestions of Wise Qigong: be open-minded, and do not let common sense fool you into blindly accepting how reality appears. Belief in the process and perhaps being willing to endure a little more pain are necessary to enable one to “see for oneself” that the promise of the ancestors can come true.

Unlike Teng Tian, who reached an ultimate happy state through qigong practice, Wai Seng Kei felt “ill” and could not sleep the entire night after experiencing qi because

it made him excited and energetic. Although he did not feel “good” or beautiful about the process, his experience, according to him, shows that cultivating a relationship with qi will bring him a positive life.

Wai Seng Kei believed he would experience a positive outcome even though he did not feel well. His attitude is similar to what Wise Qigong teaches its practitioners: qi will bring positive progress to its practitioners, as long as they keep trying to practice qigong with the motivation to examine and prove or witness the effects of qi. “Witnessing and proving the pathway as correct, as the ancestors claim it to be as you walk in it,” or *zhengdao* 證道,²⁰ is the key to qigong healing. Kun, who once gave up qigong completely, revived his faith in qigong because he suddenly “got” what other experienced practitioners were saying about qi—the sensation, the color, and everything about it. A sense of wonder at the discovery of qi from Kun regenerated his faith in qigong. In Kun’s case as in many others’ cases, one has to identify with the ego-ideal, putting the ideal or the possibility of a Giant Self’s coming into being before the ordinary self, and to some extent downplay the ordinary self so that one can be open to a public intrusion in exchange for an advanced way of life.

Zhengdao is also a logic of deferring, confirming, and embodying ancestors’ experiences, analogous to the Confucian cultural logic according to which younger people should show respect for and follow traditions. One has to choose to believe what experienced qigong practitioners say about the ultimate good that is promised to and lies in front of her if qigong is to take effect. In short, if one believes in the efficacy of

²⁰ The Chinese phrase to which they refer literally means, “proving the Dao’s correctness with your actions” (証道). This is an action-oriented approach to aligning oneself with the Dao, walking on the right path.

qigong, qigong works. If one disbelieves in the efficacy of qigong, then qigong does not work for her. This leads to the conclusion that disbelief causes qigong not to work. Simply put: Each individual is the key factor in the efficacy of qi. If you believe, then qi works on you, you will live a positive, progressive life, even though occasionally it may not feel good during the process. The relationship one rebuilds with one's ancestors through *zhengdao* is promised to bring ultimate inner fulfillment to a practitioner, if one believes in what has been promised by the ancestors' knowledge, and practices qigong accordingly. Belief is the beginning and end of the efficacy of qi. Belief is the means and the end of the efficacy of qi

As Wai Seng Kei mentioned, his belief in the radical positive-ness qigong brings to his life elevated his capacity, intellectually and physically. Such personal elevation affected all aspects of his life, including his response to challenges:

In fact, many a time when we practice qigong, our body, our desire, our wisdom are all improved. Before we practice qigong, our brain activity is inactive and thus our brains hurt when we need to solve a problem. However, when we continue to make qigong practice a habit, it becomes easier for you to solve a complicated problem. . . . Things become easy for you because your brain power is stronger now. Your thinking becomes more energetic that you have many approaches for you to use to solve the problems. Your blockages are unblocked.²¹

During this process of complete elevation, what Sung mentioned as “upgrading oneself like your iPhone through qigong practice,” is, however, not a transparent process. Wai Seng Kei hinted in the above passages that personal elevation comes naturally, even without one's awareness or control. However, below he tries to describe what that

²¹ The text of the interview in Chinese: “其實很多時候我們練功呀，我們的身和心啊，和我們的智慧呀，開發智能是很有道理。就是說以前呀，我們這種腦活動能力很弱，一想到困難的東西頭也痛。因為你練功練功啊習慣了，一些複雜的東西對你來講很容易解決。對某一種工作一種要解決的問題，他感覺到很頭痛、不容易解決。可是你練功練久了，你對一些困難的事情很輕鬆地解決了。無形中的就是說，你的思維啊比較強化。好像給自己一種思維活動加強。你有很多方法去結合在一起給你去分析，就通了。”

personal elevation has to do with the process of unblocking the blockages:

Because before, when your cranial nerves in your brain are blocked, it impedes your efficacy to solve problems. But after qigong practice our cranial nerves are improved. We can use less than five cranial nerves only. But every time after you practice qigong, your left and right brain will open up so they become wider. In this way, your thoughts will be “wider,” too, and you will become more open-minded, especially your meridian, *tianmu xue* 天目穴. Practicing qigong will unblock the blockages in your cranial nerves.²²

Wai Seng Kei explains the logic underlying the capacity of qigong practice to unblock the blockages in one’s brain that in turn also makes one more open-minded. He implies that transforming one’s physicality leads to mental transformation because the meridian *tianmu xue* 天目穴 or *yintang* 印堂 (a term more widely known) is unblocked. After explaining this qigong logic, he quickly draws an example from Albert Einstein and restates his belief in the positive ultimate power of qi:

Albert Einstein is very protective about his brain. His brain is different from others because the middle part of his brain is wider than others’ brains. Researchers have been studying Einstein’s brain. With the same logic, if we in Wise Qigong aim to develop practitioners’ intellectual capacity, [after qigong practice] our judgment and the power of thinking can be reinforced and improved. That I believe is true.²³

Wai Seng Kei concluded that the goal of developing one’s intellect can be accomplished by comparing brain development in the giant of science, Einstein, with Wise Qigong’s methods of developing intellectual capacity, specifically ESP. He does not refer to qi as a good object, but sees it as an ultimate positive force that can bring

²² The text of the interview in Chinese: “因為以前你要解決問題的時候，你的腦神經還沒有開得很通透。你經過練功、練功、我們的腦才用幾個不到五個。每一次練完功的時候，你左腦右腦開得比較寬一點。這樣你的思維活動比較寬闊，開得…就是你的印[堂]…天目穴，就關係到你的腦神經通透。”

²³ The text of the interview in Chinese: “給你一個很正確的例子呀，愛因斯坦他很保護他的腦，他的腦跟別的人不一樣。就是說，他中間他的[腦]闊度開得比較大一點。他們在研究他的腦。一樣的道理，我們智能氣功如果開發智能，我們的這種判斷力、這種思維的力量都是加強的。我很相信的。”

progress to one's judgment and thinking. His belief in qi's positive efficacy is firm, yet the process of Wise Qigong practitioners' engagement with this positive qi, an alterity of self-improvement and happiness, is quite mysterious. The path is mysterious because everyone is unique and everyone walks on a uniquely personal path. This mysteriousness means that some rules or processes cannot be spelled out clearly to participants. Cheuk Siu-Kei from Hong Kong, a person who prefers to be informed with logical steps that he can easily follow, is dissatisfied and discouraged by what he calls "the Chinese way of education" that does not lay out clear steps for students to follow. The nature of teaching that allows students to figure out things on their own is not necessarily Chinese per se. However, what is Chinese is the somaticized habit through which Wise Qigong and its members tend to relate their emotions to descriptions of physical symptoms.

Emotions are rarely mentioned in Wise Qigong teachings. Wai Seng Kei looks at one's physical progress in healing first and then discusses how to improve one's intellect. This body–mind link that excludes emotions matches Kleinman's (1980) observation of the Chinese tendency to somaticize emotions, because Wise Qigong suggests that the origin of all mental and physical problems lies in one's engaging with consciousness (意識的病 *yishi de bing*), which means engaging with one's perspective on life. Thus, as long as practitioners can change their perceptions, their sickness will be gone because their consciousness transforms. Sung and Mrs. Chua consult with patients to transform their perceptions (話療 *hualiao*) of issues that have troubled them for a long time that may contribute to their illness and discomfort. Most of the time, however, Wise Qigong teaches its practitioners to stop over-thinking the issues that plague them, and just act

and continue to practice qigong.

Wise Qigong's theorization and rationalization cater to the Chinese habit of somaticizing emotional problems. This creates a comfortable distance that enables one to contain her raw uncensored emotions, abiding by the Confucian teaching guidelines—emphasizing centeredness, calmness, stillness, and harmony. Contained emotions that are theorized and rationalized create a safe boundary within to remain at a distance from one's emergent emotions. As stated previously, Wise Qigong solves emotional imbalances by asking practitioners to stop thinking and practice more qigong. By physically practicing qigong, one shifts his focus to the body, the present. Practicing qigong, a type of exercise, also helps one transition one's mindset through the transformation of one's physical condition.

This emphasis on behavior over thinking is similar to what Beck Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) entails. The advantage of this healing method, CBT, is that it allows people to cut off the habitual looping of constant engagements of thoughts to undertake direct action. It works to push through the inertia that prevents continuous indulgent thoughts from blocking action to produce reality. CBT is also known for its ego-strengthening strategy to build self-esteem to reduce the degree of one's maladapted interactions in society (Beck and Hollon 1994). Similarly, Wise Qigong has a maximizer mentality that encourages one to garner as much positive qi as possible within oneself to strengthen a healthy condition physically and mentally (i.e., strengthening one's ego).

Strengthening one's ego by offering a Confucian model of personhood and its version of a healthy social personality can be abstractly understood as embracing the Giant Self. Wise Qigong is effective in helping practitioners because it embodies the

traditional Chinese way of managing social and mental problems. It also repeats the cultural way, Confucianism, that attracts practitioners in the first place. Wise Qigong replaces qigong practitioners' reliance on social recognition with spiritual reliance on qi, the imagined good object, which brings real effects, and thus makes every issue in life real in itself. Wise Qigong engages (Weber 2001) its practitioners in a deeply patriarchal, traditional logic as well as solidifying the subgroup's values that keep one at arm's distance from the mainstream to achieve the advanced way of life.

The gap between the present and the attainment of the advanced way of life or the Giant Self is wide, and the process may be full of pain. However, practitioners must start with belief and relate to qi as an ultimate alterity. With belief, one's qi will keep expanding because when one knows how to use consciousness to maneuver qi, the qi that can be used will expand, and the effect of healing will be stronger. The process may first be full of pain of the sort that Wai Seng Kei experienced before reaching the pleasurable stage as Teng Tian described it. The key is to sustain the process and keep going when the pain emerges because this pain, according to Wise qigong, is the result of maladapted perceptions that need to be transformed. This brings us to the core concept of pain and blockage in Wise Qigong practice.

8. Pain and Blockage 痛則不通 通則不痛

If one feels bodily pain or discomfort there is blockage, according to the Wise Qigong theory of pain and blockage. If one is emotionally in pain or uncomfortable with certain people or circumstances, mental blockage is present. The happier you are, the less pain you have. The less pain you have, the less blockages exist in you. The less

blockage exists in you, the healthier you are. The healthier you are, the happier you are. The happier you are, the healthier you are. The healthier you are, the less blockage exists in you. The less blockage that exists in you, the happier you are. Skeptics may consider this theory a tautology while devotees see it as truth reflecting real medical conditions: positive mental health reinforces the quality of physical health, and vice versa. When one's blockages are cleared, one is considered healthy by Wise Qigong standards. Few people, however, meet this standard because an ideally healthy state of mind and body requires hard work at qigong practice. In today's world of pollution and stress, even those in excellent health may turn out to be less healthy than they thought they were. In short, the underlying message is: "Everyone is sick to a degree," says qigong instructor Teng Tian. "Qigong is the elixir to pain, disease, and blockages."

Blockages are hard to measure based on appearance because they are intangible to untrained non-healers. So is sickness. How can you tell if a person is sick from his appearance? The easiest way to measure one's mental health and physical fitness is to discern the pain one feels physically and emotionally. This idea of pain and blockage has been widely adopted and accepted in alternative folk healing regimes such as Thai massage. Following the same idea, Wise Qigong practitioners invite and welcome pain in their practice because it provides an opportunity to detect one's level of healthiness while at the same time making it possible to address the related problems.

In the qigong meditation seated posture, one is asked to sit through numbness or pain, eyeing the larger goals associated with becoming healthy. Wise Qigong theory assumes that numbness or pain indicates that a healing process is underway: when qi is flowing strongly through a blockage, it is unblocking the congested pathway. When that

healing process happens, one feels numb because something is blocked, and the qi is trying to get through the congested pathway. To let qi flow as strongly as possible to clear the pathway, it is crucial for one to sit through the numbness or pain; the longer one remains in the seated posture the more powerful the healing effect. Once one moves one's body to shift the pain or numbness away, the healing process stops as the pain or numbness is gone. In a word, in such a case the pain or numbness is gone because qi is not functioning and the healing is no longer taking place. Thus, if one wants to be healed, she has to live through pain and numbness, at least as long as possible throughout a qigong session.

This imperative to “sit tight” through pain and blockage (short-term pain) to gain health (for a long-term goal) resembles what happens in connection with the aforementioned altruistic cultivation in *The Great Together*. A born insular or selfish person experiences pain when she is suppressing her hoarding nature to exchange qi with the universe. The transformation is painful. If one learns to transform herself to tolerate short-term pain in qigong practice, if she learns to wait it out for the long-term gain of becoming socially healthy (being harmonious with others) or individually healthy (being harmonious with oneself), she is transiting from the ordinary self to a Giant Self, fulfilling the ego-ideal set up by Wise Qigong. Controlling instinctual responses for a consciously chosen long-term goal (health) is a guideline Wise Qigong applies throughout the training. The guideline determines how practitioners perceive themselves achieving the advanced way of life, to which we now turn.

9. “The Advanced Way of Life” 第二套生命模式

The Giant Self symbolizes a good life with abundant qi, the good object. The Giant Self is also a lifestyle that leads to the advanced way of life. Wise Qigong promises that a practitioner who believes will live a good life through qigong practice, a good alterity, qi, the good object, through self-control and being open to playing the role of the Giant Self. Controlling one’s “selfish” desire for “short-term-gain” is the key to socializing and mastering the advanced way of life through every aspect of Wise Qigong learning.

Controlling instinctual responses in favor of a consciously chosen long-term goal (health) is essential for transitioning from being an “ordinary person”²⁴ to becoming a “perfect person.”²⁵ To reach the ideal perfect personhood, one has to clear out most of her congested pathways mentally and physically, according to Wise Qigong blockage theory. Methods for unblocking these pathways include qigong practices designed to train practitioners to avoid reacting to the instinct to opt for pleasure to get rid of pain. Such self-control training for long-term gain is applied to restricting one’s intake of sleep, sex, and food. Stories have been told in Wise Qigong communities of professional Daoist practitioners living in the mountains in China who need to eat only a little food. Wise Qigong practitioners in Hong Kong and Shenzhen have practiced short periods (ranging from 3 to 14 days) of Daoist fasting called *pigu* (關穀) under the instruction of Teng Tian and Ti Da. Although I use the word “fasting” to refer to times

²⁴ The Chinese phrase to which they refer literally means “ordinary people” (凡人).

²⁵ The Chinese phrase to which they refer literally means “extraordinary, perfect people” (完人) or the Daoist highest term, real saint (真人).

when Wise Qigong practitioners eat little food (some soup boiled with Chinese red wolfberry, Chinese dates, and Astragalus roots) or no food (only water) in their *pigu* practice, for them it is not fasting because they take in universal energy by practicing qigong during the fasting. Regarding one's ability to sleep very little, Wise Qigong Masters have described how Buddhist monks sleep little but meditate for many hours, which enables them to be more alert than normal people who have supposedly obtained eight hours of sleep.

In addition to reducing food intake and sleep, advice that is often given but rarely implemented, restricting sexual frequency is mentioned in Pang's publications and in Wise Qigong classes I attended in Penang and Hong Kong with Ti Da, Sung, Yuan, and Teng Tian. Wise Qigong Masters inform their students about how important it is to enhance one's energy by reducing the frequency of sex according to Daoist practices. Following the rhythm of nature according to Daoist traditions, it is advisable for practitioners to limit having sex to three times in the spring, once in the summer, twice in the autumn, and never in the winter to restore long-term vigor. The Daoist practice is broadly disseminated in Wise Qigong teaching, which encourages students to follow the rules, but it is not enforced. Several newcomers in that class in Hong Kong were clearly surprised to hear about this ascetic requirement. Teng Tian quickly explained the logic behind this practice using Wise Qigong theory, elaborating on how energy is restored. Wise Qigong Master Yuan, a Western medical doctor in his fifties, with extensive training in qigong and Chinese medicine, also explained this Daoist theory of energy-enhancing restraint by showing pictures of human anatomy. His credentials and background as a Western physician plus his blending of the three medical systems and

contexts (biomedicine, Chinese medicine, and qigong medicine) together made his argument persuasive, as no one could argue with him with the same level of mastery of all three medical systems.

Yuan, who speaks of Wise Qigong as the best system for healing humans, critiqued Freud (1962) for “over-emphasizing” sexual desires. He even further critiqued Freud’s “Western cultural view” of sexual conduct. Yuan and Lang, who is from Guangdong but teaches in Australia, both think that the attitude and conduct associated with sexual liberation promoted by Western medicine in “Western” countries is juvenile, because releasing sexual desires without proper control functions like a person swiping a credit card to consume pleasure instantly: they are spending sexual energy but losing vitality for the future. That being said, based on online discussions involving serious Chinese male qigong practitioners, many people admitted that refraining from sex is difficult. This shows the seriousness of Wise Qigong regarding the accumulation and saving of qi/energy.

Restoring one’s vitality is indeed fundamental to the spirit of Wise Qigong for practitioners. Peng Chew, the Harvard graduate, even refrained from laughing out loud because, according to Wise Qigong theory as he understands it, laughing without self-control depletes energy that one has worked hard to earn and store in the body. Conscious control of one’s desires is the way to achieve Wise Qigong’s version of the advanced way of life.

Wise Qigong encourages its practitioners to hoard and save—to maximize—as much qi as possible. The more qi one hoards, the healthier one’s physicality is. The healthier one’s ego is, the more stable one is. The more effectively one controls one’s

desires, the more easily one can put oneself in an environment that is conducive to forming a powerful, Giant Self. This is the transformative track along which to work through Wise Qigong practitioners' weaknesses, to avoid surrendering to one's instinctual desires. It is, in a sense, hard work to reinforce a particular type of Confucian-oriented Wise Qigong Giant Self form of personhood through Wise Qigong techniques for improving practitioners' health, developing their ESP capabilities, and strengthening their egos. The key to the advanced way of life is to practice self-control over one's instincts while developing a Giant Self capable of ESP. Simply put, for Wise Qigong devotees, qigong will make one stronger and healthier, physically and mentally.

Summary: Chinese Aesthetics, the Good Object, Alterity, and Transcendence

In this section, I discuss (1) how Wise Qigong educates others about Wise Qigong and its value; and (2) how belief in the efficacy of qi forms through seeing qi as the best object with its aesthetics of life-affirmation and natural and social order based on Daoist and Confucian philosophy; the Wise Qigong view of the best object makes qi the best alterity, enabling practitioners to transcend their individual limits to achieve the collective goal of “attaining the ideal of a peaceful world and walking on the main path” (共同奔向大同世界，大道康莊!). Spiritual togetherness provides a life-affirming force to combat anomie or the emptiness one experiences through the divide between the self and social others.

