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## **The Subtle-Energy-Body as a Self-Organising System: An Enquiry into the Lived-Experience of TCM Qigong Practitioners**

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### **Abstract**

*According to enactive cognitive science (Varela, Thompson), we are not just born into a given, pre-existing world. We discover, make sense of, and shape the world of which we are part, or, as Merleau-Ponty has it, we incorporate and synthesise the world of our lived-body. As self-organising, autonomous beings, we create and are formed by our environment, and are drawn towards equilibrium and wellbeing through our seamless experience of living in the world. The literature of phenomenology has explored this outward-oriented dimension of experience extensively. However, less explored is the interior lived-world that belongs to the traditions of Chinese wellbeing practices such as Health Qigong (Jiànshēn Qìgōng 健身气功) and Traditional Chinese Medicine Qigong (TCM Qigong) (Zhōngyī Qìgōng 中医气功) whose aim is to restore the natural balance of life-energy.*

*Over recent years, these forms of exercise have been the subject of clinical research, with good clinical evidence for improved health and wellbeing. Such studies are immensely valuable in closing the cultural gap between the different world views of western medicine and TCM, and support the promotion of these practices for health maintenance and restoration. However, the clinical research methodology of these studies tends to be reductive insofar as it generally does not look beyond biological or psychological mechanisms of action to account for health improvements, passing over the principles of TCM that provide their own account of wellbeing.*

*This paper draws on phenomenology – in particular, the work of Merleau-Ponty relating to perception, and Drew Leder’s work on the body – to examine the diary entries of a selection of volunteers who, during Covid-19 lockdown in Spring 2021,*

*took part in a research project into wellbeing by Northumbria University Informatics Wellbeing Team, and learned a new TCM Qigong exercise routine.*

*We argue that, by turning their sense perceptions inwards towards new dimensions of the subtle body created by TCM Qigong practice, participants discover the positively thematised body as a self-organising space for the restoration of health. This model of lived-body wellbeing contrasts with the objectified body of medical science. Moreover, it also contrasts with some of phenomenology's more limited depictions of the lived-body as thematised only in illness and absent from experience when human endeavours are flowing freely.*

**Key words:**

TCM Qigong, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Wellbeing, Phenomenology, Lived-body, Self-care, Health maintenance.

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## Introduction: background to the research project

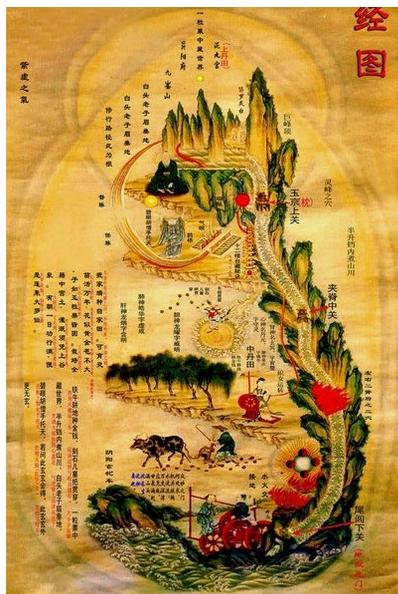


Image: *Nèijīng tú* 内经图 : Daoist inner landscape

“The human body is the image of a country” implies a relation that transcends the simple metaphor. The emphasis on *country* reflects the interdependence of the human being and his environment, as well as Taoism’s fundamental teaching that favors the interior over the exterior.

Kristofer Schipper *The Taoist Body*

During eight weeks in spring 2021, in partnership with Northumbria University Wellbeing Informatics Team, the Confucius Institute at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David carried out a research project into the efficacy of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Qigong (*zhōngyī qìgōng* 中医气功). As well as assessing the immediate benefits on wellbeing, the research also sought to understand the experiences of the participants and how they relate to TCM’s model of wellbeing.

The project timing coincided with the period of Covid-19 restrictions in the UK, providing an opportunity to recruit participants who were looking for ways of improving their mental and physical wellbeing. The research project emerged following the initial promising results of a previous, smaller study into this form of Qigong exercise (Sice, 2020). The project had the advantage of adapting the initial data-gathering tools from the 2020 study in order to capture qualitative data on distinctive features of TCM Qigong. The analysis of the quantitative data gathered is the subject of a separate paper yet to be published (Sice, 2021). However, key to the focus of this paper is the qualitative data gathered in participants’ practice diaries.