I have discerned three ways in which the strategy for expanding Wise Qigong's target audience and enriching its inner resonances is being implemented. First, Wise Qigong introduces to non-initiates the existence of qi and the interpretation of qi as the

best possible alterity through theories and philosophies that resemble the logic of science and Confucianism. Second, Wise Qigong demonstrates the existence of qi through archival accumulation and social recognition. Third, Wise Qigong confirms this “best alterity, qi” through conferences and testimonies to aesthetic experiences. This is a form of persuasion that accumulates layer upon layer, from introducing qi and Wise Qigong to listing steps toward social and political recognition to sharing personal and collective experiences.

First, the introduction to the basic information about qi given by Wise Qigong includes the concept and effects of *hunyuan* qi and its new method that differentiates Wise Qigong from other qigong or meditation schools. Wise Qigong theory supports Confucian ideas but also gains legitimacy from following Confucian *values*. This fits in with how Wise Qigong serves as a hidden treasure by recognizing the value of the Chinese cultural heritage that is overlooked by science, technology, and “data-ism.” Moreover, by synthesizing the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist philosophies and adopting a complicated Chinese medical system, Wise Qigong differentiates itself from other qigong traditions that stem from more “superstitious, backward and unscientific” backgrounds.

Second, archival accumulation and social recognition support the validity of Wise Qigong. To ward off guarded public responses influenced by the pre-existing stigma surrounding *falungong*, Wise Qigong (1) quotes from scientific publications from prestigious universities; (2) affiliates with prestigious institutes to gain power and influence, such as practitioners or patients with Harvard degrees or employees or faculty from the University of Science, Malaysia, or university professors and researchers on

conference speaking lists; (3) demonstrates Wise Qigong doctrines through scientific experiments that produce tangible results; (4) distributes qigong research publications conducted by researchers or practitioners affiliated with prestigious institutes; and (5) explains qigong theory in technical, erudite, yet understandable language that Confucian devotees can understand. Wise Qigong preserves archival documents to build authority—the more archival documents they produce for Wise Qigong, the more social confirmation Wise Qigong enjoys—a man-made supplement to create tangible evidence to make the literature or validity of qigong more real. Even where the origins of such archival documents may be less than persuasive, their quantity and diversity increases the perceived validity of Wise Qigong in the eyes of the general public, especially among those who already acknowledge the existence of qi in Chinese medicine or martial arts. Also, Wise Qigong uses a highly elaborate forum to document Wise Qigong experiments in magazines, journal articles, newspapers, online forums, newsletters, and other media.

Third, Wise Qigong disseminates personal experiences including individual aesthetic embodiments that resonate with ancestor poets. This means of promoting its benefits confirms that individuals who embrace Wise Qigong embody historical aestheticism with Chinese characteristics. This serves as a testimony to others. Similar inner connections may be repeated and even heightened through “collective effervescence” (Durkheim 1951) during international and regional conferences.

These qigong experiences confirm the Chinese concept of abundance, or the best object understood and constituted through Chinese cultural symbols. Wise Qigong system’s version of abundance, from my viewpoint, addresses anomie, a type of

estrangement. As an individual senses the divide between himself and society, he first experiences anomie (Durkheim 1951). According to Durkheim's definition of religion, in society knowing the self involves accumulating its dissatisfaction through time and designing a collective gathering to release the individual's dissatisfaction routinely through social ritual or carnival celebrations. Wise Qigong rituals work in a similar way because the Wise Qigong institute requires all individuals (as parts) to support the collective goals (of the whole).

Yet I have witnessed the collective excitement and fervor that encourages participants to release their deep emotions at the international conference in Kulai, Johor, Malaysia as well as at several regional Wise Qigong conferences in Kuala Lumpur, Shenzhen, and Penang. Excitement and happiness are pervasive among practitioners whenever Wise Qigong members gather: several senior citizens in Shenzhen engaged in prolonged laughter when Teng Tian lectured to the gathering of approximately 60–80 participants; a Singaporean Wise Qigong participant who is a university professor not only offered testimony to his own qigong personal transformation but also sang with high emotions in front of the 200 participants in Kuala Lumpur. The conference organizers also mentioned in public the number of registered participants to indicate the fervor of Wise Qigong participants. In an instructor-training workshop that lasted for five days in Malacca, there was a limit placed on the number of participants. Many practitioners could not register because there was not enough space for lodging and food preparation. There was a competition among people who were eager to attend that conference. Such competition made some who could not register a little panicked and greatly disappointed, making the conference seem more valuable and making several

who were able to attend feel lucky or honored. These competitions generate excitement, as participants look forward to conferences and thereby feel a stronger sense of “collective effervescence” as they are mentally prepared to attend and are excited about doing so.

The social dynamics at Wise Qigong conferences fit Durkheim’s (1912) argument about how reunion sentiments create a sense of the sacred in a collective that reminds the collective of its unity through a symbolic group totem. In Wise Qigong the ritual through which the qi field is established, the singing of the Wise Qigong School alma mater, and the group shouting and echoing of collective self-healing behaviors in *hunyuan* healing circles all bring belief in Wise Qigong alive. The *hunyuan* healing circle is a collective symbol of Wise Qigong and an embodiment of the collective through which Wise Qigong is seen, heard, and formed. The social effect of reunion bonds practitioners into a unity, confirms their belief as core Wise Qigong devotees, and strengthens their identity as healthy Wise Qigong adherents. In this sense, they repeat the structure and ideology of Wise Qigong doctrines by adhering in their practices as closely as possible to the unified forms recommended by Grand Master Pang. Those who have advocated for alternative forms such as Lee Wooi Bok and Wei are being watched, or even excluded, insofar as many, such as Sung and Wai Seng Kei, seem to them as threats to the unified development of Wise Qigong.

Wise Qigong has religious characteristics *in spite of* disavowing religion to fit with Communist ideology. However, the atheistic inclination in Wise Qigong that reflects its development in Communist China suppresses the religious character that is present in most meditation practices, as Sung suggests, and indeed Wise Qigong

disavows association with any religion, unlike other traditional qigong schools. Kun has brought up cases he found or heard about online of several people in the qigong or even Buddhist communities seeing an image of Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy) during pilgrimages. He explains this with Wise Qigong theory: first, everything is possible if one uses his consciousness with intense focus; second, it is possible for a person to generate an image or turn an imagined picture into material reality according to the Tri-Matter theory; third, according to the qi-field theory, when multiple people concentrate on the same thing intensively, its positive effect is doubled or even tripled. In this case, when people go on a pilgrimage, they are focused on praying with many others who are also focused on praying. The qi-field is grand, and the use of consciousness is intensive. Plus, having many participants expands the qi-field and the energy in those picturing the image of Guanyin is strong. In this way, it is not surprising that people on pilgrimage could see the image of Guanyin. As Kun, an atheist, explains, when people gather they create a social force or power that will affect if not shape the environment that contains the group's characteristics after they come together as a group, thinking and acting synchronically. Wise Qigong practitioners' (imagined) relationship with a good object, their embodied aesthetics as an expression of the Chinese cultural heritage that confirms their (imagined) membership in the Chinese community from the past to the present, together induce a sense of pride, inner beauty, and connection within themselves. This is the process that reduces social estrangement.

Here Kun's point is that qigong is a kind of social production, and when people project their consciousness with focus, a real image and object such as Guanyin can emerge. Nevertheless, when Wise Qigong Masters argue on the one hand that collective

consciousness can make an object real in the physical sense, there is some wavering in the associated conviction. This parallels the Wise Qigong Tri-Matter theory, where consciousness is powerful enough to transform oneself and the world. However, on the other hand, Wise Qigong also attempts to claim the materiality of qi, that qi is a substance that one can maneuver. Such a claim seems to move Wise Qigong into the category of science or physics, an anti-religious, atheistic position that markets Wise Qigong as the “new” qigong. With that scientific position claimed but with the evidence to prove it yet to be discovered, practitioners are invited to work harder to prove Wise Qigong’s scientific authenticity. The same approach applies to the process of tolerating pain to unblock one’s blockages. This demand that practitioners prove Wise Qigong’s validity is packaged in the pervasive idea that one has to believe to make qi work (信則靈 *xin ze ling*), which is analogous to the Christian New Age idea that “God helps those who help themselves, and God can work only through us for us.”

Kun also speaks lucidly about how humans make deities valuable by showing respect and acknowledging the worth that humans attribute to them. In this sense, his observation (made through the lens of Wise Qigong theory) is another way of saying that one’s belief (and attribution of value to religion) makes religion work (信則靈) which, according to Kun’s interpretation, is the principle that makes qi work. According to Tri-Matter Theory, however, the principle of qi can be used to transform the world and heal oneself. According to this logic, the transformation force returns to the “advanced” human being who transcends the demands of instinctual desires. In this sense, qi is transcendent yet immanent for trained practitioners. Qi provides omnipotent, life-affirming power to the world—and to humans. If they could learn how to channel qi,

they could be omnipotent by possessing ESP. This is the individual's ultimate transcendence of all limits in life.

Above, we have discussed how Wise Qigong teachers educate others about its value. Below, we now turn to considering how non-initiates' belief in qigong is formed through connection with Chinese aesthetics, the idea of the good object, alterity, and transcendence.

Wise Qigong introduces the concept of *hunyuan qi*, the best alterity, to non-initiates. According to Wise Qigong, this extraordinarily beautiful object, with aesthetics developed from Chinese philosophy and martial arts, functions like a mother (an adult's mother) who provides life and affirms individual existence. It is seen as the ultimate energy source to replace humans' dependence on sex, food, and sleep. The underlying logic in Wise Qigong I observed is: once one internalizes the ultimate beautiful object into himself, his helpless dependence on social Others will be less of a problem because he feels more self-sufficient and whole by connecting to that life-affirming source within and without himself. By embracing the abundant qi that symbolizes truth, goodness, and beauty, a person's inner wealth grows as she senses she is connecting more directly with the imagined good object, the abundant qi from the universe. The good object promises to bring practitioners a sense of freedom through qigong practice, in which they can stand tall like a Giant, which is analogous to the omnipotent feeling of swimming in the womb.

Through their imagined connection with universal qi that brings real spiritual nourishment, (I argue that) practitioners reconstruct their relations with others (alterity) by "internalizing a good primal object" externally and internally (Klein 1957:4). As

devotees become more satiable and stabler, they produce happier and healthier lives holding imagined abundance within. Driven by a sense of self-sufficiency and inner beauty, they are more willing to exchange with others socially, serve and give of themselves generously to the international and national communities—realizing the ideal of the Confucian middle path. In this way, one can rely on himself with self-control yet freely exchange with society and the universe. Wise Qigong’s accumulation and interpretation are informed by an aesthetics that stems from Chinese literary and philosophical traditions. This is in part why many Chinese intellectuals find Wise Qigong persuasive, seeing it as “the compass of life” that serves a religious function yet is framed by an atheistic and scientific perspective in its theories and practices.

The internal logic of Wise Qigong works like this: Qi is the best alterity, through which one can transcend all sickness, pain, and suffering, and there is proof in science, philosophy, Confucianism and Daoism (through the three steps mentioned above). Since qi is the best alterity and can help humans transcend all sickness, pain, and suffering, humans who can learn to interact with qi can transcend all sickness, pain, and suffering. To interact with qi, one has to learn self-control. Techniques for maintaining self-control technique are taught through controlling consumption of food, sex, and sleep. It may be difficult to train oneself to achieve and maintain self-control over one’s instincts, but it is a “no pain no gain” proposition. What is more, Wise Qigong practitioners believe that when you have pain, you are blocked and you need transformation, or some kind of change in perspective, which Wise Qigong can offer. That is, they believe that you have to endure pain because, contrary to common sense and against your instincts, the pain is, in fact, an indicator that your body is healing.

Pain, according to Wise Qigong, is a form of healing in disguise not because pain makes you mentally tougher (although that happens as well) but mainly because the qi/energy exchange of the sick organ with other organs and the universe gradually increases in frequency. When qi/energy/resources are distributed in a more even and balanced way, the sick organ transcends its selfish nature, transforming into an altruistic, healthy organ.

The internal logic of Wise Qigong continues as follows: Humans can learn to interact with qi to transcend all sickness, pain, and suffering. You are a human, and therefore you can learn to interact with qi to transcend all suffering (the classic Aristotelian syllogism). It is, however, up to you to decide if you want to transcend all sickness, pain, and suffering. If you want to transcend all sickness, pain, and suffering, you have to learn to interact with qi as Daoists interact with nature and as Confucians interact with social others.

Wise Qigong promises that qi brings health, confidence, and abundance as well as truth, goodness, and beauty. Qi, as the best object, is considered the ultimate source of goodness and abundance. Qi fills the emptiness of one's identity and life, like a mother's nurturing which gives orientation and vitality to a baby. Qi, the life-affirming source, also fills in Chinese cultural meanings and values. Wise Qigong sets up a model of personhood according to Confucianism and Daoism. The Confucian side of Wise Qigong teachings encourages practitioners to interact with social Others with proper regulation. The Daoist side of Wise Qigong teachings encourages practitioners to live according to the rhythm of nature or the dietary and practical movements of Daoism. These two models of personhood—interacting with society and interacting with nature—are summarized in Wise Qigong teachings about the Giant Self. Qi, as the

alterity, an Other that nurtures practitioners, provides a path to a stronger, transcendent self.

The pathway to the advanced way of life, of living a transcendent, self-controlled life, is crucial to one's ability to achieve and maintain self-control—pain that it is necessary to experience to reach the beautiful and peaceful ultimate goodness, including the omnipotent capability of ESP. The more pain one can endure in the healing process, the more qi is working through one's blockages or *tong* (as in the concept of *hunyuán língtong*). The more qi is consumed by practitioners the more qi replenishes what they lack. The more qi fills up the emptiness, as Wise Qigong teaches, the happier and healthier practitioners are. They become self-sufficient to the extent that they need no sleep, sex, or food to feel flourished.²⁶ Yet this self-sufficiency is sustained by one's being open to the exchange of universal energies with social Others, standing as tall as a giant, undertaking the *tong* of social exchange, and marking the end of pain through the concepts of blockage, pain and *hunyuán língtong*.

Wise Qigong's spirit of filling the empty, wretched, or sick self with abundant

²⁶ When a sense of abundance is at work through the effects of qigong if one does it correctly, as Wise Qigong instructs, practitioners are alert without sleep (神足不思眠), energized without sex (精足不思淫), and satiated without eating (氣足不思食). Skeptics may argue that this ego-ideal suppresses all natural human desires. Serious Wise Qigong practitioners, however, consider themselves to be leading a life of purpose with passion, which attracts more energy to them. Standing together with the ego-ideal, they see mundane pleasure as a source that consumes energy instead of restoring energy. They think that running after pleasure without self-control is like running in circles in a vain attempt to fill the void, an action that takes oneself further away from self-reliance and the stable way of earning lasting abundance, as one is running in circles on the surface and not focusing on the main path—the Dao. Wise Qigong practitioners are taught to dis-identify with the pleasure-seeking part of themselves, replacing what they consider “cheap” pleasure with a healthier one, qi—a pleasurable reward some practitioners report or deem to be as lasting as or more lasting than any other form of pleasure.

qi contrasts with Buddhism. Buddhism promotes extinguishing desires of all forms, negating a fixed role for the self (Lacan and Fink 2004). However, Wise Qigong provides a different form of alterity that enables practitioners to transcend the limitations of their perceptions of the issues that plague them. The qigong healing process works like a mother to soothe one's pain. The void of the psyche needs to be filled with qi; the baby's hunger needs to be fed with its mother's milk; the spiritual and identity emptiness of Malaysian Chinese's lives need to be filled by their intake of Chinese traditional texts, their understanding of Chinese philosophical ideas, and their practice of the embodiment of Chinese civilization, qigong, and martial arts. By engaging with the ultimate pure alterity with Chinese meanings, ideologies, and contexts, one becomes the things one pursues and fills the void—that is, the becoming of the Giant Self, leading an advanced way of life. This is a Chinese way of relating to a good alterity: one benefits by returning to (mother) nature, to the qi, the best object, and by playing the role of the Giant Self as an advanced self who enjoys ultimate freedom living in abundant qi, like the freedom of swimming in Mother's amniotic fluid.

This ideal inner freedom associated with the good object provides positive, life-affirming energy within oneself. This positive energy is given and taken under the ideology of a Confucian and Daoist model. This freedom of returning to Nature, which is similar to swimming in a mother's womb, is manifested if one re-experiences becoming One with the nurturing Mother Nature. This imagination and projection of merging with the best object (*hunyuan qi*) allows practitioners to transcend time, space, and their physical limits. Wise Qigong serves as a Chinese way of relating to an alterity that resembles Confucian and Daoist models, suggesting particularly Chinese attributes

and universal qualities.

Wise Qigong's depth in Chinese culture draws in many Malaysian Chinese. The Chinese philosophy and Confucian values make sense to them, speak to them, soothe them psychologically and spiritually, and provide meaning to their lives. Their unconscious minds, induced by the state of anomie, drive them to latch onto Chinese cultural meanings to express suppressed emotions in a Chinese way with which they are familiar. Through the medium of real cultural enterprise and qigong practice, their unconscious emotions are compensated for in qigong. Healing themselves through qigong practice prepares them psychologically to perform better socially, with another type of personhood opened up by Wise Qigong through the new relationship with the good object. What Wise Qigong practitioners experience is not experienced by many other people. Their positive feelings, experiences, and notions about the value of qi are not seen, felt, or recognized, and this further alienates them from social Others.

Learning how to practice qigong and letting its effects work on you involves an identity shift: from the outsider perspective of a skeptic who brushes off any possibility to allowing Chinese cultural meanings hook you in. This becomes an active process of participation as an insider—actively appreciating qigong, continuing to capture and make sense of how Chinese cultural meanings and qigong symptoms relate to the individual inner world. That is the position or relationship one allows oneself to establish with qigong. Most practitioners are unconsciously attracted to qigong because it speaks in a logic that resembles discourses they have heard and perhaps find natural or consistent with their upbringings. In other words, one feels at home or at ease with the logic of Wise Qigong because it synthesizes many Chinese traditions despite

many internal contradictions. The contradictions do not affect most practitioners because most untrained critical thinkers see the value only of what resonates with them (if something does not seem familiar to what they have heard or experienced they reject it). They will not look at the teaching as a whole or see its strengths and weaknesses at the same time. Most practitioners come to Wise Qigong with wounded souls and it acts on their unconscious minds or emotions, in the way that people are drawn to a particular song. The new relationship with a good object is, after all, established by a set of emotions and feelings and ideas that have happened before, a confirmation bias that is difficult to discern during their search for spiritual liberation and alternative physical healing.

This is a universalist's account that sees qigong as a form of healing in a cross-cultural setting. In this dissertation I ask: What is healing? What is qigong? What is "alternative" about alternative healing methods? Why do people need this "alternative" healing to compensate for what biomedicine and perhaps humanity itself lacks? The desire to have everything, through the projection of possessing the best alterity, is described as lying at the core of the human psyche (Freud 1962). As contemporary society sees science as the best solution to life, Wise Qigong competes with science for the same desire in humans seeking to transcend their limits through relating to the best object.

CHAPTER V

BODHI HEART SANTUARY, BUDDHISM, AND YT'S EXPERIENTIAL SELF

1. Setting: Bodhi Heart Sanctuary

At 8:30 a.m., on May 20, 2016, a hot Sunday in Penang, Malaysia, the sky, which should be sunny, is gloomy instead, almost foggy, with smog shrouding the sun in haze. Visibility is extremely low. “Ping!” Several text messages appear on the screen of my iPhone 5. Members of the WhatsApp group of meditation folks at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary have shared pictures all morning. They joke about the serious smoke-haze as a precious “gift” from their Indonesian brothers. Some remind others to wear masks when commuting. Some just try to stay indoors at all times. But life goes on, with or without the haze.