## Demographic profile of the participants

An initial 170 participants from the UK and Europe volunteered to take part in the study. The predominant demographic of the participants was white, female, aged between 45 and 74. The largest number of participants had little or no previous experience of Qigong or Taiji. Although the participant group also included some Taiji and Qigong regular practitioners, none had specific knowledge of TCM Qigong. The focus for the discussion that follows comes from the diary entries of participants who had some previous experience of Taiji or Qigong. Additional criteria for selection were that they must have completed the exercise at least twice a week and provided detailed information about their experiences in their practice diaries.

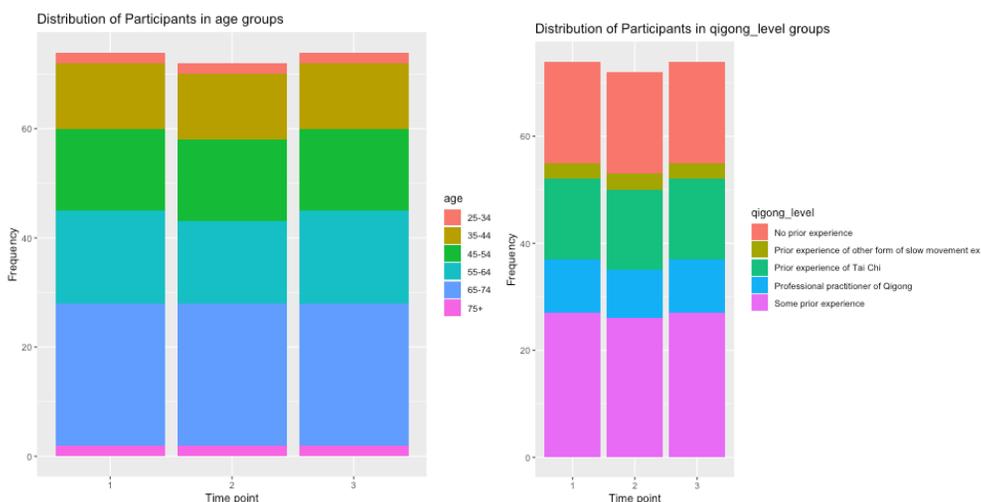


Figure 1 Demographic distribution of participants (Zeyneb Kurt 2021)

## TCM Qigong Exercise

Participants initially learnt the TCM Qigong routine through a mixture of video recordings and weekly live, remotely-delivered sessions with the TCM Qigong tutor. Additionally, the learning experience developed further as participants' questions about the theory and practice were fed into each week's live practice, enabling strong student/tutor interaction and promoting increasingly rich understanding of the practice. Volunteers completed an online practice diary after each session and commented on their experiences under five headings: body awareness; focussed attention; *qi* awareness; relational awareness, and sense of meaning and satisfaction.

The specific practice selected for the study was the Lung-Strengthening Qigong Exercise (*jiàn fèi fùyuán dǎo yǐn fǎ* 健肺复原导引法) designed by the research project partner, Jiangxi University of Chinese Medicine (JUCM). This form was chosen for the targeted effect of the practice on the organs most at risk from potential Covid-19 infection while also working on whole person wellbeing. A short overview of Qigong practices in general may be helpful to distinguish TCM Qigong from other forms of Qigong exercise.

Qigong exercise belongs to a family of self-care (*yǎngshēng* 养生) practices that originated from Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, and have continued to be practised over millennia as efficacious health maintenance routines. They embrace many of the features of Traditional Chinese Medicine such as principles of *yin* and *yang*, the five elements, and of course, *qi* energy. The term Qigong (literally, *qi*-work) is a modern coinage that emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century and was used to refer to breath-based health practices that at the time were gradually gaining official status in China through government regulation (Hsu, 1999). While there are many forms of Qigong exercise, only relatively few have become known in the West over the past couple of decades. These belong to what is known in China as Health Qigong (*jiànshēn qìgōng* 健身气功) and include forms such as the Eight Section Brocade (*bā duàn jīn* 八段锦) and Five Animals Qigong (*wǔ qínxi* 五禽戏), and have commonly featured in Western published clinical research. TCM Qigong (*zhōngyī qìgōng* 中医气功) is a relative newcomer to the Qigong scene in recent years. Aligned even more closely with Traditional Chinese Medicine principles than Health Qigong, TCM Qigong has several distinguishing features that also show the influence of Western medicine, for instance, the emphasis on physiology. However, the practice retains the core values of its Chinese heritage.