At 9:15 a.m., Mr. and Mrs. Hein make the ten-minute drive from their house in Greenland to pick me up at my apartment in Gelugor. We carpool to BHS to attend the meditation *dharma* talk by an instructor named Hor Tuck Loon, who visits Penang regularly from Kuala Lumpur. We leave the hustle and bustle of the city behind once the car turns into the deserted Cantonese graveyards. The windy road becomes narrower and narrower, leading us into the center of a worn-out Tamil neighborhood. Wild goats with white beards chew rubbish from blue plastic bags dumped on the side of the road. The goats get smaller and smaller and eventually fade out with the dust and ashes as our car motors past them. Passing yet another forsaken grave of some wealthy Chinese family from the Qing dynasty, we arrive at a brown metal gate. Behind the gate, I can vaguely make out a Buddha pond with goldfish and plants. The gate has no lock at all—

the first welcoming gesture to all visitors to Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. We step into BHS and find tropical trees standing astonishingly high and birds chirping vibrantly. Along the grey concrete stairs, we pass by several small Buddha shrines. None of us lingers to pay homage to those shrines because class starts soon, at 10:00 a.m. One step, two steps, up the stairs we run. We hustle quickly into the first lecture hall on our right.

Taking her shoes off before entering the black glass door, the anthropologist (me) instantly sees the sleeping Buddha's picture hanging high on the front wall of the lecture hall. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. She kneels down and shows respect to the Buddha while calming herself to be as composed as the Buddha. Several senior citizens are arranging large brown cushions and small meditation blocks on the floor, preparing seats for participants before the *dharma* class. People are talking about the meditation retreat held at a site surrounded by nature so close to Kuala Lumpur three months before the deadline so that they can qualify for the early bird fee. Some members, who could not attend the retreat, partially sponsor the retreat to gain merits and good karma for themselves. A Chinese couple in their 60s are paying cash to a sister in her 40s with a ballerina bun.¹

A Chinese woman in her fifties and dressed in red, YT, sits at the front of the lecture hall scanning the scene with sharp eyes. She takes up a bit more space physically than others. Between her and the meditation instructor lies a small black desk. On the desk there are four MP3 recorders. Some regulars walk into the lecture hall and familiarly place their recorders on the black desk. They nod at YT. They chat briefly in

¹ The bun is also associated with the Tzu-chi Buddhist Association, a global Taiwanese-based Buddhist Association. Some female Malaysian Chinese Buddhists dress their hair to resemble Tzu-chi sisters.

English and Hokkien. YT then turns to speak with the instructor in Cantonese. Later she converses with a man in a low voice in Mandarin. When she speaks, even softly, the firmness of her voice commands attention. With her assertive brightness she stands out from the crowd. YT's unique character repels some (female) members who prefer to interacting with others using a softer and subtler female persona in a Confucian patriarchal society. YT's demeanor demonstrates a blend of masculine professionalism and motherly leadership.

2. Introduction to the Bodhi Heart Sanctuary

BHS is hidden among the narrow lanes of a quiet neighborhood occupied by lower-class Tamil communities surrounded by Chinese graveyards. Next to the Cantonese graveyards is the independent Primary and Secondary Chinese School for Girls at a popular location in Pulau Tikus. BHS's official website is: <http://www.bodhihearts.net>.

Most frequent BHS attendees are middle-class, English-speaking local senior citizens ranging in age from forty to eighty years. Participants attend the Buddhist lectures or meditation classes to hear Brother Hor Kwei Loon's *dharma* talks on Monday and Thursday mornings. After every talk the group enjoys a potluck lunch where people gather, eat, talk, gossip, or make travel plans for domestic and international meditation retreats. Six or seven retired couples take the classes frequently and hold meditation retreats at BHS and elsewhere. The Chan and Hein couples are the core organizers of a group called the ROTTP, through which they set up scholarships for students or distribute food to lower-income families in Penang, including Indians,

Malays, and Chinese. They make house calls to make sure the families are really in need—and they go as a group for grocery shopping or offer coupons to support lower-socioeconomic-class people who are being introduced by their friends. The same group of people organizes a monthly activity to release the animals they bought in the markets into the nature on Penang Hill. The core members collect donations from their friends and BHS attendees to buy frogs, fish, and birds at the local market. They bring those animals to Penang Hill and meet with other people who want to participate in the life-liberating rituals. Since 2016 the group has been extending its services by providing tuition, books, and computers to five students in Sekolah Menengah Heng Ee. The group also visits retirement homes during Chinese New Year celebrations to cheer them up by singing to and feeding them.

The idea of constructing BHS started in the last quarter of 2006 when the land was purchased. Construction began in early 2007. The main objectives of BHS are: (1) to establish a non-sectarian Buddhist institution providing spiritual, welfare, and wellness programs; (2) to advocate for the sharing of resources and values through collaboration; (3) to pioneer innovative and valued-added programs; and (4) to serve as a catalyst of change in the Buddhist community. The committees include both landowners and people who are experts in their respective careers, such as architects. There are two full-time workers while the rest, as in most Buddhist institutions in Malaysia, are volunteers who are usually frequent participants of BHS. The founding Committee remained essentially unchanged as of 2015–2016.

BHS sees itself as a non-sectarian institute where leaders and participants actively introduce and implement many non-sectarian initiatives from all over the world.

Consequently, BHS does not impose a unified direction on their organizational principles or spirituality. The ideal it embraces is to cater to any person and be open to any religion in the world. It provides a location designed to encourage religious and social activities for low rental fees. Its goal is to provide a channel through which people can sample various schools of Buddhism and healing knowledge and integrate these systems into their own.

BHS invites spiritual speakers from Southeast Asia, North America, and East Asia to hold workshops or deliver lectures related to various schools of Buddhist thought and alternative healing such as qigong, yoga, taichi, and reiki. BHS differentiates itself from orthodox Buddhist schools by its openness to alternative traditions of Buddhism, meditation, and healing. BHS does not offer registered memberships. All frequent BHS attendees are free to come and go. According to the BHS manager, Hor Kwei Loon, many members of the public identify themselves as members of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary even if they do not attend frequently. He believes this demonstrates that the institutional strategy of “free enrollment” at BHS is working successfully.

3. Hor Tuck Loon’s class at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary

Hor Tuck Loon is an English-educated Chinese man in his fifties. His twin brother, Hor Kwei Loon, is the manager of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. The Hor brothers have been *dharma* lecturers since they were 15 years old at the Mahindarama Buddhist temple in Penang. They moved to BHS in 2008 when it was built.

Hor Kwei Loon has since 2008 delivered two lectures at BHS per week, running from 10 a.m. to noon on those days. He also teaches a meditation class for people who are interested in learning how to meditate, for groups of twenty. His training is steeped in Theravada Buddhism, but he also hosts and attends many *dharma* talks and meditation retreats held by monks and laypersons from various Buddhist traditions. In addition, he is interested in energy-healing, qigong, and has used these alternative healing methods to help him make judgments both in his outside business outside and in his management of Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. His lecturing style is designed to make Buddhism easy to understand in a layperson's language. He has taught Buddhism to laypersons as well as employees from large companies. His lectures incorporate humor, blending colloquial Malay, Hokkien and Cantonese with English, the language in which he conducts most of his lectures.

In contrast with Hor Kwei Loon, Hor Tuck Loon, an illustrator, often draws on the whiteboard to illustrate his thinking. He also loves to explain things in an abstract and literary way—he plays with words and posts his latest ideas on the digital newsletter or the group chat on WhatsApp. Hor Tuck Loon's teaching is considered even more eclectic than that of Hor Kwei Loon. He often mentions Jesus Christ in the context of his Buddhist lectures and even has led meditation retreats for Catholic churches. Some conventional Buddhists cannot accept Tuck Loon's way of blending Christianity and Theravada Buddhism. In addition to his affinity for Christ, however, Tuck Loon abides strictly by the Theravada Buddhists' five precepts. As his talks convey a strong sense of tolerance of differences and he openly hopes other people can be more open-minded instead of seeing his thinking as a form of heresy. When I asked him why drinking is

prohibited by the five Buddhist precepts, his face turned into a grimace. I felt sinful by merely posing this question to him. This made me realize that Tuck Loon is more firmly positioned in Theravada Buddhism than others at BHS who have described him as a heretic seem willing to acknowledge.

At Tuck Loon's meditation retreats in May 2015 in Penang, and in August and September 2015 in Kuala Lumpur, meditators are given plenty of time to meditate on their own, which is unusual for such a retreat. Still, Tuck Loon lectured almost half of the time, and his disciples are considered talkative and "chatty," according to Mrs. Hein's self-caricature when I first joined them on their meditation retreat. At the table over breakfast on the first morning, she told me how Tuck Loon had trained them to talk about their thinking and feelings with high transparency within the group. I agreed with her, because people would share highly confidential private concerns in lecture classes or in small groups with Tuck Loon, Fanny, or YT as group leader.

Once I heard a husband in his 50s, Mr. Gen, ask in the small group how he might deal with his waning passion for his wife, while his wife was in another group at the same meditation retreat. We all knew who his wife was because she was one of most frequent participants and had been a co-organizer of the retreat for years. Members of this group exhibit high trust in each other and are trained by Tuck Loon to see every thought as an object itself that needs to be disassociated from the self. As Mr. Gen stated before asking about his difficulty in feeling passion for his wife, "it is his mind talking, not him talking." Fanny and Tuck Loon serve as dharma teachers but also play a role similar to that of a counselor. In the meditation retreat in 2015 at Kuala Lumpur, several middle-aged married women consulted with Fanny and Tuck Loon about how to get

along with their mothers-in-law. Fanny guided the complainers to adopt step-by-step thinking about what might work for them, much as a psychoanalyst would do with her patients.

The group immerses itself in diverse traditions. Tuck Loon shared highlights from several TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conferences during the meditation retreat to support the science behind Buddhist meditation and the principles of the “mind.” YT and Mrs. Gen both listen to an eclectic mix of tape recordings in their spare time, ranging from Sai Baba to prestigious Buddhist instructors from Kuala Lumpur or other global locations the globe. They seek content that confirms their values and inspires them to build on the foundation of what they have learned from BHS teachings. Several people who had been attending BHS regularly for ten years or more (some have followed the Hor brothers since their early days lecturing at the Mahindarama Buddhist temple in Penang) treat the Hor brothers as family friends whom they consult about their problems. Most of the issues this group brings up are family-related problems: people are concerned about how to harmonize with their spouses, in-laws, or friends. As YT would frequently guide other practitioners in learning Buddhist concepts more deeply and answering their questions, she often concluded her sessions with the observation that all the entangled emotions in their social relations seem to start with guilt. Let us now examine what guilt means in various cultural contexts.

4. Guilt

a. The Chinese experience

YT talked frequently about guilt in the sharing sessions with other meditators I observed in 2016. She believes that guilt prevents her from *seeing things as they are*. Even during our five-hour interview, she asked me to reflect on my own guilty feelings.² “Reflect on your guilty feelings. If you don’t watch out, you will do that to other people. Be careful ah,”³ said YT. I recalled my guilty experience, an indebtedness that prompted me to give more than I was willing to. This indebtedness forced me to reciprocate rather than giving voluntarily. My guilty experience helps me relate to YT. Sharing my guilty experience with YT induced her to talk more openly about her guilty experiences during the interview. For her, guilt drives most of what she does for others. Before we turn to YT’s description of her sense of guilt, let us compare how guilt is experienced and thought of in individualistic and relational societies.

b. Guilt in Individualistic and Relational Societies

Guilt, experienced and expressed as *neijiu*⁴ in Chinese, is

. . . the feeling that one has failed in one’s personal responsibilities. It implies feeling obligated in some way to other people and not fulfilling that responsibility. One has the sense of owing others, whether those persons think so or not. It overlaps with feeling sorry, but not with

² When my father was hospitalized for three weeks ten years ago, I felt strongly that everyone in the family should show their presence in the hospital as much as possible as a token of support. I took several absences from school to morally support my father and other family members at the hospital, even though he was well attended by other family members. When my sister adopted a different approach from mine—she stayed in the hospital only when she had no classes and social events to attend, I felt offended by her behavior. I took her absence as lack of support and solidarity without realizing that guilt motivated me to bind to my family. My sister did something that I wanted to do but felt a sense of betrayal to my father if I were to have done so. In retrospect, guilt is an emotion that involved entanglement of my deep desires with my internalized sense of social responsibility.

³ The “ah” here is a typical feature of local language use among Malaysians and Singaporeans. It has no particular meaning but to make the statement more personal and approachable.

⁴ *Neijiu* and *nei jiu* have the same meaning in Chinese. I prefer to group the two Chinese characters together (as in *neijiu*) rather than separating them by a space (as in *nei jiu*) because *neijiu* is understood as a distinct unit.

feelings of shame. No one else needs to know, or even be of the opinion that one ought to feel it for *nei jiu* to be experienced.

Nei jiu is a personal guilt in two ways. First, it concerns only self-expectation and self-demands. Persons experiencing it feel that there are obligations that they must uphold. They do not necessarily expect others to have the same sense of obligation as themselves. *Nei jiu* is aroused only through one's own actions. It cannot be imposed by another person. Secondly, *nei jiu* is a personal guilt in that it is always felt toward another person. It occurs when one feels that one has violated the deservedness of another person or failed to uphold an obligation to another person. Feelings of *nei jiu* may occur even if one does not have the capacity to fulfill the obligation, or when the person to whom one feels obligated does not hold one responsible. Only one's own perception of the event is relevant. (Bedford 2004, 32–33)

A Taiwanese teacher described her feeling of *neijiu* toward her students:

Like just now, [my student] asked me to help, but I don't have much time so I feel *nei jiu*. And I know I could do this, but I just don't have time, and I have to say to her, 'Oh, sorry, I don't have time.' This is *nei jiu*—this kind of guilt. (Bedford 2004, 33)

Neijiu happens when one cannot achieve the ideal or responsibilities associated with a role he plays with a given audience. A traditional Chinese doctor also felt *neijiu* when he could not help his patients:

My father always feels *nei jiu*. Because he is . . . a Chinese traditional medicine doctor so he never uses a knife; he's not a surgeon. Sometimes the patient needs a surgeon. Just because they like my father they go to see my father. And, he must say, 'No I cannot do this because I cannot use a knife.' Then he feels *nei jiu*. (Bedford 2004, 33)

Guilt is a subjective emotion that resonates with social ideology, manifested as anxiety over failing to perform one's social role or as fear of not measuring up to what one imagines is society's expectations. Guilt is like an internalized social police officer calling on the "infantile consciousness" (Obeyesekere 1981, 77) to stay within social boundaries and perform social personhood. Guilt is the internal sense of injustice one feels when society forces one to play certain roles.

Guilt falls into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary guilt consists of primal self-sanctioning emotions that can be associated with patricide, castration, and incest. It reflects violations of the preconceived code of conduct that governs parent–child social roles. Secondary guilt manifests in self-blaming when a social transgression, such as running a red light, occurs (Obeyesekere 1981, 79). In general, guilt is a form of social control that suppresses one’s primal desires, internalizing the social expectations of the roles one plays, enabling the superego and the ego to override the id (Freud 1962).

Even though guilt operates on “infantile consciousness” (Obeyesekere 1981, 77), it is a highly advanced emotion which develops only after shame is developed (Bedford and Hwang 2003). People who are highly empathetic, often religious people, tend to feel guilty (Bedford and Hwang 2003, 129). Guilt has a socially adaptive function that helps one develop better relationships through an attitude of non-avoidance of responsibility (Bedford and Hwang 2003, 128–129).

A guilty feeling or *neijiu* comes from one’s being too attached to an ideal of personhood while simultaneously being held hostage by the internalized policing voice that represents social sanctions (Althusser 1971). An actor may phenomenologically experience paralysis, finding himself unable to name or admit to his unconscious desire to break free from a prescribed social role: his inner censure is so alarming that he may not even dare to feel, look, or examine *why* it feels wrong not to conform. There is a strong preexisting sanction that prohibits the actor from even coming close to understanding a particular issue in his heart: an imperative calls one to action, to live up to social expectations, and to bear the responsibility involving in playing a given social

role to the fullest. However, the pull to fulfill one's "selfish" desires and the push to accommodate social expectations continue to create ambivalence. What is ambivalence?

5. Ambivalence: Kinship, Debt, and the Turning of the Self

The definition of ambivalence is:

the simultaneous "*coexistence*"...[*of two or more powerful*] *contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing,*" which may entail emotional or attitudinal "*oscillation, fluctuation, variability,*" and so on. (Peletz 2001, 414–415; my emphasis)

Ambivalence may be relatively "bivalent" or "binary," involving a "back and forth" between two (or two sets of) powerful, conflicting emotions or attitudes toward a single phenomenon; or it may be more "multi-" or "polyvalent," as in one technical meaning of the Latin root *ambi-* ("around" or "about"), thereby suggesting perambulatory emotions or attitudes. *It may, in any case, derive from divergent interests, each calculated with respect to different values, aims, or constraints.* Ambivalence is distinguished from "diffidence"—modesty, bashfulness, or reluctance to express one's emotions, attitudes, or self—which is sometimes (mis)taken as shallowness or absence of affect. (my emphasis)

Ambivalence also differs from "ambiguity," which refers to phenomena of a more cognitive—as distinct from emotional—sort. More specifically, the term ambiguity is used here to index uncertainty, in the sense that some expressions, gestures, and so forth are capable of being understood in two or more ways, and so have double, multiple, or indeterminate signification. Something that is ambiguous is therefore indistinct, equivocal, not clearly defined, and in some instances, obscure. The terms ambivalence, diffidence, and ambiguity are thus analytically distinct, although there is semantic and experiential overlap for a variety of reasons: emotions and attitudes have cognitive entailments; cognitive phenomena may be colored by "feeling-tones"; ambivalence may foster ambiguity, and vice versa; and both may follow from the internalization of multiple frameworks of evaluation. (Peletz 2001, 415)

Ambivalence, then, is the "*coexistence*" ...[*of two or more powerful*] *contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love and hatred) towards a person or thing,*"

which may entail emotional or attitudinal “oscillation, fluctuation, variability,” . . . It may, in any case, derive from divergent interests, each calculated with respect to different values, aims, or constraints.” The emotion of ambivalence experienced by the self is described as an inner split or re-doubling, which implies restorative or supplementary work (Butler 1997):

The power imposed upon one is the power that animates one’s emergence, and there appears to be no escaping this ambivalence. Indeed, there appears to be no “one” without ambivalence, which is to say that the fictive redoubling necessary to become a self rules out the possibility of strict identity. Finally, then, there is no ambivalence without loss as the verdict of sociality, one that leaves the trace of its turn at the scene of one’s emergence (Butler 1997, 198).

A subject pulled by “*different values, aims, or constraints*” (Peletz 2001, 415; my emphasis) in multiple directions: passion, hatred, and paralysis, the ties of the forces of love and hate.

Ambivalence is an inner conflict between self-sacrificing and other-accommodating emotions. The emotion of self-sacrifice for social others reflects self-sabotage or self-destructive mentality and behaviors. Acts of accommodation, fraught with contradictions, compromises and negations, “place a particular moral burden on the inner world” of actors that, as Kleinman (2011) points out, “each person experiences and negotiates in his or her own way” (286). The burden comes from the self that is torn between self-interest and the collective good, “struggling over desire and responsibility, negotiating contradictory emotions, shifting attention between things in and out of awareness, and juxtaposing imagination and practical action” (Kleinman et al 2011:5). As research on Asian kinship formation and nationalism formation suggests, the boundary that separates an individual’s giving freely and giving out of a sense of social

responsibility for others' emotions is unclear. Social coercion happens when social responsibility binds the actor to conduct herself in accordance with a social contract to repay (emotional) debts. The actor's experience makes this a demand rather than a request.

Emphasizing accommodation to others, the Japanese ideal of *sunao na kokoro* also encourages one to have “a heart sensitive not to its own desires, but to the needs of others” (Kondo 1990, 105). Social recognition of one's cooperativeness is prioritized in Japan because it will eventually bring cheer to the self (Kondo 1990, 106), despite one's initial suffering or self-denial. The burden of *on*, or the indebted feeling a junior feels toward her parents or seniors, is even heightened when the junior interacts with her parents, or someone to whom she is indebted: because the teachings and time that the seniors devoted to her development obligates her to reciprocate with gratitude “by extending [herself] for the sake of others” (Kondo 1990, 105). Kondo experienced this burden, pushed and pulled by her reluctance and sense of obligation to an arrangement with an English tutor in her tight schedule made by an older male friend to whom she felt indebted. As Kondo later complained about this incident to her female Japanese friend, their conversation suggests that Kondo's reaction is common in Japanese social interactions.

The tension arising from the decision to choose one's autonomy over social recognition is magnified in Taiwanese legends (Sangren 2017) in which *Miaoshan* (female) and *Nezha* (male) defied arrangements made by their respective fathers. In both stories, the father figure represents the law, in Lacan's sense—the father figure prioritizes social expectations over his child's wishes, asserting fatherly power to force

his child into a socially appropriated interpellation (Althusser 1971) as an expression of a Confucian cultural sentiment that emphasizes social recognition (face, *mianzi*). Through a process that Sangren (2000) calls alienation, both characters re-identify themselves by misplacing their autonomy on the imagined ideal Other in the pursuit of their desired selves. *Miaoshan* and *Nezha* represent Taiwanese gendered personhoods and their ambivalent psyches that are shaped by their social relations and sentiments of filial piety. In a deeper philosophical sense related to human existence, both stories capture, on the one hand, the ambivalence of how the Chinese recognize their fate or restraints on their lives in forms of acceptance, while on the other hand trying to maneuver their destinies by exhausting all resources (Sangren 2012), including acts of religious worship (Sangren 1987, 2000), networking, gossiping, and identifying with the imagined ideal. While Sangren emphasizes the desire to defy and realize oneself in the face of the restrictions of social structure, Peletz focuses on the paralyzing emotions that fetter one by a particular social discourse.

Ordinary Malays shackle themselves by internalizing a set social discourse that makes them afraid of being punished socially by magic curses or spells (Peletz 1997). Along the same lines, the fear of becoming a traitor restrains them from voicing dissatisfaction with Islamic fundamentalists. The prioritization of Muslims' progress in public discourse makes people feel guilty for their myopically self-interested complaints. If they are concerned more about their deprivation caused by public policy than the collective good, they betray the community by leaving Muslims' welfare to the ethnic Chinese. With an ambivalent guilt within them, ordinary Malay Muslims suppress their dissent, linking their personal complaints to betrayals of Muslims' collective pursuits.

The inner imperative for Malays to accommodate social responsibilities to the Islamic state, placing community welfare before individual desire, is shaped by a cultural panopticon whereby people internalize the storyline that their intimate others might kill them with curses (Peletz 1997). The moral dilemma, as manifested in guilt, ambivalence, recoiling at the horror of rebellion, and patricide, shackles ordinary Malays from voicing their disagreement with the Islamic resurgence. Their fear of even feeling, looking, or examining *why* it is wrong to even think about it is concretized by their fear of being cursed by intimate others. To show their loyalty, they are forced to conform, support, and acquiesce to the state and patriarchy:

The analytically and culturally distinct dimensions of the resurgence that *ordinary Malays find most morally offensive are much more troubling for them to confront, directly or otherwise*, and are, partly for this reason, all the more vexing than the institutional encroachments mentioned earlier. (Peletz 1997, 262; my emphasis)

The internalized policing voice in ordinary Malays is a culturally interpellated “hey you!” (Althusser 1971). This “troubling” feeling that arises when they are tempted to “confront” what they consider “morally offensive” (Peletz 1997, 262) is, in fact, a mental block against voicing their dissatisfaction. This entanglement is formed within an indebted kinship panopticon: (1) *it is wrong in the first place* to confront the Islamic state when all Malays are born indebted to the collectivity; and (2) one cannot afford to accumulate more social debt by disagreeing with *dakwah* resurgents because this will lead to social suicide—being killed by intimate others. The mental block is a forceful, demanding interpellation from the Islamic state that binds the Malay psyche with cultural symbols and entanglements.⁵

⁵ Their effort, from my understanding, to suppress individual disagreement is an effort to pay off some debt they feel they owe to the Islamic state and patriarchy. They cannot afford to add

These Panopticon-like features of the social and cultural universes of ordinary Malays *thus serve to constrain the elaboration of strategies and ideologies of resistance to the Islamic resurgence*. More generally, they indicate that an understanding of resistance and oppositional ideologies (including hidden transcripts) requires *an analysis of the political dynamics of the presentation of self in everyday life that goes far beyond investigation of the politics of the major lines of cleavage associated with the relatively fixed hierarchies of class, race, and gender*. (Peletz 1997: 264; my emphasis)

Ordinary Malays are caught up in a panopticon-like system that prevents them from generating resistance or creative strategies that would enable them to see through the ideology. They even suggest that the goal of escaping the system involves “understand[ing]” their inner “resistance” and “oppositional ideologies (including hidden transcripts)” (Peletz 1997, 264). The education provided with BHS meditation in Penang teaches meditators to reflect on the “political dynamics of the presentation of self in everyday life” (Peletz 1997, 264) to *see things as they are*, especially when coping with kinship interactions and guilty feelings. Differing from the ordinary Malay’s fear of becoming a traitor for disagreeing with the Islamic resurgence, Malaysian Chinese such as YT actively embrace Buddhist doctrines to gain perspective, approaching the Buddhist ideology of *seeing things as they are*.

Although the emotional intensity of Malay social control may be relatable to Chinese living in Confucian societies in Penang, the exposure of Malaysian Chinese to Western culture while adopting a unique mixture of Confucian and Buddhist influences

to that debt by voicing their resistance to the debt already owed. From the outside, it is support by a *part*, albeit imposed on individuals, of the *whole* Islamic community. Islamic communal betterment is imperatively prioritized over their non-Malay, non-Muslim counterparts, including ethnic Chinese, ethnic Indians, and Westerners. From the inside, despite the occurrence of ambivalent or troubling emotions toward the Islamic resurgence, the fear of the curse leads Muslim Malays to conform to the Islamic state to protect and preserve their social existence and social recognition. Any altruistic choices may contain individual gains (Mauss 2000).

stems from another context. The Malay and Malaysian Chinese psyches were formed in distinct religious and cultural contexts. Such contextual differences shape of their psyches and personhood in unique ways. However, despite the differences, there is a fundamental commonality between Malays and Malaysian Chinese insofar as both are shaped and influenced by religious and cultural ideologies that in turn shape their identities.

My analysis of the learning process associated with YT's Buddhist meditation represents the Confucian psyche of guilt among Malaysian Chinese that expands our understanding of the cultural psychology of ambivalence in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. After reviewing the cultural psychology of ambivalence in Asia, we now turn to a case of a Malaysian Chinese woman's formation of a guilty psyche in the contexts of Confucian patriarchy and Buddhism through YT's narration of her life history.

6. Buddhism: *Vipaka*, a new way to interpret YT's life

Reflective and well-versed, YT described in our interview how her Buddhist perspective (i.e., the *Right View*) transforms the way she engages with her parents and mother-in-law, who have disappointed her. Based on her narrative, we could see (1) how a retired professional, English-educated Malaysian Chinese woman in her fifties (she was born in 1960), experiences guilt as a symptom of the entanglement of social expectations; and (2) how she uses the Buddhist idea of *vipaka* and the associated meditation techniques to bring new meanings to her interpretation of suffering.

Suffering is a ubiquitous theme in Buddhist societies as Buddhists are concerned with permanently liberating the self from suffering by going to the Western Paradise. Suffering is a powerful analytic through the Buddhist lens because Buddhists see life as suffering that results from attachments. Thinking of their world in terms of suffering allows people to make sense of their individual, social, ethnic and national suffering, using suffering as a metaphor to reflect on and organize life. Suffering nevertheless also acts as a symbol of desire in other contexts because it allows people to externalize and objectify their own individual experiences through symbols or metaphor. In this sense, suffering becomes a kind of symbolic means of expressing the desire to get beyond blockage or impasse.

In an academic context, YT's dependence on Buddhism to transcend her mental suffering can be seen in light of Lacan's theories. Lacan's concept of a mirror stage suggests how humans identify with specular images of the Other rather than identifying directly with the Other. The self misrecognizes the specular image as the self because the self is merely a "shadow," as Lacan puts it (Fenves 1998).

YT's life history, which I present chronologically below, is based on my paraphrasing of what she told me in the interview. I present her life story in detail because by reading her "storyline" and the narrative of her experiences we can firmly grasp the apparent and underlying issues that cause her "suffering." Also, when we follow the narrative of her life we can understand how she produces a new self by embracing Buddhism. I narrate what she told me and summarize the content based on her account during our interview. Sometimes I show her own words transcribed from our interview to present her unique voice as evidence.

(1) Disappointments in YT's Natal Family

YT started our interview by telling me how she was born in a poor family as the first child. She said that her family could not afford tuition for attending university abroad, although that was her dream. According to YT, although she performed well academically, after graduation from high school she had to work to support her parents and her five younger siblings. Ill-fated, as she thought she was, she felt that life treated her unfairly. As she shared with me the fact that she was not able to study overseas herself, she framed it as sacrificing her dreams to support her siblings.

(2) Dating Jon and their Connection with Buddhism

YT shared with me with the fondness she felt for Jon when she met him through a friend. She explained that she had accompanied her best friend on a double date. She said that they were both young and shy and thought that bringing a friend with them on the first date seemed like a good idea. However, interestingly, as YT admitted, she and Jon fell in love at first sight. They started dating soon after they met. YT then mentioned that Jon was the person who exposed her to Buddhism. She said that Jon once cancelled a date to attend a *dharma* chanting session and that made her curious. She decided to go with him. That was YT's first *dharma* talk,⁶ but soon attending *dharma* talks together became a habit in their relationship.

⁶ YT told me in the interview that she had been raised to pray to Chinese deities and chant. She said that she studied at a convent school, although everyone in her family were Daoists, so her mom prayed to many deities: *dizugong* 地主公 (the earth God), *tiangong* 天公 (the Heavenly God), 灶神 (the Kitchen god). She had not attended any Buddhist *dharma* lectures before Jon took her to the *dharma* talk.

YT attended a Christian school. She often asked the priest many philosophical questions. She said he frustrated her by not answering her questions. He even punished her for asking questions. She said she was disappointed that a priest who represented Christianity would treat her that way.

(3) YT's Hostile Mother-in-law

YT mentioned in the interview that when Jon proposed to her he promised to provide economic support so that she could continue to support her siblings' education. This arrangement was not known to her mother-in-law, however, leading to conflict and misunderstanding between YT and her mother-in-law, a situation that worsened over time:

When I married my husband, my mother-in-law actually [did] not like me. She [was] looking for somebody that [could] help my husband in the sense that she [was] looking for someone with a better family background in financial [aspect] la in the sense la. Then the first two daughter[s] in law. She put it this way la, she says that my elder brother-in-law when he bought his first house, my sister-in-law's father give him the first down payment. And the second brother when he migrated to Australia the father-in-law give him twenty thousand to give it to him so that he [could] start over there.⁷

And . . . I still remember when . . . they ask [us] to get married, I said "cannot" because "my sisters and brothers are still studying." But they still

⁷ The quotations are literally what she said in the interview, not a translation. She is proud of her ability to speak both English and Chinese. She switches between two languages when she speaks and reads. She went to Chinese primary school, but participated in meditation groups full of English-educated Chinese. As a leader in the meditation group, she took reading notes in English and shared her notes to people who are on the e-mail mailing list.

To honestly present my field data and to objectively present my informants' voices, I choose to leave her original quotations in this dissertation. This is how people speak English in Malaysia if one has been to Malaysia and talks to natives. I do not think anyone has the right to correct the local use of language, in either English or Chinese, unless they are asked to do so for language-learning purposes, which does not apply to this situation.

ask[ed] to get married. Then my husband [said], “Why you don’t want to marry me?” I [said], “It is not that I don’t want to marry you. It’s that I still have sisters and brothers that I need to support.” Then he [said], “Then you continue support la, I never ask you to support me ma,⁸ I can support you, and you can support your sister and brother.” So, I was thinking okay la, someone can support me la, and then okay, good la. But he did not talk to his mother.

I still remember when I [got] married, first month, my mother-in-law [asked] for my salary. She never [asked] other sister-in-law[s] but . . . me. [She said], “Hmmm . . . why you never give me your salary?” Then I said, “Why I need to give you my salary?” Because actually my husband promise[d] to take care of me ma, right or not, so, I said my salary, I [had] to take back home to for my sister and brother. And then she [was] not happy. Then she [went] and [talked] to the neighbors.

The neighbor [told] me . . . in Chinese, “I daotie daotie niangjia (倒貼倒貼娘家, took husband’s money to my original family).” Then I [said], “No, daotie 倒貼 means, I take my husband’s money and go back to niangjia (娘家, her mother’s home). This one is my hard earned money. . . . How can you say that? So, I was hurt and she did a lot of things that really hurt me during that time. So, it is inside me, then I miscarriage of my second baby also because of her. . . . So, it is not exactly because of her la, but it is something to do with her. So, wosuan zai tade taoshangla (我算在他的頭上啦. She awes me for this).

YT was angry that her mother-in-law wanted her salary like her two sisters-in-law, who came from wealthier families than her, did. Her mother-in-law was not informed of the agreement YT had with her husband according to which she would continue to support her own family despite the marriage, or of her not wanting to marry early because she still had to take care of her family. Her mother-in-law, however, complained about YT and painted her as a person who took her husband’s money to support her own siblings and original family. YT felt angry because her mother-in-law was using her own hard-earned money instead of her husband’s money.

⁸ “Ma,” like la, is another linguistic quirk in Malaysia and Singapore.

Not only did YT consider the mother-in-law as a contributor to the miscarriage of her second child, but she also described how her mother-in-law continued to interact with her unpleasantly, even being jealous that she was able to talk to her father-in-law.

We (my father-in-law and YT) [shared] a lot. Actually my father-in-law [liked] me a lot and my mother-in-law s[aw] that and I think she [was] jealous. . . . Because the time I [got] married, I am already in this [Buddhist] journey already, so, I read a lot of books and all those things. My father-in-law retired at that time so every day he [would] wait in front of the gate there. [He] saw my car came and then he [started] talking to me. He [was] waiting for me to come home. So, he [started] talking to me. He said, “today ah, I am reading this chapter ah” So, the moment he [talked] with me. My mind tune[d] into spiritual already, so, I started talking to him so I have my own understanding, my own perception, my own everything, so he [found] it very interesting because I [saw] things very differently so he [talked] a lot. So, when my husband [was] working in the middle of the sea, when he [was] not at home it [was] only three of us in the house because my husband is the youngest ma.

So, it’s my mother-in-law, me, and my father-in-law, so, I didn’t know that my mother-in-law [got] jealous that my father-in-law talk[ed] to me a lot. So I still remember my husband [came] back from work then she [complained] to my husband she [said] that I . . . she didn’t say that my father-in-law talk to me. She [said] I [talked] to my father-in-law so much ah . . . she [said], “You know she is so talkative she talks none stop, you know, and all those things, so she talks a lot and then your father don’t want to talk to me.”

Because she [was] not educated, she [didn’t] know how to read and all those things. So, my father-in-law got nobody to talk to mah, so, she [was] jealous la, in a sense, so, when she [stayed] with us ah, before she [passed] away. Sometimes we [had] breakfast ah, and then after breakfast she [would] go outside to water the plant.

She [would] call my father-in-law onetime two times, but my father-in-law [was] talking to me mah sometimes some very interesting topic. She talk[ed] and my father-in-law didn’t go out she call[ed] for a few times she [threw] the little dengzi (小凳子, stool) she [threw] the thing from outside inside the house, you know, and [made] such a big noise. And that screaming at my father-in-law, [she said], “What’s so interesting to talk so much like that? I call[ed] you so many times . . .” so actually me and my father-in-law we [talked] a lot. And then we share[d] books that we read, we share[d] information. We share[d] a lot of things.

YT portrayed her mother-in-law as an uneducated and unreasonable woman. Her mother-in-law lost her temper at her quickly, according to YT, especially when she saw the father-in-law's heartfelt interaction with her. As YT described it, both YT and her father-in-law were serious students of Buddhism: they shared their reflections on Buddhist books and their own realizations of concepts of Buddhist philosophy frequently. YT said that her mother-in-law had no interest in studying Buddhism. She chanted and prayed. YT noted that her mother-in-law, as a traditional housewife, did the housework and chores well but shared no common interests with her husband. My observation is: YT's intellect threatened the mother-in-law, making the latter feel badly about her barren relationship with her husband. YT suggested that the mother-in-law was jealous of YT for receiving so much attention from her husband. My analysis is: what the mother-in-law did not see was her husband's hunger and eagerness to discuss his "aha" moments about Buddhism with someone who finally appreciated and understood him.

YT was deeply hurt by her mother-in-law's crazy behavior over the years. After attending Hor Tuck Loon's meditation class, retreats, and group activities and participating in Christopher Moon's workshop, YT finally had the tools she needed to reconcile with her mother-in-law:

So I have a very pitiful bitter young age la in a sense. So, I went to Tuck Loon's two workshops, two retreats, nage xinjie haishi buneng dakai 那個心結還是不能打開 (Her misunderstanding and the hurt she caused me are like the block that still cannot be unblocked). . . . Cannot because it is too deep already.⁹ It [was] still painful. I [didn't] want to face it. I just want[ed] to blame her. [Blaming] her I [felt] better already. Then . . . after that when I went to Christopher Moon's five-day workshop.

⁹ This is a very typical form of Malaysian English, "starting with a 'cannot' and ending with an 'already.'"

I felt that I actually very . . . the moment that I cannot forgive her, when I [looked] at her, I [got] this hatred in me that [was] boring, eating me, that I [became], more . . . more . . . painful, more suffering, so when I went for that workshop, I [did not] know what day, I just, all of the sudden [understood that] all the suffering it is because of myself seeing it wrongly. So, that was about two years back then. I came back from the workshop then. I ask[ed] for forgiveness for my mother-in-law.