It is worth quoting the definition of TCM Qigong provided by Professor Zhang Wenchun:

TCM Qigong is based on a holistic outlook on life. Through the active exercise of introspective consciousness, it transforms, perfects, and improves the life functions of the human body, turning natural instincts into conscious and intelligent practices.

(Zhang, 2020)

Central to the practice is the transformation of *qi* energy by the practitioner, as external *qi* is gathered into the body through consciously directed movement. According to Pang Ming, the founding father of *Zhīnéng Qìgōng* (智能气功), (incidentally, also providing the direct lineage to TCM Qigong), the energy exchange between the *qi* of human beings and that of environment is a metabolic process where *qi* is the interface for matter, energy, and information (Pang, 1992, 2014).

The Lung-Strengthening Qigong Exercise is characterised by slow movement and a meditative state of mind and combines dynamic elements with its largely static method of practice. Core to the practice is the focus on entering ‘*Qi State*’ (*qì gōng zhuàng tài* 气功状态), akin to ‘being in the zone’. This is achieved through the harmonisation of the three elements that constitute the human being, namely: body (*xíng* 形), mind (*shén* 神), and *qi* (气) energy.

The whole routine consists of four sections bookended by an opening and closing sequence, and is performed using slow hand and arm movements. The exercise places equal importance on the physical and mental aspects (although there are more advanced variations of the practice with differing emphases), (Pang, 1992). The principle is that of: ‘where the mind goes, *qi* follows.’ The focus is on the mind following the physical movement and becoming absorbed in the enaction of that movement. The physical movement in turn embodies *qi* energy whose dual phases of opening to release internal *qi* and closing to gather external *qi* enable energy exchange. The exercise is normally performed in a standing position. Participants have their eyes shut and follow the instructor’s guided visualisation. As the location of energy centres in the body, as well as internal physical organs is not so familiar to many, throughout the eight weeks of practice participants were also taught the position of the three *dāntián* (丹田) energy-centres, other key acupoints, and were shown diagrams and models of the lungs and kidneys.

### **Recent research into Qigong Exercise**

There has been much research into the clinical effectiveness of Qigong over the past decade. Byeonsang Oh's meta-analysis of 2020 identified and screened 996 published studies that investigated the effect of Taiji and Qigong practice on the immune system. Klein's study (2017) cites 107 studies which produced strong evidence for the effectiveness of Qigong exercise in medical conditions such as falls associated with poor balance, cancer care and cardiac care. Wang's meta-analysis from 2013 examines studies of the psychological benefits of Qigong practice arising from eliciting the relaxation response, and also refers to studies targeting conditions such as hypertension.

One of the most commonly encountered issues in such meta-analyses is the lack of precise classification of the specific form of Qigong being practiced in the studies, and the frequent combination of data from studies where different forms of Qigong exercise were used (for example, Taiji and Qigong as in Oh's 2020 study). Although from the same family, the aims of these practices may differ considerably (for instance, longevity may be one desired outcome of self-care (*yǎngshēng*) practices that are common in Health Qigong), as does their actual execution and consequent effect on wellbeing.

A further area requiring more precise study is the ethnic background of participants. Asian participants' cultural heritage may predispose them to embracing the practice more rigorously and with greater expectation of efficacy. Whilst pointing to positive outcomes for participants, these studies remain inconclusive as to whether there is something intrinsic to the practice itself – that is, whether it is the balancing of the body's subtle energies – that may account for the significant results in improvement of medical conditions or mental health and wellbeing.

Inevitably, clinical studies are caught in one of the dilemmas of western medicine which is that the parameters for measuring health improvements are bound by the scientific theory and technology of the time. Science sets the gold standard for clinical research to be the double-blind test carried out in a laboratory or clinical setting. Within this paradigm, the lived-experience of the practices which in many studies are carried out in a wide variety of settings such as parks, gardens, or a village hall, is often considered anecdotal, subjective, and lacking consistency. It is not surprising, therefore, that clinical trials have limited means of assessing the premises upon which TCM is built. Interestingly, studies note the current limitations in instrumentation for detecting meridians, acupoints and energy centres

(Klein, 2017), with the consequence that the subtle-energy-body remains unexplored in the West where there is little commercial motivation for investing in such research technology. On the other hand, research bodies in China, such the Qigong Centre at Jiangxi University of Chinese Medicine, are rapidly developing infrared and terahertz *qi*-monitoring technology as science continues to be a driving force for understanding Traditional Chinese Medicine and establishing it on an evidential footing (Zhang, 2020).

However, by turning to phenomenology as a useful art for capturing first person human experience, and by setting aside any cultural presumptions about the world view of TCM, we can enter into the lived-experience of the participants in the Qigong research project to understand their reported improvements in wellbeing. In doing so, phenomenology – an established approach in the West that has influenced a wide range of disciplines from systems theory to neuroscience and economics – may create a bridge to the TCM model of wellbeing and help to better integrate its practices as effective wellbeing interventions.

### **Elucidating experience: the phenomenological approach**

*The lived body, lived mind, and lived environment are all thus part the same process, the process by which one enacts one's world (in phenomenology speak, "brings forth a world").*

(Rosch, 2016)

*Overall, I find myself with more sustained energy levels, I can do more during the day without getting too tired, an improved quality of sleep, a calmer state of mind, more 'connected' to the whole in general and less fearful of what I can't see. My kidney function has improved (from my viewpoint) which led to improving my quality of life. I feel that I am making progress towards improving my life/health.*

Participant ID 100

*Yes recent practice makes me feel better connected with my body and my mind. It has just occurred to me that it's probably this new practice which is helping me move on. I have some issues in my life which my mind is wanting to resolve for a long time, and this week they are much in my mind in a "working on how to resolve them", so although they are not pleasant things to sort out, I am now working on how to move on from them.*

Participant ID 61

Just as Qigong practice has its particular lineages, so phenomenology has its various trajectories within European philosophy. Husserl is considered to be its founding father, establishing as a valid basis for enquiry the study of how phenomena are perceived and experienced. Husserlian phenomenological bracketing (*epoché*) allows focus on first-person experiences whilst side-stepping any charge of solipsism. The experiences of others are also understood to be those of other consciousnesses (Hammond et al., 1991). Moreover experience, mutually shared and understood by human beings, constitutes our lived-world with its contents and meanings.

Whilst Husserl's work has been hugely influential in the development of many disciplines, including some aspects of systems theory, it is, however, largely to Merleau-Ponty's work that we turn for a phenomenological approach that is most appropriate for mapping the experiences of Qigong practitioners. Taking case histories of clinical patients exhibiting various psychopathologies Merleau-Ponty compared these with the lived-experience of non-pathological, 'ordinary' cases. His work provides an extensive examination of the role of sense-perception in movement, and a ground-breaking account of embodiment as the incorporation of a lived-world. For this reason, his phenomenological approach provides illuminating ways of exploring Qigong practice as a therapeutic body-based exercise.

Applied to qualitative research, the phenomenological approach necessarily focuses on language as the primary medium for shared experience. This may be in the form of texts, conversations, interviews, and, in the case of the Qigong

programme, diary entries. However, distinct from a hermeneutic approach where a text is mined for hidden meanings, the phenomenological approach drawn on in this study focuses quite specifically on identifying the role of sense perception in the experience of Qigong practice. Diary entries include extensive descriptions of physical sensations and emotional states relating to specific phases of the practice routine. Such emergent properties of first-person experience constitute the richness of meaning in life which clinical research may overlook, and which quantitative data alone may fail to capture: ‘Facts of self-experience cannot be translated into objective facts without a decisive loss’ (Fuchs, 2018). Using phenomenological methodology we may legitimately work with participants’ diary entries to tease out the dynamics of their experience. Being intertwined with the lived-world, the first-person perspective has immediacy, authenticity, and credibility.