That time she [was] still alive . . . and . . . I really talk[ed] to her and I told her how I [felt] . . . and all those things. . . . Yes, [I] told her that everything . . . what and how I [thought] about her . . . everything so you know so strange ah, that morning when I came back it was late at night so she [slept] already. So, the next morning we were at the breakfast table . . . I [looked] at her, I just [wanted] to go there and [held] her hands and ask[ed] for her forgiveness, so, I just [held] it and just [wanted] to keep quiet. I [did not] want to say anything. But half an hour later, she was in the living room, and I just [could] not hold it anymore. And I [talked] to her and [asked] for forgiveness from her. And so strangely the whole house energy [changed]. Oh . . . that instant moment, you know! And my mother in law passed away three months later.

YT realized that blaming her mother-in-law had been a good strategy that worked well for her. She was not ready to face the wounds before these Buddhist trainings. Eventually, however, reflecting her commitment to Buddhism, she mustered her courage and looked into the causes of her pain. She claimed that her suffering was gone when her perspective changed, a shift in her perception that came in due time. Before her mother-in-law passed away, YT conversed with her on her deathbed. They talked everything out, exchanged viewpoints, released their blaming of each other, and cleared their misunderstandings. After that talk, YT said that she felt the energy in the house changed instantly. YT said that she was happy with her transformation and the result.¹⁰

¹⁰ YT said Tuck Loon told her that her mother-in-law was made to wait until YT reconciled with her before she passed away. Tuck Loon hinted at YT that she should now focus on loving herself after having reconciled with the mother-in-law. Tuck Loon reminded YT again to put herself at the center to achieve self-growth. YT said in the interview, “*When I [talked] to Tuck Loon, he said, “She is waiting for you only . . . when you’re cleared . . . because she passed away because of old age mah. From that time onwards, you don’t need to keep those sufferings with you. You don’t need to be so violent with yourself. You can be loving with yourself just by recognizing*

(4) Meditation Education

YT told me in 2007 that the questions that the priest refused to answer have been answered at BHS. She said that her meditation class started with instructor Hor Kwei Loon, an experienced *dharma* speaker and a colleague of hers at a bank where she worked. She said that later when she was introduced to Hor Tuck Loon's meditation class, Jon started to resist her continuing with meditation education. She stated that Jon was afraid she might leave him for serious full-time *dharma* study, like a nun, since she was passionate about and talented at Buddhism. YT described her transformation after learning from Hor Tuck Loon:

After that I met Tuck Loon, then I start[ed] a new journey more looking into the mind, until now. So . . . I felt that this journey is very interesting, at this moment a lot of thing that is start coming out. The old habit . . . don't know if it's a last life time habit or whatever, but it starts coming out. So, I start seeing things very differently. It depends sometimes you know it is like, you need to be very attentive to the mind . . . then you can see it changes. So, then only that is how I say it a lot of realization will take place. And then it actually met the Buddha's teaching, so, also that I can understand why certain time I react like this, certain time how I respond to certain things, because of the old conditions that come out.

I can clear what a number of all the blocks in myself like emotional blocks yes, and some of misperceptions, the wrong views. . . . Now it slowly slowly come out and let me see those things, so, it is an interesting journey at this moment. Hmm now is like. . . . Still there is time that I am deluded, but, now is much better. . . . I am aware of what is happening more, not all the time deluded. I am more aware of what is happening outside and how the mind look at it. How the mind complains about it and all those things.

Sometimes you feel unfair, then you ask why you have this unfairness. All these deep feelings inside you will start to come out. Certain time, last time, you (are) never aware that you're actually expecting something it is not met and you get disappointed and all these.

that you're seeing it wrongly, and then a little bit, now a little bit, I can see my agitation and anger is there."

So, in the same situation happen, you have the same kind of emotions, now you're not pushing it away, and now you are looking at it and ask why is it in my space, or what can I learn from it so slowly slowly you will unblock all the blockages that you have sometimes it's not the present one, it can be very old ancient emotions or emotion pain and slowly la.

In this passage, YT describes her transformation as she became more aware of her mental imagery under Tuck Loon's teaching. Tuck Loon's perspective affects how she looks at social conflicts and notices recurring patterns in her emotions and responses: *"The old habit . . . don't know if it's a last life time habit or whatever, but it starts coming out. So, I start seeing things very differently."* She then said, *"You (are) never aware that you're actually expecting something it is not met and you get disappointed and all these."* The recurring emotions that continue to plague her, or that continue to "block" her *"can be very old ancient emotions"* because those are wounded emotions that keep reoccurring to someone according to her personality.

Tuck Loon's lectures, meditation groups, and other self-discovery workshops and audio materials that they share with each other, according to YT, help her push herself further and know herself better. Pushing herself further means improving social relations with others, such as her mother-in-law. YT's sincere conversation with her mother-in-law before the latter died is crucial to the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation: any unresolved feelings at a person's deathbed not only prevents the person from reaching nirvana but also continues to ensnarl her in the same dysfunctional social relationships following similar patterns in future lives.

YT believes that, based on her understanding of this reincarnation system, if she had not reconciled with her mother-in-law the unfinished emotional entanglements between them would recur when they meet again in their next lives: the conflict would

regenerate over and over again until all the debts are cleared, snarls disentangled, and the conflict resolved. To set up better conditions for the next life, the Buddhists at BHS attempt to clear away all the emotional baggage of their present lives and chant with laser-focused, peaceful minds before dying to increase the likelihood that they will reach nirvana—peace is the aim. If one dies without attaining peace, BHS followers believe, emotional entanglements from their previous lives will roll over into their next lives. That is *vipaka*, what they see as a precondition of their current lives, manifested in a person's status, context, habits, and personality. The repeated cycle of entanglements without reconciliation, i.e., *vipaka*, they believe, provides motivation and urgency for believers to reconcile misunderstandings, conflicts, and hurt with other parties.

YT's personality clashed with her mother-in-law's personality, and such clashes have happened repetitively in her life. If one sees the Buddhist reincarnation doctrine as a metaphor, it broadly describes how emotional debts are accumulated or cleared in human social exchanges. Emotional burdens generate emotional entanglements. Doing the inner work to figure out how to give and take on equal terms with someone whose personality clashes with YT's even as yet they are locked into a kinship relationship with frequent interaction takes energy and time. If they were not motivated by the firm belief that they can lead a better next life (for fear of being reincarnated into a poor family or as a pathetic cockroach), most people would prefer living an easier life by blaming others for the faults and conflicts in their relationships. Driven by the ideology of reincarnation to create a better next life, however, YT worked hard as she reflected on her weaknesses and sought an understanding, accommodating mindset and the corresponding behavior toward her mother-in-law before the latter passed away.

To summarize YT's narration of her life history, she described her disappointments with her life in her birth family and with her mother-in-law. She sacrificed herself for the families' collective good out of guilt, ignoring her resentment and hurt. Since she was young, she struggled with philosophical questions that no one could answer, including the priest at the Christian school. Nevertheless, Jon brought to YT a new lifestyle (married life with parents-in-law), new roles (spouse, parent, in-law), new identities (wife, mother, daughter-in-law), and new exposure to Buddhism (chanting and praying) along with new problems (her dysfunctional relationship with her mother-in-law). Nevertheless, YT's exposure to Buddhist meditation at BHS in middle age brought new perspectives to her victimized identity: she, like others, is the product of *vipaka* from the past. Yet, at the same time, she is the producer of *vipaka* in the next life. Moreover, hers and Jon's fears were alleviated by their belief in *vipaka*. YT is motivated to face her wounds directly: she tries to disentangle her dysfunctional relationships, And she strives to improve herself and her relationships with others to have a better future, specifically in her future lives. *Vipaka* is a crucial concept that transforms and motivates her. What is *vipaka*? How does YT understand *vipaka*?

(12) Vipaka in YT's Original (English) Quotations

Let's say this morning I read the Chinese newspaper: this airline this lady [A] complains. The moment [B] puts her feet on [A's] armrest. The smelly foot. [A] thinks that there is something wrong, [so] she asks the air hostess to do something about it. Of course the air hostess ignores her because it is other people's freedom to do it. But [A] thinks that it is something wrong with it. So, . . . her value [is]: 'you are not supposed to do that.'

. . . in our mind we have been educated since [childhood that] you're not supposed to urin[ate] at the roadside. There are a lot of things we

*are not supposed to do. So, that's our value. Even you cannot hold it, you just burp in front of people. You think it is wrong: it is your value. But in reality, when you burp in the public, it is nature tak[ing] place. But you think: it is something wrong. **All the time your education system show[s] you that it is wrong.***

***Your knowledge system from your background is telling you 'that is wrong'—that is your resultant condition. It shapes your mindset to be like that. So, that is also your value ma.** You see, ah, my mom said you cannot burp in front of other people or you cannot bampui ("fart" in Hokkien) in front of other people.*

*If that [person] is very rude and you become this [rude person], so, when you do it, **automatically you want to nullify that particular feeling.** How to nullify the particular feeling? You have to say I am sorry, or excuse me, right or not? So, to you ah, that is the right thing to do. That is your value. That is your vipaka also. But some other people they don't do [it], they will think that 'it is natural to fart and burp!' [wo (Mandarin) bampui (Hokkien), ziran de ma (Mandarin)!]*

*So, to them, putting the leg up, it's nothing wrong, it is my action, nothing to do with you. But for you it is called rude. It depends on you, and you look at it. **You are not seeing that 'leg.'** You are seeing that 'don't like'. So, you just need to see the 'don't like.' Why is that 'don't like' come out? Why does that 'don't like' come out? Because of condition ma, the condition. Because your vipaka, and your vipaka will be your value, right or not? (my emphasis)*

YT uses a story she read in the newspaper to explain the Buddhist concept of *vipaka*. The apparent issue in the story regards a conflict over personal boundaries. Lady A feels disrespected when lady B puts her feet on lady A's armrest. The underlying issue, however, is that lady A and lady B define public and private boundaries differently: Lady A judged lady B based on her values.

In addition to desires, one's value system originates in her upbringing, education, and the ideas she learns over the course of her entire life. Buddhists believe, of course, that a person's entire life span includes numerous lifetimes. When value conflicts between two parties occur, both sense the difference and likely feel threatened and each

one seeks to prove the truth or righteousness of his or her claim—the urge that YT describes in the phrase, “*automatically you want to nullify that particular feeling.*”

Most people intuitively see the wrongness of other people’s behavior without seeing that their judgments, in fact, reflect their desires. When two worldviews collide, both subjects naturally feel threatened by the new, unknown worldview since their realities formed through time and experience are being shaken. Due to their differences, an inner sense of conflict and an urge to override the other person’s value system will emerge: a need, as YT puts it, to *nullify that particular feeling*. The agent wants to stabilize his old worldview, sticking tenaciously to his own perception, the conclusion he arrives at that life has so far taught him. Unconsciously, he wants to protect his upbringing, the time he spent learning, and the basis of his worldview. He naturally becomes the advocate of his past socialization, often unaware of the historical process that forms his protective action toward the upbringing that constitutes him as well as his militant action against something that diverges from that upbringing. The judgment is deeply planted in the subject’s mind, and once he detects contrasting or conflicting behaviors or opinions, intuitively, an inner sense of hostility occurs, accompanied by negative emotions.

I interpret YT’s sharing of her belief in *vipaka* and her inward-oriented meditation as factors that taught her to free herself from her old programming.¹¹ *Vipaka*, as an accumulation of preconditions and conditionings of numerous lifetimes, is similar to Bourdieu’s *habitus*. Yet it seems to expand the time and scale of social influences on YT. To “be aware of” and hoping to transcend their (usually non-reflexive) impositions

¹¹ YT might not be aware of what exactly she was sensing. That is why she could not put it into exact words.

of their own culturally influenced standards on others and the world, BHS meditators are trained to investigate their own dislikes to see through and transcend their old programming.

Buddhist meditation, according to YT, trains practitioners to change their personal perceptions and transcend their culturally influenced categories: when a subject finds that other people's behavior does not fit her category of reality, she trains herself to postpone the need to secure a sense of reassurance so that she can *nullify that particular feeling*. Meditators such as YT believe that *vipaka* teaches them (1) to recognize that people are products of education and socialization; and (2) to be mindful of the urge to *nullify that particular feeling* by making others or ourselves wrong (Burgo 2012).

Bodhi Heart teachings suggest that the dislike one experiences denotes that one's standards have been breached: knowing that we are all products of socialization (*vipaka*) and being conscious of the historical process of how a subject comes into being help meditators see the bigger picture—the objectified lens enabling them to think beyond themselves to see that both parties' perceptions are valid and true. Instead of judging behaviors that are incompatible with a subject's categories, meditators are taught to observe their antipathetic emotions—to examine what is being challenged and why it does not fit into their socialized categories.

Based on my sources from classes and observations at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, this dislike-examining practice is the beginning of the process in which the questions one's internalized cultural norms. YT explains that *vipaka* is an internalized value system. *Vipaka* comes from Theravada Buddhism: Karma is action, while *vipaka* is the

result or fruit of action. *Vipaka* is seen by BHS devotees as the precondition or socialization one received through one's trajectory in life shaped by family, school, workplace, country, class, gender, physicality, sexual orientation, language, and culture. They believe that seeing things with the *Right View* unblocks an agent's mental blocks, demanding a coerced result without sensing her own feelings, desires, and cultural background or others' feelings, desires and cultural backgrounds. The meditation technique is believed designed to train meditators to be flexible in life arrangements and open to a variety of personalities and cultural or class backgrounds because each is shaped by one's *vipaka*.

The connection between *vipaka*, the *Right View*, and the end of suffering (*dukkha*) is illustrated in the teachings of Brother Hor Tuck Loon, as posted on a WhatsApp discussion group on June 26, 2015. Below are the original English quotations from Brother Hor Tuck Loon, who speaks English and Cantonese as his native language. I choose to leave the original texts without revising them to show his original expressions. English native speakers may find that his words do not make sense because of grammatical errors and odd sentence structures. This is the way brother Hor Tuck Loon speaks and types, however, using “international English” rather than “Anglophone English,” as he is proud of his English mastery and often demonstrates his interest in playing with English words in his lectures. His creole-like performance of language is a feature of many English-educated Malaysian Chinese. Brother Hor Tuck Loon typed:

. . . this now moment tells a lot of a reality which is difficult to realize yet the Buddha makes it very simple to comprehend: namarupa—there's only mind and object. When an object arises—be it an event or a situation—it CANNOT be otherwise. They are results or effects arising due to whatever conditioning supporting it at that point. For a mind that is there to receive it, it is a kind of vipaka (resultant) to be

associated with it.

How the mind receiv[er] the object can be very unbearable at times, particularly if the defilements (greed, hatred, delusion) present at that point plays out big time. . . . The truer reality will be your mind coming into contact with the object. It is a vipaka to your mind, and how your mind reacts to it, is your present experience, your present dukkha (stress), which is also a vipaka since it is a ripening of the past perception.

*If you notice the dukkha mind, then that mind becomes an object to awareness, which if the awareness comes with **Right View**, then that dukkha mind now becomes a dharma object. **There is nothing wrong with that dukkha mind** so long as seen correctively as just an object. Somehow if there is no Right View, then that dukkha becomes unbearable. (My emphasis)*

Acceptance is implied when Brother Hor Tuck Loon introduces the idea “*When an object arises—be it an event or a situation—it CANNOT be otherwise. They are results or effects arising due to whatever conditioning supporting it at that point.*” This type of acceptance, as YT would argue, comes from understanding oneself and a given situation rather than passively accepting or being subservient to fate. Chinese agents performing under the influence of Chinese culture, which rewards humility and punishes self-promotion, tend to mask their agency with fate or contingent forces. Sangren (2012) notes the paradox between how Chinese fervidly participate in palm-reading activities to learn their fates to control and change the outcomes of their destinies.

A similar inner logic is applied in Buddhist teachings as interpreted by Brother Hor Tuck Loon—one has to accept, allow, and acknowledge what has happened prior to a particular dissatisfying moment before one can make a better arrangement for her life. This is the *Right View*, to feel no pain in a world full of suffering. According to

BHS teaching, when one feels no pain because his old perception alters, the suffering is not suffering anymore. This is the end of suffering that Buddhists seek throughout their practices.

Seeing from the *Right View* makes suffering (*dukkha*) bearable for Buddhists because as long as one learns the technique that enables one to objectify one's dislike, manifested in the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion (*anicca, dukkha, anatta*), one's focus on pain or suffering shifts. Buddhist teachings allow a person, instead of feeling subjectively victimized, to observe objectively her inner self and external situation. The process of seeing the *dukkha mind* as a *dharma object* allows one to objectify his experiences and negative feelings. As Tuck Loon's teaching shows, one cannot control the emergence of negative thoughts and feelings: *When an object arises—be it an event or a situation—it CANNOT be otherwise. They are results or effects arising due to whatever conditioning supporting it at that point.* He believes, however, that one can learn to *notice the dukkha mind* by increasing his *awareness* of *this now moment* with the *Right View*. Awareness, as Tuck Loon and Kwei Loon teach their students, brings realization to see one's conditioning of *vipaka*, or the repetitive patterns actors see in their psyches and social interactions with others.

To see one's recurring patterns takes practice and time. To fully accept one's condition and precondition in life takes even more practice and time. It is *difficult to realize* and interpret one's emergent response with a meta-understanding following the *vipaka* framework with acceptance. Many meditators in the discussion group demonstrated self-blaming emotions, feeling that they *should* not feel guilty or angry toward their family members. Some even turned their anger toward others onto

themselves. *How the mind receives the object can be very unbearable at times, particularly if the defilements (greed, hatred, delusion) present at that point plays out big time.* The Buddhist meditation teaching implies that there is shame, resistance or blaming of the self or others to protect one's identity and worldview due to the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. *It cannot be otherwise,* however. Even self-blame or anger toward others is *merely a ripening of the past perception.* This suggests that no-self is involved in the reincarnation system. No-self needs to be blamed. Blaming oneself or others, imposing oneself in a none-self reincarnation system is futile because it is preconditioned and one has no control over it. *There is nothing wrong with that dukkha mind so long as seen correctively as just an object.* What one can control is observing one's response to external stimuli objectively in the present.

Going inward objectively means seeing the mind as a *dharma* object. As YT and others believe, it helps Buddhist meditators to put things in perspective, relying on the idea of *vipaka* and their belief in reincarnation to examine their programming that has accumulated through past conditionings. Their firm belief in and reliance on Buddhism are the keys to unhooking them from their entanglements and programming because humans tend to refute what they perceive as alien thinking and behavior or external learning systems. The fact that BHS practitioners treat *vipaka* or reincarnation as natural law motivates YT to see her life narrative as a "storyline,"¹² the very first thing she asked me before our interview. She said to me, "Why would you want to know my life story? They are merely storylines I told myself." I was surprised by her objectivity to

¹² "*Vipaka is the natural law like how the sun will rise every day and how an apple falls off from a tree. One doesn't need to know the gravity theory to believe that an apple drops off naturally because of height*" (Hor Tuck Loon's Lecture from the Penang Meditation Retreat in 2015).

see through her interpretation of her personality and social relations weaved by Buddhist symbols and meanings. She, like other meditators, has one foot deeply tucked into Buddhism, treating *vipaka* as the natural law. On the other hand, however, YT also has one foot beyond the blind belief in Buddhism using the *vipaka* framework to gain lucid thinking, remaining at a self-objectifying distance from all ideas that meditators have learned so far. YT transformed her perspective by looking at her past. She takes on the perspective of the teachings of Buddhist meditation to postpone her militant urge to prove other people wrong and focus less on the “I, me, mine.”