A final point to make about the phenomenological approach is that it takes into account not only the dynamics of perception and movement, but also acknowledges the cultural dimensions of lived-experience. In crossing cultural boundaries to fully engage with a practice inherited from a set of millennia-old Chinese traditions, participants engage in a creative process of reimagining and re-experiencing wellbeing from a new perspective. A key aspect of this perspective challenges many Western ideas of embodiment. The underlying principles of Chinese health-cultivation practices involve at least a basic appreciation of the body’s subtle-energy field of meridians and energy centres, and a preparedness to think in terms of these during Qigong practice. In this context, the concept of the lived-body, as articulated by phenomenology provides us with a starting point for inquiry.

### **Embodied cognition: the body as the ground of experience**

In analysing the participants’ experiences, then, we look first to the lived-body as the ground of experience. Before they can fully experience the benefits of the practice, participants have to master the physical movements, concentrating on the correct posture and gestures. In this specific practice (and in contrast with other forms of Qigong), minimal attention is given to breathing. Instead, focus is mainly directed to the body (one of the three elements that combine to form the living person), as well as sensing and feeling. Moreover, the means and purpose of Qigong cultivation is *bodily*, working on specific patterns of energy flow or blockage to optimise the whole of a person’s life. My emphasis on starting with the body is therefore also coherent with phenomenology’s descriptions of the

fundamental features of human behaviour. As Merleau-Ponty (1945) reminds us: ‘The body is our medium for having a world.’

The lived-world of first-person experience is characterised by *embodied* cognition, the means by which the enaction of our intentions, interests and life-designs is realised. Fuchs brings out this dimension when he writes, ‘Embodiment does not come as an external addition to perception, but, rather, it is constitutive for it’ (Fuchs, 2018). Upon closer scrutiny, several more basic constituents of experience can be teased out.

Maturana and Varela (1987) have developed the insights of phenomenology and encapsulated them at an organismic level in the concept of autopoiesis – that is, the processes of self-organisation that are common to all living beings. These processes involve motility and sensorimotor perception flowing from the organism into the surrounding environment, and, in the case of human beings, consciousness and intentionality giving rise to the enaction of a lived-world. The latter is the point of departure from generality of experience to individuation and the emergence of a sense of self. The underlying component structures of experience are summarised by Merleau-Ponty: ‘Visual representations, tactile data and motility are three phenomena which stand out sharply within the unity of behaviour’ (1945). It is a feature of self-organised entities that there is a constant back-and-forth flow of perception and movement towards, and from the surrounding environment. It is *from* our lived body that environment-oriented perception arises and feeds back *to* our lived-body a World which we incorporate and flow from (Leder, 1990). The key features of experience are also reflected in the processes at play in the Qigong practice. The practice distils elements of perception, movement, awareness of environment into a precise routine for cultivating the basic processes of life.

### **The paradox of embodied experience**

Whilst phenomenology reveals a sound basis for exploring the role of embodiment in first-person experience, it has, however, given the body a rather problematic twist, with consequences for the exploration of wellbeing. Paradoxically, the body is both central and peripheral to lived-experience. In our normal ‘outwardly oriented’ perception of the world, phenomenology observes that we pay little attention to the body itself. For example, we do not consciously ‘instruct’ our legs to perform the action of walking. We simply enact walking across the room with a set purpose in mind, other than directing the movement of our legs. So, failure to

pay attention to the body is not an act of absent-mindedness. It is a normal feature of enacting the lived-world that the body is generally *not* explicitly experienced. Our body, as the medium for experience is ‘the hidden form of being oneself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). This ambivalent quality of the lived-body is also referred to by Fuchs: ‘But if we take our self-experience of life as the starting point, the peculiar thing is that this experience lies precisely in a self-withdrawal. Our enactment of life is removed from immediate self-observation and always precedes any act of reflective determination’ (Fuchs, 2018).