In the following sections I seek to explain how transformation occurred in YT and occurs in other meditators through Buddhist education. Unsurprisingly, meditators focus very sharply on the details of Buddhism, using technical terms and concepts in the hopes of scoring better in their next life. We will again see how, through this process, religious impulses and beliefs are highly complex cultural and psychological phenomena from an agent’s viewpoint. When “listening” to YT’s narrative, a story told by a person who is open to sharing and describing her inner world with lucidity and great sensitivity, we begin to feel the texture and grain of how she inhabits cultural realities that are fraught with conflicts and contradictions, and how she enacts her life with a new perspective saturated deeply in Buddhism. This is an inner process through which an agent “rationalizes” her suffering and makes sense of her experiences in a new light. This is an experience of the self that is different from social models.

Looking-Inward Through Dislike-Observing

The goal of looking-inward through the concept of *vipaka*, according to BHS

Buddhist Mr. Hwat, is to understand one's programming, the process of internalization through which people acquire knowledge and adopt ideas that contribute to their conduct. The myth of the monk who suddenly sees the whole process by smelling the soap during a shower is told over and over again, as an example of enlightenment, to "see things as they are." As mysterious as the path to enlightenment may seem, meditation practice provides the basic progress through which one becomes enlightened little by little—dislike-observing. Most people know it when dislike occurs in them. Dislike is a strong and easy-to-identify emotion that does not require sensitivity or a subtle sense of reflexivity. To get in touch with one's preconceived perceptions, the practice starts with examining the 'dislike' that emerges in daily life encounters.

For YT and other BHS meditators, through mindful introspection at each moment, they examine (1) what feels wrong, (2) why it feels wrong *to them* (but not others), and (3) how *their* holding to a set of values and stubborn thinking makes *them* suffer (*dukkha*). Rather than finding fault with the very thing that irritates them (they think), they dig deeper within themselves to see how their irritation bears the trace of *vipaka* or the conditioning of their values and ideology. YT explains the Buddhist's reason for reflecting on one's judging of others and its deeper origin:

*Because the moment you see [it] and you don't like [it], you have hatred. So, this three [defilements are] in you already are: **hatred, greed, delusion**. The moment you have hatred, that means you don't want something. When you don't want something, at the same time you want something [else]. That is called delusion.¹³ So, **the Buddha says nibbana (nirvana) is without this greed, hatred, and delusion**. As long as you see [the] outside, also you don't like it already.¹⁴ So, how [about] this*

¹³ "That is called delusion" because Buddhists think that likes and dislikes are subjective and limiting, inflecting partial truths, reflecting one's delusions. If one can transcend his subjective view to see things objectively, he will experience peace, joy, and equanimity.

¹⁴ What YT means here as I understand it is: if one has self-hatred within herself, any external objects she encounters would be projections of her own hateful feelings.

one: you check yourself: you don't like yourself a lot of times . . . you don't like yourself one—I don't like my eyebrows, teeth (in Chinese). I need to lose some weight—You don't like yourself. (My emphasis)

According to Bodhi Heart Sanctuary's instructions, Buddha's teaching categorizes suffering into three defilements: hatred, greed, and delusion—otherwise understood as attachments in the eyes of the general public. Tuck Loon's Buddhist meditation group believes that once a subject corrects his defilements with the *Right View*, his perception changes: he interprets his own suffering differently in light of the *Right View*, which saves him from misery; he transcends his pre-conditioning and *vipaka*, *seeing things as they are*.

For BHS meditators, to reach the *Right View* one has to objectify one's suffering first, being aware of when the *dukkha* mind arises. Their “yogi's job” is to see that *dukkha* mind or *dukkha* experience the *dharma* object. In this way, from the Buddhist's viewpoint, YT learns that blaming, both externally and internally, perpetuates her suffering in life to take her even further away from her goal of ending suffering and reaching nirvana.

YT's passionate way of embracing Buddhism conveys irrationality. Yet this irrational pursuit results in unintended consequences (Weber 1930)—through a certain passionate or fetishized learning process in Buddhism, she maintains a certain way of sanity that psychotherapy may bring to a patient. A coexisting tension appears between two drastic poles in YT: her deep passion for Buddhist practices (attachments) and her objective perspective that involves (trying to obtain the ability of) seeing things as they are (detachments). Her passion or over-identification with *vipaka* and reincarnation will be shown in the next section, as I describe her decision no longer to eat crabs based on

her strong belief in reincarnation.

YT's Deep Belief in Vipaka and its Unintended Functions

YT shared her numerous reincarnations on several occasions: she had been the wife of several people she knows in this life. She suggested that previous relationships with those people explain her unconscious attraction to them in this life, but she said she kept it all to herself since she was already married to Jon. In her previous lives, according to Tuck Loon, as YT says in the interview: she was a worm listening to Buddha's *dharma* talk; a Tibetan girl with braids and colorful outfits walking around breathing Buddhism fully in her life; she was also a crab. With the same doubt trying to detach her from her deep immersion in Buddhism, she mentioned she did not know if what Tuck Loon told her, that she was a worm, is true or not. She could not examine its truth. However, in the Tuesday meditation class where she led local BHS meditators in studying Buddhism and discussing meditation together, she said that the instant she knew she was a crab in this life, she stopped eating crabs no matter how much she loved them: she "identifies with the crab" now and "cannot eat her group."

It may, however, sound overly dramatic to stop eating crab (acting out physically) after identifying with crabs as a result of one cycle of reincarnation. This indicates her strong faith in the *vipaka* belief by physically practicing it. Her shift to avoid eating crabs indicates the depth of her emotional and conceptual embrace of the reincarnation storyline. Moreover, *vipaka* belief and practice enable YT to establish pseudo-kinship with people, culture, animals, and insects that share no obvious connections with her. Her adamant belief in *vipaka*, the conditioning resulting from

previous lives, as she suggests, helps her reconcile with her victimized and resentful feelings toward life and toward people who hurt her by providing a larger context within the smaller context of her present life. Below I explain YT's thoughts and feelings by interpreting them through the lens of *vipaka*. This helps us understand how, according to YT, belief in *vipaka* helps her ease her pain and suffering. Based on how *vipaka* functions for her, we might understand better how a middle-class Malaysian Chinese woman's needs are being attended to.

YT's suffering in life can be seen in several major encounters: her humiliation in front of her mother-in-law for being raised in a poor family; her frustration over having to sacrifice her dream of studying abroad; and her troubling interactions with her mother-in-law over decades of living under the same roof. YT's Buddhist education has convinced her that all her emotional entanglements and sufferings are caused by *vipaka*. *It CANNOT be otherwise*. If she wanted to act responsibly and blame herself, she had to trace her feelings back many lifetimes.

YT has learned about her reincarnations from Tuck Loon and herself. She is not sure if what Tuck Loon has told her is correct but she has no way to examine it. She maintains a certain degree of skepticism toward Tuck Loon's assertions about her reincarnation. For her other reincarnations, she said in our interview, "I just know" about her past lives through meditation or sometimes during glimpses and moments that occur in ordinary life. She even claims to know about other people's past lives and the relationships they have had in previous lives. Once, she described how she learned about Hor Tuck Loon as a serial killer on one lifetime from the infuriated looks and explosive emotions that she sees demonstrated occasionally. She also mentioned several men who

are acquaintances in this life who were husbands or lovers in previous lives, noting that they have stimulated intense attraction in her. She seems to be more confident in her own realizations or interpretations of her past lives than in Tuck Loon's interpretations.

From an anthropological perspective, belief in reincarnation provides an eccentric way for YT to rationalize the world through her own interpretations to make sense of her unexplainable emotions toward certain people or other people's inexplicable emotions and actions. This explains to her why she is more attached to some people than others—liking some, disliking others—emotions that are against the teachings at BHS according to its version of the Buddhist practice designed to achieve equanimity. One can argue that YT's past-life roles are self-initiated ideas through which she associates the quality of what she observes in herself and others with the roles she believes they played in their past lives. I argue that this gives her a sense of stability that helps her navigate through life and come to rational conclusions regarding her observations.

Kant characterizes two forms of religious experience: the sublime and the beautiful. When things can be categorized and understood as providing semiotically pleasing effects, life experiences make sense to people and seem true and beautiful. There are also, however, experiences or concepts that people cannot reason about or categorize, evoking a sublime feeling because they exceed their ability to comprehend them. Such experiences thus give people a sense of mystery, inviting them to make sense of the mystery in another form. I suggest that YT finds comfort in making patterns or order out of her observations by relating her relationships with people in this life to her relationships with people in her past lives. Moreover, past life recognition also could

mitigate her guilty feelings in this life.

For instance, according to YT, if she traces back through many lifetimes to find someone to blame for something that happened to her in this life, who would that be? The crab, the worm, the Tibetan girl, or the nun who left her husband Jon? These reincarnated roles all contributed to YT's suffering in this life, and these roles are part of her in this life. In other words, according to the logic of reincarnation, YT's suffering in this life is part of her personality and fate. This thinking helps reduce the hate or blame YT feels toward for her mother-in-law and for growing up in a poor family. In other words, as she would agree, the concept of *vipaka*, the ripening of a certain situation, corrects her tendency to blame others or herself because those roles were played in ignorance of what Buddhism has taught her in this life. She even became a nun, according to YT, leaving her husband to practice Buddhism, to reach nirvana. However, YT reasoned that she did not succeed in reaching nirvana as a nun because of the guilt she felt about leaving her family, which prevented her from feeling at peace on her deathbed—a valid reason for a Theravada Buddhist to believe she will be reincarnated again. This reasoning in a serious Buddhist's mind such as YT's motivates her to avoid making the same mistakes in this life. To reach nirvana or live a better life next life, she has to seize the present moment to reconcile with others, such as her mother-in-law, to unravel the entanglements and hurt that made their relationship difficult and painful.

The inner logic of YT's belief in reincarnation runs as follows: If she cannot blame her past selves or other people, should she blame herself in this life? According to the Buddhist teachings she received at the Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, she should not blame herself because she was facing the results and restrictions of historically

configured circumstances. *It cannot be otherwise. How your mind reacts to it, is your present experience, your present dukkha (stress), which is also a vipaka since it is a ripening of the past perception.* According to YT, the *vipaka* explanation made it unwise for her to blame herself or others because the storyline of previous reincarnated roles provides her with a macro-scale lens to explain how her suffering in this life is a result of many factors. The concept of *vipaka* enables YT to objectify her wounds, trauma, and frustrations, decentering her from her own cultural and psychological contexts. Also, generations of social roles imprinted in her behaviors and psyche in this life, as a devoted Theravada Buddhist would argue, simultaneously also generate a compassionate, self-accepting, perspective: this is who I was (due to history/*vipaka*) that leads to who I am (the product of *vipaka* of previous lives, and the producer of *vipaka* for the next life, ideally reaching nirvana). YT revealed to me that her past victimhood, guilt, or resentment can be gradually transcended by seeing it in a different light, what she calls “*there’s nothing from the outside,*” after which all the entanglements from the inside suddenly “fall off.”

YT not only established compassionate relationships with multiple past generations as a Tibetan girl, a worm, a nun who forsakes her husband, a crab, and someone else’s wife, as she sees it, but she also builds compassionate relationships with real crabs, nuns, Tibetan culture, and other people. She thinks that the actions she takes in following Tuck Loon’s instructions regarding *vipaka* objectify herself and make it possible for her to stop blaming herself or others, while connecting with other parts of herself and others to further reduce the blaming of herself and others. Her transformation occurs, as most Buddhists at BHS would put it, by taking refuge in the Buddha.

7. “Taking Refuge in the Buddha,” the external support to the old patriarchy

Taking refuge in the Buddha instills courage and affirmation in YT, supporting the formation of her synthetic self against multi-directional social influences, as she believes in the doctrine of Theravada Buddhism taught by Tuck Loon. To resist playing certain social roles in the context of Chinese patriarchy and the emotional attachment that comes with such roles, *taking refuge in the Buddha* provides a new perspective or ideology. In other words, a new set of symbols provided by the Buddha could be used to replace social authority in the patriarchy. The authority of the Buddha, for YT and other BHS regulars, provides a supportive force that helps them put their old patterns of being affected by patriarchal social forces and cultural values behind them.

In the Buddhist meditation group, actors also bring their own habitual responses to their relationships. Based on my observations, YT’s and others’ habit of being deferential to the patriarchy continue under the Buddhist patriarchy, although such deference has become even more ritualized and mandatory in Buddhist society. During a 12-day meditation retreat at BHS with a Burmese monk in 2015, Mrs. Chan pulled me aside and reminded me how I should sit with my legs crossed in a particular way at all times as a female practitioner to show respect to the prestigious monk. When I bonded with other non-full-time meditators, she warned me to distant myself from them and respect the priorities of the order, which meant taking lunch immediately after the monks and nuns because I was identified as a full-time over-night retreat practitioner who fully followed the six precepts during the retreat while others attended the retreat only casually during the day. In these instances, Mrs. Chan introduced me to a rigid,

hierarchically formed Buddhist society at BHS that follows the general trends of Buddhist society. Being deferential to the Buddha, Sangha (the monks), and dharma are the three main principles in Buddhist societies.

Being deferential is also a marked attitude in the patriarchy of Confucian Chinese society. For devoted Buddhists like YT and Mrs. Chan, being deferential to the Buddha as meditators opens up an imagined mentorship under the Buddha that replaces the earlier mentorship of the patriarchy. YT and others believe that initiating a new relationship with the Buddha creates a new perspective: *vipaka*, the theory of Buddhist reincarnation, which provides the vocabulary and framework for YT and others to look at their suffering and wounds from a more objective perspective. Through the imagined mentorship with the Buddha during meditation, meditators at BHS believe that they can cultivate new selves to examine (1) the perceptions they have acquired from society that cause their suffering, and (2) how they could work to lessen their suffering.

Their Buddhist training that teaches them to observe their feelings of dislike and their cultural programming is similar to the mindfulness psychoanalytic education designed to help subjects understand the contexts of their perceptions. The particular practice taught at BHS by the twin brothers, Hor Kwei Loon and Hor Tuck Loon, is called “non-doing observing” and is designed to train meditators to observe and understand their desires. We now turn to the “non-doing observing” training that I studied at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary.

8. Non-doing Observing: A Rational Meeting with Irrational Selves

(a) Descriptions

Brother Hor Kwei Loon taught participants to imagine themselves organizing a corporate meeting. He describes how meditation resembles a corporate meeting in which attendees must listen to the voices of the CEO (Chief Enlightenment/Enjoyment Officer), the COO (Chief Operating/Observation Officer), the CFO (Chief Feeling Officer), and the CIO (Chief Investigation Officer). The division of labor of the split self within the meditator functions as follows: the first “split” role in the meditative subject, the COO, observes what is going on in the inner space, emotionally and physically, providing a safe space for other roles through which to cope with confusion, depression, anger, sadness, excitement, passion, boredom, anxiety, nostalgia, ambivalence, etc. In class, the instructor taught his students to perceive meditation this way: *emotions are like clouds passing through the sky, be it grey or pink clouds. The sky, the consciousness, the objectivity, is there, unaffected, as always, as long as it is not being blocked by emotional clouds.* Meditation allows the full range of emotions to be expressed. Non-doing observing, as Buddhists conceive of it, trains meditators to postpone their inner critics or over-socialized parts that resonate with censorship. The meditators are trained to “accept” all conditions, including inexplicable emotions.

While the task of the COO is to be aware of conflicting desires and to observe the process of conflict objectively, the CIO, the second split role in the subject, investigates. The CIO represents the drive to know and historicize emotions such as guilt or dislike. The CIO is the part of the subject that discerns how certain perceptions are wrapped up in and formed by culture—a drive to satisfy curiosity that helps create a buffer zone between the ambivalent self and the social person.

The COO enables the CFO to express emotions. CFO, usually the loudest

member of the group, is the precursor to all conscious and intentional actions. The CFO demands that members of the executive committee approve of decisions that favor her. However, according to a lecture on brother Hor Kwei Loon's sixteen-week beginners' meditation course, "*the one that cries on the floor demanding attention*" may not be aligned with the healthy development of the corporation as a whole. The wise CEO should decide what is best for all. Meditators are trained to act as CEOs listening to CFOs during intense or confused emotional outbursts. They not make judgments about a CFO's tantrum. Let the CFO express her emotions as fully as possible. In our case, for instance, the subject, YT, feels her changing emotions through her body sensations. When she walks quickly or does the dishes swiftly, she notices that. After several observations, she gradually learns that when she starts doing things quickly it is a sign of anger. To reach this level of understanding of herself, the CIO part of YT contributes its discovery: her unconscious way of expressing anger physically through the CFO.

As the CFO is free to express herself and the space of the subject's emotional multiplicity expands, the subject's accommodation with and curiosity about the unknown are also increasingly played out by the CIO. This learned response expands one's equanimity. Such an attitude could apply to a meditator's response to everyday encounters. While the COO observes the subject's splits and eclipses with no preconceived assumptions, the CFO's emotions are validated and encouraged to bring previously hidden feelings to the surface, especially when the COO, the CIO, and the CEO all acknowledge, allow, and accept the CFO's emotions. The habit of validating emotions and recognizing those emotions enables the CIO part of the self to examine any emotions that arise.

For instance, on a Tuesday in 2016 during a regular session with BHS meditators, YT brought up her experience of asking herself “why I condemned myself and felt guilty for not being able to do more for my daughter who was studying in the United Kingdom.” In this case, her CIO’s investigating attitude opened up room for her CFO to express her feelings freely and for her COO to observe her emotions effortlessly since a curious detective like the CIO should be open to diverse voices instead of discriminating against them.

The meditative subject is expected to avoid acting on its instincts and feelings. She is expected to go from emotional reactions to rationalized responses through a process of synthesizing the voices within her during meditation. The subject is taught to allow her emotions to emerge and not to rush through the decision process. The process will be messy and emotionally charged at times, with the synthesized end result in mind.

(b) Analyses

Meditation education trains practitioners to sit quietly by themselves and look inwardly and notice inner changes, observing themselves. When conflicted selves arise, they are taught to observe how they arise. When the emotions fade away, they are trained to acknowledge it and see how it fades. Letting any experience surface and letting it run its course without controlling it is the key to non-doing observing—BHS practitioners even call this “the ‘I’ who watches.” Such corporate meetings train the self to let the subject split into various roles: the multipole (Peletz 2001) “doublings” (Butler 1997) or a multitude of selves (Benjamin 2011) that reflect, flow, and interact within the subject. This intersubjective introspection or mindfulness is encouraged to be applied

anywhere, anytime throughout one's life, according to BHS teachings.

Non-doing can be seen as the “activity of the soul” (Fromm 1956[2006], 20) compared with behavior-oriented activities such as sports, working in the garden, conducting business, etc. In a behavior-oriented activity, “the person is the slave of a passion, and his activity is in reality a ‘passivity’ because he is driven; he is the sufferer, not the ‘actor’” (Fromm 1956 [2006], 20), since the motivation of the subject is not taken into account. On the other hand, although non-doing activities seem passive from the outside according to the modern world's criterion that emphasizes the external manifestation of achievements, non-doing activities are, in fact, active affects. Non-doing activities make the subject its own master in its thoughts, according to Fromm (1956), experiencing inner freedom that is not affected by the external criterion. The inner freedom experienced through non-doing activities are the present consciousness that unfolds to the next moment, a point that settles the (changing) self into the (constant) self, requiring the subject to forget itself to engage authentically with itself and the world. By authentic, I mean an experiential self that is unfolding organically or the state in which the subject feels alive, congruent with his nature in the moment. Below I describe the “experiential self” that BHS meditators talk about as a part of meditation.

9. Settle the self into the self. Forget the self to find the self.

According to Bodhi Heart Sanctuary's meditation teachings, the subject's attempt to lose itself into feeling, observing, investigating, and synthesizing ambivalent emotions, or to *settle the self into the self*, is done through focusing on one's breathing, or letting one's attention shift from focusing on the bird chirping outside to focusing on

the sound of the floor being swept. The non-doing practice, as Buddhists believe, allows one's energy to flow freely in a relaxing manner, letting one's attention be directed to the next object spontaneously. As Hor Kwei Loon puts it, this mindfulness training that focuses on outside attractions trains meditators to apply the same principle to observing their introspective activities: consciousness shifts inwardly and outwardly, responding to the strongest stimulus one receives at the moment.

As the meditation instructions imply, forgetting social roles and social demands while turning inward during meditation enables some hidden parts of a subject to be heard and found from the inside (i.e., the CEO, the CFO, the COO, the CIO). Meditators believe that lost or missing parts of the subject can be reconnected and recognized (through the CFO): the split of the old and the new self is multiple and multi-pole. Yet, as many meditators at BHS have discovered, their emotions and thoughts have minds of their own. During this meditation process, according to devotees the subject synthesizes the estranged parts of herself, helping her to feel authentic and refreshed. As Brother Hor Kwei Loon deeply believes, meditation provides a platform on which the self meets the shadow sides of oneself. All these processes have to be carried out in non-doing mode, however, which means the subject should not directly be involved. The I or the ego should not decide anything or prevent any emotions from emerging during meditation. Usually this is the most difficult part of the process. One has to unlearn the constant doing mode to develop a new habit of *non-doing* behavior in meditation training. In the ideal non-self operation, the ego only gets in the way by attempting to control the process, which is interpreted as a type of defilement such as greed (the desire to gain fame, wealth, beauty for oneself), hatred (of poverty), or

delusion (unrealistic expectations that lead to disappointments).

10. Inner Dialogue, Imagined Selves

The corporate meeting metaphor teaches BHS practitioners to see themselves as bundles of multiple selves. These multiple selves are the residue or shadow that is not valued by the social structure within which they live. Meditation, as BHS devotees believe, allows a person to familiarize herself with her estranged selves and reach the deeper self by practicing non-doing, non-judgmental, self-empathic, inward-looking meditation. During a meditation “meeting,” conflicted perspectives are put together: those of the CEO, the COO, and the CIO are attuned to the emotions of the CFO, as Brother Hor Kwei Loon teaches in class. The CFO is the victimized self who has been ignored by the dominant voices of the selves who are over-socialized, internalizing social censorship, as I understand it based on Bodhi Heart Sanctuary’s teachings. YT mentions how her meditation helped her recognize that her guilt was tied to self-hatred:

you check yourself: you don't like yourself a lot of times. And, most of the time, you don't like yourself one¹⁵—I don't like my eyebrows. . . . I need to lose some weight. You don't like yourself.

The destructive manner in which she describes reflects her over-identification with social values. The conflict within her is pulling her in opposite directions. If she behaves in a self-centered way, she feels guilty about not fulfilling her social role. To paraphrase what YT said in the interview, she thinks that there is a dilemma between the autonomous self and the relational self within her: if she behaves according to social expectations, she feels forced; at the same time, she also feels guilty for not taking care

¹⁵ This is a particular feature of Malaysian English or “Singlish”—adding “one” at the end of the sentence. The “one” is just an added word which means the same as “you don’t like yourself.”

of herself. According to YT's self-observation, both emotions make her hate herself. YT even points out that her unresolved guilt generates self-hatred, which I observe as a form of paralysis between the autonomous self and the relational self. She reasons that guilt manifests in the over-socialized self, what I see as part of her promotion of internalized social censorship: guilt is a symptom of her over-socialized voice, which bullies and mutes her other voices. Paralysis emerges when there is a tie between the bully (the dominant socialized voice) and the CFO (who has been ignored for years and has no choice but to declare war on the bully). Self-hatred is the resentment induced by the bully side of the self that constantly shuts other voices (including the CFO's) down as well as the helpless victim side of the self for not being able to speak up or do anything to negotiate the situation.

YT's inner demands and self-judgments, are in fact, expressions of her desires, which are shaped by many contexts. Meditation, with its looking-inward technique, as YT believes, helps her connect to her needs and deeper emotions. As mentioned above, she noticed the change in hurried movements as a subtle expression of anger. She also warned me that I have to reconcile with my own guilty feelings; otherwise, I would apply the same criterion to other people. What I interpret as YT's insight from her inward-looking meditation experience is: (self-)critiques, (self-)hatred, and (self-)destructive voices and behaviors come from her 'relational self,' which imposes violence on her 'autonomous self.' It is the conflict between these two selves that causes her suffering. As Buddhist teachings inspire YT, the real suffering starts from one's desire, and the end of the suffering comes when one reduces one's desire for or attachment to things, objects, and people.

Bodhi Heart Sanctuary's instructors teach students to believe that the Buddhist desire to transcend suffering can be fulfilled only by finding the cause of the suffering: defilements (greed, hatred, delusion) or attachments, in Buddhist terms, are also forms of desire. Brother Hwat, a Malaysian Chinese man in his fifties who is responsible for distributing *dharma* books told me when conveying his understanding of Buddhism at BHS, "Buddha is so smart and wise. He got the solution to end human suffering. That is, the negation of desire to end one's suffering."

At BHS, the two instructors, brothers Hor Kwei Loon and Brother Hor Tuck Loon, promote the habit of meditation because, following the teaching of Theravada Buddhism, they believe that the root of human suffering makes enlightenment possible—seeing things from the *Right View*. The first step to enlightenment is to go inward to understand oneself and to understand the impermanent nature in everything that makes reality illusionary. For instance, anger, cited as an example in brother Hor Kwei Loon's lecture, arises often when it appears as though someone has done us wrong, according to Brother Hor. He said, "when people throw poop at you, do you want to pick it up?" In fact, anger emerges, according to Brother Kwei Loon, when people's needs are not met. This means desires are emerging, or something that is felt to be lacking. Underlying YT's suffering, then, is guilt that arises in the conflict between the relational self and the autonomous self that she tries to harmonize through her belief in *vipaka*.

Through Buddhism and meditation, YT sees how her actions and thoughts are affected by Confucianism and social expectations. By objectifying herself in meditation, she sees how her actions and attitudes toward distinct parts of herself affect her

ambivalent identities. Buddhism and *vipaka* have changed YT's ways of involvement in the Confucian patriarchy. *Vipaka* shows YT that she is born into a world where all the mechanics, assumptions, rules, roles, and structures of oppression are already in place and functioning—that is, she has nothing to do with constructing them. Since this is the setting into which she was born, she has no reason to feel guilty about or responsible for the state of the world into which she is born. She is innocent, falling into an already established system. This explanation of *vipaka* not only alleviates the guilt associated with privileged social groups (because they have accumulated good karma from generosity and doing good in their past lives) but also encourages unprivileged groups to set aside their sense of injustice and motivates them to self-reform to accumulate better karma in the next life. Moreover, *vipaka* is accurate for YT in the sense that conflicts in perceptions, tensions, and misunderstandings that surface between individuals and social identity groups do not happen in a vacuum or randomly.

Instead, such conflicts result from the historical and institutional dynamics of privilege and disadvantage. *Vipaka* points this out without accusing or blaming any existing group. Buddhism/meditation opens a ground for critical reflection on the self and its link to social ideology. Empowerment and self-transformation are generated to achieve nirvana through Buddhist self-reform. This particular self-reform requires participants to recognize their emotions in full, observing the relationships between ambivalence and alienation. When YT signed up to join a good mother club, and felt guilty and self-sabotage when her daughter from the United Kingdom called and cried over the lack of support she had experienced, she felt demoralized and disempowered as a mother. However, meditation teaches YT to understand how she has been affected

by the Chinese patriarchy.

YT understands what it means to be a member of a socially situated identity group and the roles she should play in the Confucian patriarchy. During the meditation session, she lets different parts of herself relate to one another, and learns to flip out appropriate sides in the broader social context. She learns to see what triggers her emotions and how the triggered emotions along with other multiple identities relate to one another to understand the meaning of being a member of a socially situated identity group. She sees what roles she has been socialized to play, how she is affected by issues of oppression in Confucian patriarchy as a middle-class Chinese woman, daughter, elder sister, daughter-in-law, wife, and mother.

The social roles (i.e., personhoods) have systematically trained YT to perform her social identities and duties throughout her life. These identities and duties are ascribed to her at birth through no effort or decision or choice of her own. Therefore, there is no reason to blame others or hold others responsible for the identities she has. According to YT's realization, her socialization and internalization of these social roles happen both intra-personally (how she thinks about herself) and interpersonally (how she relates to others). She did not question those identities because she was too dependent on her parents and her poor family, and she had not yet developed the ability to think for herself, so she unconsciously conformed to their views.

Vipaka provides reason to not blame YT's parents because the parents were doing the best they could to raise her, and they had only their own backgrounds from which to draw. Through self-objectification, YT sees that she has been exposed, without initial questioning, to a strong set of rules, roles, and assumptions that cannot help but

shape her sense of herself and the world. The Confucian ideology is insidious because it is woven into every structural thread in the fabric of Chinese culture. She was angry, experiencing dissonance between her autonomous desires and the duties of her roles as a daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law in the Chinese Confucius patriarchy. She has internalized the social responsibilities and learned to become her own oppressor from within: her inner critical voice. Meditation, as YT believes, opens up a channel within her to check the resonance between her ambivalent emotions and her desires as she plays multiple roles in the Chinese patriarchy.

11. Alienation, Ambivalence, Authenticity

According to YT, Buddhist meditation education has taught her to feel ambivalent emotions and allow her desires to surface. While YT treats Buddhist values, or *vipaka*, as natural law, she assigns Buddhism a significant place in her life, something larger than herself. This is analogous to her entering the “slave mindset” to obey and follow the natural rules. Instructor Hor Tuck Loon also stated at the Penang retreat that Buddhist reincarnation and *vipaka* are natural laws like Newton’s law of gravity. I see this conception of reincarnation as a natural law as an alienated or fetishized state because people misrecognize the value and source of power elsewhere rather than in themselves. Paradoxically, however, because of YT’s deep commitment to *vipaka* and her actions following the Buddhist meditation disciplines, she is able to listen to her deep desires, her contradictory selves, during meditation, which contributes to her sense of authenticity out of understanding her deep desires. Once she understands what she needs, the ambivalent emotions she experiences “fall off” on their own, as she puts it.

However, from my point of view, this “falling off” functions as an overarching framework within which YT grasps the contradictions within her emotions and complicated arrangements that are beyond comprehension because, as she suggested in the interview, through *non-doing* non-judgment-imposing, self-objectifying inward observations, she (1) meets the alienated parts of herself; (2) recognizes her disassociated, disowned, or disregarded emotions; (3) releases her emotions through compassion and acceptance of herself by non-doing objective observation; and (4) finds meaning in her suffering through the lens of *vipaka* and Buddha’s *Right View*.

12. Cultural Meanings and the Production of Experiential Selves

YT’s perceived suffering was being transformed by the Buddhist teachings at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary. According to YT’s description of her own transformation, Buddhism provides a vocabulary and framework that enable YT to interpret her personality (inwardly) and to interpret her perception of reality (externally) in a new way. This new angle or ideology is achieved by examining her conflicted selves (the autonomous self and the relational self). By imagining herself internalizing Buddha’s *Right View*, YT thinks that she is able to shift from a self-immersed, first-person narrative to a self-distanced, third-person perspective, and eventually Buddha’s view, if possible.

Taking refuge in the Buddha seems to help practitioners like YT internalize a new role and new ideology. Asians tend to cultivate a “collective self” more than inhabitants of Western societies, where individualism is valued. Rolland (1991) shows that Indian worshippers find their sense of identity through making themselves belong

to another individual, their guru. Their attachment to the guru is so strong that when the guru passes away, they commit suicide because they cannot stand the pain of being fragmented selves. They no longer see themselves as whole human beings because their identities are so firmly attached to the guru. When the guru passes away, he takes away his students' identity as humans, the very existence they rely on to be humans. He explains why Indians worship gurus because they need that narcissistic glow from the guru—"you are great, thus I am great, too, because I am part of you being your disciple"—they construct their sense of identity through belonging to another individual, their selected guru.

The psychologist Gay Winch (2013, 154) suggests that when patients ruminate on their painful experiences clinically in self-immersed narratives, they release the emotional intensity they felt during traumatic events by describing horizontally how the events occurred in first-person narratives. When asked to analyze the event from a self-distanced, third-person perspective, however, patients were reported to "reconstruct their understanding of their experience and to reinterpret it in ways that promoted new insights and feelings of closure" (Winch 2013, 154). The speed with which a patient moves into transformation may even improve if she is asked to reflect on why, instead of how, the event and hurtful feelings took place. When reflecting on *why* the event and hurtful feelings took place, the patient releases her emotions and thereby initiates the process of self-transformation. *Vipaka* provides a quick explanation of why people suffer without going too deeply into the psychological core of the problem that might offend people or scare them away by touching on sensitive parts within them, yet it provides transformational routes because it creates an objective lens that helps people

reinterpret events from new perspectives.

In addition, the sense of being victimized was diluted for YT by her firm belief in Buddhism because there is no one to blame across the generations of *vipaka* described in the previous sections. Subjects use the *vipaka* framework to explain and justify the privilege and suffering into which one is born without control since the subject is the product of previous conditions and conditioning. *It cannot be otherwise*. In this sense, Buddhism provides subjects, as YT believes, with a new framework of public symbols that they can use to unblock the “blockages of guilt and blame” or *xinjie* 心結. *Vipaka* provides tools and motivation for YT to shed part of the socialization that has led to her behaving in ways that support and maintain the oppression within her authentic self, from her viewpoint. Buddhism, for YT and other BHS regulars, provides new meanings that helps them navigate their emotional landscapes. In YT’s case, Buddhism reframes her disappointments and feelings of victimhood toward her family members and her life in general. Moreover, the framework of *vipaka* reincarnations, YT believes, helps her reinterpret the suffering in a new light that leads her to closure (for example, making peace with her mother-in-law before the latter passed away).

The reoccurring theme in Buddhist practice and the purpose of BHS practice is transcendence of suffering. The double motivation to end one’s suffering is provided for the subject by the theory of *vipaka*: suffering keeps occurring until one stops the cycle. To stop the cycle, one has to continue working on himself to objectify himself and practice seeing things as they are with the Buddhist’s *Right View*, which means a change in perspective. Moreover, *taking refuge in the Buddha*, the imaginary father figure, also allows YT and other practitioners to cultivate a self-regulating emotional

space in which to soothe their hurt feelings. *Taking refuge in the Buddha* is the first step to reforming oneself.

To recover from the prior strong permeation of social encroachment, YT first needs to create an independent third space in which to build a space for the self. However, the third space is hard to build from scratch rather than being substituted for or replaced by a new power structure that resembles the former patriarchal hierarchy. Meditation opens a third space in which YT can examine her ambivalence toward personhood (culture) and come to a more “synthetic, authentic” self that can hold ambiguities and tensions with greater composure. There is a wavering between the “clinging self” and the “let-go” self in BHS Buddhist teachings. It seems to me that a Buddhist’s interpretation of seeing all things as an illusion functions to enable a person to let go of the clinging self to approach the goal of negating desires. This goes back to the wavering of the autonomous self and the negation of the autonomous self in light of the demands of the relational self.

BHS meditators subscribe to a new (Buddhist) system, with the hope of forming a stronger self that can defend the space of the self against the forceful, intruding social forces representing the patriarchy and social structure. A new relational self helps strengthen the autonomous self against the old relational self and its produced contexts. The new relational self (constructed through Buddhist education) will, however, later affect the formation of the autonomous self, which is a process most devotees see as positive transformation. From the anthropological perspective, though, the new relational self will once again restrict the autonomous self and create tension between the two. However, meditators believe that the new relational self will be different from

the old relational self because the inward-looking technique requires the meditator to look into her internal landscape and weather its changes, to filter and choose the right social values to take in. Meditators believe that, by so doing, they can construct a third space in which to sift through the usually unfiltered permeation of social values into the self, defending the self from playing the puppet that is manipulated unconsciously by social control and the encroachment of social power.

13. Conclusion

This chapter describes how Buddhism provides a new perspective from which my respondent, YT, can see her multiple selves in meditation. This enables her to unconsciously tease out the inner social critic that she has been internalizing, understood as a product of her past lives. Her learned critical voice causes emotional entanglements such as guilt and self-hatred. This self-sabotage or self-destructive mentality and the resulting actions, aimed at earning social recognition, generate her conflicted ambivalent emotions. Her new technique in Buddhist meditation provides her with self-preservation skills that enable her to catch herself when she began joining her parents or society by critiquing herself. Her submission to and employment of Buddhist meanings and symbols, although somewhat alienated, help her see her circumstances with objectivity— “see things as they are.” She thinks Buddhist meditation helps her maintain her inner freedom, putting things in perspective rather than demonstrating her anger as at the Bersih rally, as she realizes that anger is more about her desires than about external factors that generate more negative karma in herself.

YT’s case helps us see how a female subject resonates with the prescribed social

roles of a Chinese Confucius patriarchy in Malaysia, and how she manages her ambivalence and alienated selves through her commitment to Buddhism. Through *vipaka* and objectification, she recognizes her guilt and other ambivalent emotions and finds meanings through her suffering. The guilt formation in YT's heart, as she reveals it, represents the subject's split as well as a force with the historicized web of cultural systems impinging on the individual, wrapping the subject up and into the further symbolic meaning from which one finds it difficult to be liberated. Buddhism provides a new source of liberation for YT while at the same time permeating the subject with another system of cultural webs. Through the Buddhist's perspective, YT has developed perceived "open-mindedness" to see things more clearly with the support of her imagined *Right View*. In so doing, abiding by the teachings of meditation, she cultivates the ability to coexist with her conflicted experiential selves.

The old webs that produced YT's deep-seated longing and the disheartening disjunction between her yearning and internalized social expectations are seen through a new framework, the Buddhist worldview. The new perspective contains the multitude of dissonant emotions caused by guilt. This is the core of her inner conflict between her true self and her social selfhood under Chinese patriarchy. The split between the old and the new self, and the eclipse of the old self as it transitions to the new self, are motivated by YT's belief of *vipaka* and meditation skills. Meditation, as she and other BHS devotees believe, trains subjects to reconcile contradictory selves and emotions.

In this chapter I have discussed the Buddhist experiential self from YT's point of view. As Hollan (2010) shows, there is a gap between the cultural models of the self and individual phenomenology, "a slip between self and social persona" (2010, 296).

She asks: “When we say that concepts of the self vary by culture, do we mean only that different cultures have different ways of conceptualizing and talking about the self, or do we mean something more: that aspects of subjective experience also vary considerably?” (2010, 296). She points out that anthropologists are unclear about this: “To what extent are selves culturally constituted? If selves are only partially constituted by culture, what other factors play a part in their makeup? Are those other factors—social, biopsychological, etc.—universal in nature? Even if all selves are at least partly culturally constituted, are some selves more culturally constituted than others?”

Hollan (2010) then further points out the difference between her position and Abu-Lughod's. Abu-Lughod (1986) shows that “different aspects of the self may be culturally elaborated in different contexts.” Hollan (2010) finds that the experiential self is sometimes left undeveloped and unelaborated, because it is only poorly understood by the subject and society insofar as the experiential self may directly contradict another (social) self, whose experiences are more likely to be considered normal or acceptable in the society in which one lives. I agree with Hollan that “the complexity of the relationship between cultural models and the self” (2010, 296) is a locus of subjective experience. This chapter does not aim to develop a comprehensive or conclusive analysis of either the Chinese or the Malaysian self. Rather, YT's case shows how she tries to understand and develop her experiential self in the multiple contexts of patriarchy, Confucianism, Buddhism, female personhood, and female selfhood in social lives that comprise the subject's reorientation and motivation.

CONCLUSION

Transnational and Local Cultural Synthesis in Wise Qigong and at Bodhi Heart Sanctuary

This dissertation focuses on my ethnographic study of two healing disciplines in Penang, Malaysia and elsewhere in East Asia and the institutions through which they are practiced. I explain in this section my approach to comparing Wise Qigong with Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, and the differences and similarities between the two disciplines. In the chapters that focus on Wise Qigong, I present many informants' experiences, while in the chapter on Bodhi Heart Sanctuary, I present the experiences of the subject YT almost exclusively as I explore her incorporation of the teachings of instructors Hor Kwei Loon and Hor Tuck Loon. BHS has a relatively shorter history and fewer publications than Wise Qigong, which has developed its institutions systematically. The more extensive treatment of Wise Qigong in my dissertation reflects Wise Qigong's status as a larger transnational organization with a longer institutional history than BHS. As a result, my work with Wise Qigong was of longer duration, including my three months of fieldwork in Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Moreover, most BHS members whom I interviewed offered relatively limited descriptions of their experiences, whereas YT, as a person who had trained herself to be introspective and expressive of her own reflections, articulated her experiences extensively and in detail as she slipped between her inner self and her social persona. This is why I present YT's self-reflections in greater depth than I did with many of the Wise Qigong practitioners' experiences in Hong Kong, Penang, and Shenzhen.

To be sure, Wise Qigong and BHS complement each other in various ways. Wise Qigong in Penang is a local branch of a Beijing-based Chinese institution that synthesizes traditional Chinese philosophies and bodily practices. Wise Qigong, without an official headquarters after Pang Ming's confinement to house arrest in China, offers a more unified and systematic doctrine than Bodhi Heart's service-oriented framework. BHS is a local Penang institution with a flexible doctrine emphasizing compassion and providing classrooms and dormitories to support international religious healing activities. Yet, BHS and Wise Qigong are both global religious healing institutions desiring to expand their influence, and both are open to international connections and religious syncretism.

BHS, a place of Theravada Buddhist healing that is frequented mostly by Malaysian Chinese, has adopted Confucian values. BHS also incorporates Daoist and Hindu discourses through yoga and qigong classes: BHS even invites Wise Qigong Masters and other alternative healing instructors to teach healing sessions. For its part, Wise Qigong, with Confucianism and Daoism teachings at its core, is also affected by Buddhist values.

Review of Central Themes of Wise Qigong and BHS

In this dissertation, I delineate and explicate how Malaysian Chinese cope with their suffering or desires through religious healing education at BHS and the Wise Qigong Association. Both schools have unique ways of diagnosing "blockages" that index personal and social distress. Wise Qigong places a physical and psychological spin on healing, suggesting that blockages prevent practitioners from uniting with the best object, qi. In contrast, BHS sees blockages primarily as mental blocks in a person's

history of reincarnation, manifested in the present in one's resistance to seeing things from the Buddha's *Right View*, the ultimate ideal alterity.

Wise Qigong and BHS meditation education evoke practitioners' unconscious, deep desires and emotions to transcend the old perspectives they had adopted but that cause suffering. The new alterity feeds a range of new cultural discourses into the self to create meanings and shape the self into a new being: a process through which the old self replaces its dysfunctional worldview for an external system, an ideology, and a perspective. Both Wise Qigong and BHS-style Buddhism promise to help devotees transcend their suffering. Such transcendence can take place, however, only when devotees believe in it or place value in the healing system.

Wise Qigong Masters promote the doctrine that believing is efficacy, or *xin ze ling* 信則靈, under its putatively atheist philosophy that follows Communist Party guidelines. Wise Qigong nevertheless embodies a religious essence (demanding belief to make qigong work) while referencing atheism to rid itself of what it sees as the superstitious elements of traditional qigong to help build the "New China." For her part, YT from BHS also firmly believes in the *vipaka* reincarnation system, so much so that she had stopped eating crabs after being told that she herself was a crab in a past life, although she also harbored some skepticism because she cannot verify whether the reincarnation system is true or not. The self actively inserts value into the new alterity, which appears to be the best object the self can use to harmonize its conflicts with social others and overcome the sense of emptiness that it feels due to the divide between the self and the Other.

Both BHS and Wise Qigong project a better future for their practitioners, offering something like a utopia in everyday practice that demands that they relinquish or negate their desires. They teach their practitioners to “unlearn” old instinctual habits by abiding by the alterity of the new law (Lacan and Fink 2004) to transcend those old habits and their old selves. The logic of transcendence manifests in the invention of traditions designed to liberate the present self. In Wise Qigong’s teachings, for example, one tradition includes contemporary science. Wise Qigong positions itself as a form of syncretism of traditional Chinese philosophies and bodily practices that has the potential to liberate Chinese practitioners from the limits of science.

BHS’s doctrine of *vipaka*/karma implies that the past (one’s accumulated misdeeds) result in today’s mishaps, but practitioners can transcend their past errors by seizing the present to do good and eventually achieve nirvana. Both Wise Qigong and BHS doctrines call for the negation or control of one’s desires to reach the ideal human condition, be it nirvana in the case of BHS or the advanced way of life as a superior person in Wise Qigong. In both cases these doctrines project an alterity through which to transcend present suffering or desires by negating desires through ascetic practices that demand self-control and self-submission. In Wise Qigong, the negation of desires includes reducing consumption of sex, sleep and food; in BHS, one negates one’s desires by controlling attachments such as greed, hatred and illusion (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*).

Both religious healing systems, borrowing elements from Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and other traditions, teach their students to observe the play of desire by negating their mundane appetites and pursuing the ultimate desire, connecting to

Buddha's *Right View*, or *hunyuan qi*, the "primordial energy," to fill in the void of the emptiness of modern life. Such self-help therapy, as a self-reform activity carried out through religious healing education in Wise Qigong and BHS, manifests a universal psychology that humans experience: the divided self, which reflects the ambivalence inherent to the choice between fulfilling one's own desires or the Other's desires.

Many middle-class men and women in Malaysia identify with an ego-ideal through religious healing that replaces reliance on recognition by one's biological parents or other people. Such a condition can perhaps be traced back to the fort/da pattern (Freud 1990), which originates in a game a child plays to cope with the pain of not receiving his mother's attention and of feeling empty and lonely. The desire to be recognized, to confirm one's existence through the gaze of the Other, to feel one has value, is an element of the psyche shared by many humans (Hegel 1979; Lacan and Fink 2004). The beautiful quality of religion, according to Kant (Gasché 2003), provides a calming aesthetic that is both pleasing and enables humans to grasp the deep, mysterious world that defies human comprehension. Both Buddha's *Right View* as a means of reaching nirvana and Wise Qigong's *hunyuan qi* as a means of tapping into a world of abundance and happiness offer promises with principles that can help practitioners navigate life's vicissitudes.

Yet these two transnational schools synthesize conflicted systems of knowledge to attract practitioners with a wide range of tastes and thought patterns. Each creates aesthetic contexts that appeal to middle-class Chinese language users. These two schools' adaptive syncretism attracts broader memberships by letting practitioners recognize certain aspects of the doctrines that suit them while ignoring what does not

suit them. This, of course, results in confirmation bias. What lies underneath the differences is the continuation of a Confucian logic that binds practitioners in similar ways to Chinese culture and the associated social hierarchy.

Paradoxically, it is submitting the self to the ego-ideal that makes self-healing identity construction possible, especially in Asian societies (Kahut 1977; Kakar and Sharma 2014; Rolland 1988) in which the “we-self” is more prominent than in Western countries, in which the individualized-self is the ideal model. The practitioners of Wise Qigong and BHS identify themselves with their gurus—Grand Master Pang Ming and the Buddha—as glowing higher-level selves to which they attach themselves to transcend the ordinary and somewhat dysfunctional we-selves they experience with social others such as mothers-in-law, family members, and colleagues. By identifying with a higher alterity, or the “best object,” YT and Wise Qigong practitioners transcend their old selves. YT, based on her observation of the play of her desires through Buddhist symbols and *vipaka*, would say that this experience has enabled her to bridge the gap between her experienced self and the cultural model which she desires to transcend through Buddhism.

Both Wise Qigong and BHS gain their influence and legitimacy in part through archival accumulation. Wise Qigong has an early history of publishing magazines and books, conducting press conferences, teaching professional qigong classes for experts and professors, and disseminating photographs, audio recordings, and video recordings to people and their networks. BHS also publicizes itself by publicizing photographs, sending out e-mail newsletters, posting and sending pictures on social media and updating its official website. These are distinct but similar ways of accumulating

documentation to make the groups known to public outsiders while also connecting to and confirming solidarity with insiders.

Within both groups, politics and competition over the legitimacy of translating the doctrines occur. At BHS, Hor Tuck Loon's blending of Christianity into his understanding of Theravada Buddhism is constantly being challenged by both BHS members and people in and outside Buddhist and Christian communities. Wei's and Lee Wooi Bok's diverse Wise Qigong interpretations that diverge from official teachings have caused the president of Wise Qigong in Malaysia, Mr. Wai Seng Kei, and Pang Ming's first disciple, Sung, to negotiate over control of a unified doctrine of Wise Qigong teaching.

Both Wise Qigong and BHS teach their practitioners to observe the play of their desires, aiming to achieve new selves that are less affected by emotions but benefit from stronger social connections. Each provides a cultural system as an ideal alterity in which practitioners must believe deeply to transcend their own webs of desire. That both systems teach practitioners to value an alterity—Buddha's *Right View* and Wise Qigong's *hunyuan qi*, “the primordial energy”—displaces the power of change that comes from within themselves. It is precisely through such displacement of recognition, however—their identifying with and projecting onto the best object—that both their transcendence of suffering and their connection with the larger social world occur. The formation of a new Chinese self within a Chinese cultural context constructed in specific coordinates of time and space differs from individual to individual among Chinese women and men in Penang, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen. Thus, based on my observations, I find that individuals survive these collectivist traditions.

EPILOGUE

Early on during my field research, I found that taking notes and recording conversations became a problem when the local ethnic Chinese Malaysian Wise Qigong and Bodhi Heart Sanctuary practitioners with whom I was engaged figured out that I was seriously regarding them as a research topic, using scholarships to stay around for a year or longer to “hang out” with them. The meditators and qigong practitioners whom I studied began demanding my presence with full attention and participation as a learner. The boundary that I wanted to maintain as a researcher was challenged by the locals again and again.

The difficulty of studying modern religious movements lies in the overlapping interest in answering philosophical questions and completing existential quests that middle-class interlocutors and we academics share. I noticed both similarities and differences between the analytics we employed. When research subjects are highly educated and socialized in highly developed systems of rationalization that in some ways mirror our professional, non-religious academic analytics, the boundary demarcating a researcher’s position as a scholar becomes blurred because the people under study unconsciously demand recognition and identification when the researcher–subject relationship deepens.

While the analytics deployed in the two worlds (academe and the spiritual industry) need not conflict, they sometimes lead to dilemmas that are perhaps more troubling to us as anthropologists interested in how life becomes meaningful to people than to the seekers themselves. My interlocutors may not agree with my interpretation of the situation, as I am positioned between the two worlds, delineating what I see in

the space where they overlap. This research experience has taught me to balance the intensive immersion that is characteristic of qualitative research with the detached objectivity of quantitative research because quantitative methods contribute to a broader view with numbers and charts that complement the descriptive, literary strengths of ethnographies.

As I close this dissertation, I wish to express my gratitude for the generosity of my interlocutors, who so willingly shared their lives with me. I could not have completed this study without them, my advisors or my colleagues. Any value found in this dissertation is to their credit. All mistakes are mine.

GLOSSARY OF ENGLISH TO CHINESE TRANSLATION

A Global Discussion of Marxism	世界馬克思主義大會
A reversible reaction	練功反應
A rigid, scientifically trained attitude to examine facts	嚴謹求實的科學態度
A strong sense of security	安全感
Acceptance of one's destiny or fate	認命
An advanced qigong class	提高培訓班
Attaining the ideal of a peaceful world and walking on the main path	共同奔向大同世界 大道康莊
Beidaihe Qigong Hospital	北戴河氣功療養院
Beijing University of Chinese Medicine	北京中醫藥大學
Big brother	大師兄
Bring Your Soul Home With You after Work	把心帶回家
Classics of Poetry	詩經
Communist	共產黨員

Cui Hao	崔顥
Cultivate his character or virtue	涵養道德
Distinguished professor	特聘教授
Energy in the theory of matter, qi, and mind	形氣神
Establishing a qi-field	組場
External natural qi	外氣
External qi from humans' limbs	軀體混元氣
Extreme	極端
Gabungan Persatuan Wise Qigong Malaysia	馬來西亞智能氣功聯合會
Good message	好消息
Government official	公務員
Guo Lin Qigong	郭林氣功
Haogong	耗功
Hard qigong	硬氣功

Harmonious, happy, natural, and elegant	和諧 歡暢 自然 端莊
Hebei Wise Qigong College	河北智能氣功學院
Huaxia Wise Qigong Training Center	華夏智能氣功培訓中心
Hunyuan qi	混元氣
Hunyuan qi's significance in Daoist practices	混元氣在道教生命修煉上的 意義
Hunyuan zhengti	混元整體
Improve their practice in Wise Qigong by learning Wise Qigong theory	理上開竅
Improving a human's intellect	開智
Internal qi from humans' organs	臟真混元氣
Internal qi neiqi	內氣
Introduction to Wise Qigong	智能氣功入門
Jianxi University of Traditional Chinese Medicine	江西中醫大學
Jizu Mountain	雞足山
Kwong Ming Yit Poh	光明日報

Laqi	拉氣
Lim Guan Eng	林冠英
Liu Guizhen	劉貴珍
Live Life Passionately	用愛護生命
Maneuvering qi	調動氣
Mansion of the Yellow Bird	黃鶴樓
Matter, qi, and mind	形氣神
Meditation accompanied by gymnastic movements	動功
Meditation without movement	靜功
Ministry of Health	衛生部
Mong Kok	旺角
Mount Huangshan	黃山
Nan Tou Senior High School	南投中學
National Games of the People's Republic of China	全運會

Nonsense	胡說八道
Ordinary people	凡人
Pain and Blockage	痛則不通 通則不痛
Pang He Ming	龐鶴鳴
Pang Ming	龐明
Persatuan Qigong HuaXia Pualau Pinang	華夏氣功智能文化中心
Persatuan Senaman Wise Qigong Malaysia	馬來西亞智能氣功總會
Positive mindset	想好
Qigong deviation	走火入魔
Qinhuang Island	秦皇島
Redirect herself back to the main path	歸中
Respect for the Dao and the teacher	重道尊師
Scientific research	科（學）研（究）
Security	安全感

Senior mentor	資深導師
Shijia Zhuang	石家莊
Soft qigong	軟氣功
Stable	穩定
Teresa Teng Li Chun	鄧麗君
The Advanced Way of Life	第二套生命模式
The Beijing Qigong Research Society	北京氣功研究會
The Body Mind Form	形神庄
The Book of Changes or Yiching	易經
The Chinese Medical Management Bureau in Hebei province	河北省中醫聯合管理局
The Chinese Wise Qigong Center of Healing and Recovery	河北華夏智能氣功康復中心
The Chinese Wise Qigong Research Institute	河北華夏智能氣功研究所
The Confucian middle path	中道
The Confucian's Way to become a Saint	儒家內聖修持輯要

The Confucius Institute and Chinese Cultural Expansion	孔子學院與中國文化傳播初探
The Crane-Flying Movement	鶴翔庄
The Diaoyutai State Guest House in Beijing	北京釣魚台國賓館
The Great Together	禮運大同篇
The Guidelines to Cultivate the Body in Wise Qigong	智能氣功調身要旨
The Health Department of Hebei Province	河北省衛生廳
The Importance of Qi in Acupuncture Practices	針灸心法淺談
The Lift-Qi Up Method	捧氣貫頂法
The Phoenix College	鳳凰書院
The Principle of Traditional Practices of Dao	傳統修身法理
The Qigong Healing Practices	氣功療法實踐
The Secret of Breathing in Wise Qigong Practice	智能氣功調息秘要
The Secret to Discipline the Heart in Wise Qigong	智能氣功修心秘意
The Special Qigong Class for Experts and Scholars program	專家學者教授班

The Special Qigong Class for Experts and Scholars	專家教授班
The Three-in-One Principle of Essence, Qi, and Spirit	精氣神合一大法
The Way to Prove and Live a Zen Life through Meditation	禪宗證悟理法輯要
The Wise Qigong Science Research Institute in China	中國智能氣功科學研究所
The misleading teachings	誤人子弟
The qi of consciousness of the mind	意元體
The qigong “zone”	氣功態
The smallest unit of hunyuan qi or hunyuan zi	混元子
The state in which the practitioner is so focused in her practice that she forgets herself	得意忘形
The three-level materiality theory	三層物質理論
The whistling sound of progress and development	大鳴大放
The yin and yang energy had not been divided	陰陽未判
Through an external connection to qi	開放性功法
To liberate and bring happiness to all mankind	造福人類

To prove the Truth of Dao	證道
Tongji University	同濟大學
Tri-Matter Theory or The Theory of Three Layers of Substance	三層物質理論
True hermit	真人真隱
Unicorn Outdoor Mountain Resort	麒麟山療養院
Using your body to observe the Zhen Qi and the Qi pulse	用身體觀察真氣和氣脈
When diverse qi blends well into one, everything works efficaciously	混元靈通
Wise Qigong Camp	智能氣功生活營
Wise Qigong Science for College Graduates with Pang Ming's Instructors	智能氣功大專教材與名師講解系列
Wise Qigong Science for Instructors	智能氣功科學教材
Wise Qigong "squatting" movement	蹲牆
Witnessing and proving the pathway as correct, as the ancestors claim it to be as you walk in it	證道
Wudang Mountains	武當山
Yangshen or nurturing the body	養身

Yellow Emperor's Canon of Classic Medicine	黃帝內經
Yin Zhen	尹真
Zen Buddhist	禪宗
Zhen Shi Yin	甄士隱
Zhen Shi Yin	真事隱
Zhen Yin	甄隱

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