Leder’s (1990) work is of particular interest in exploring how this aspect of embodiment is reversed in illness. In describing the ‘alien presence’ of a body in pain Leder highlights how our normally frictionless ability for enaction can suddenly break down when faced with the body’s inability to function because of injury or pain. The body, or a specific body part is brought sharply into focus and becomes the subject of attention and concern. In these cases, seen in the context of the underlying structures of first-person experience, sense perception changes directionality. In illness, we shift focus specifically to our body, immersed in a bodily world tinged with pain, medical interventions and a suspension of our normal concerns and activities. Fuchs (2018) gives further nuance to this point suggesting that capacity for enaction within the lived-world is compromised, and the lived-body (*Lieb*) is transformed into an objectified physical body (*Körper*).

The diagram below (*Fig.2*) illustrates the dual mode of embodiment that characterises normal experience. On the one hand, our lived-world is one of *capacity*. In the lived-world, we are able enact immediate plans, actions and responses. In this mode the body is the *background* from which sensorimotor perception arises. On the other hand, when the potential for enacting the lived-world becomes limited by *incapacity*, such as a broken leg for example, our perception is forced back to the source of malfunction and the body becomes *foregrounded*.

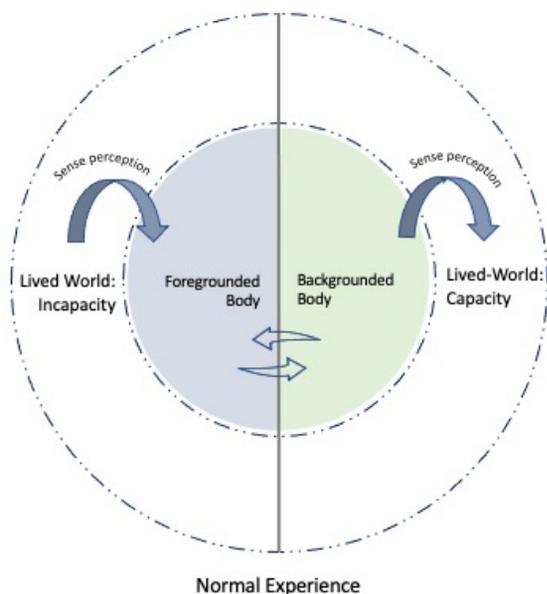


Fig.2 Dual mode of embodiment

Phenomenology would seem to suggest, then, that experience of the body is either *foregrounded* by our conscious perception, as in the case the pathological body; or *backgrounded* when enacting our normal, lived world. It should be noted, however, that in daily life these transitions of the backgrounded/foregrounded body are fluid and may switch not only from one moment to the next, but also in the degree to which the body becomes the focus of our attention. For example, when first learning the routine, participants' practice is punctuated by occasional pain or discomfort:

*I'm struggling at the moment with sciatica and although I had warmed up prior to doing these exercises, today I could feel tense in my body because of the sciatica. This did dispel as the exercises continued which was good until I was unaware of it.*

Participant ID 68

There are other examples where the focus on the foregrounded body is not necessarily pathological, but merely hindered. For example the not-yet-fluent-body

learning to dance or play a musical instrument, or indeed, in learning to master the movements of the Qigong routine, as expressed by this participant:

*As I am still on the initial practice sessions, I have to keep an eye on the video to check I am doing the exercises correctly, so that does reduce the opportunity to detach from thoughts and focus on the activity and visualise the inside of the body as requested.*

Participant ID 40

How does this account of normal everyday experience relate to the wellbeing experience of the Qigong practitioners? The dual mode of embodiment described above would seem to suggest that embodiment which features the capacity to enact the lived-world is the domain of wellbeing. Under this model, in wellbeing the body disappears into the background, blissfully unaware of itself and free of pain or discomfort. However, authorities such as the World Health Organisation (2012) make it clear that wellbeing it is not to be defined merely by the absence of pain or disease but should include ‘a complete state of mental, physical and social’ wellbeing (WHO, 2012). Examination of TCM Qigong practice would suggest there is a third form of experiencing embodiment in which the body does not disappear from experience, but where, instead, it features specifically as the body-positive and the ground for cultivating wellbeing.

### **Wellbeing: the body-made-present**

The third mode of experience specific to the TCM Qigong exercise is shown in *Fig. 3*. It is characterised by the *body-made-present*, a state attained by the performance of posture and movement combined with the surprising step of turning sensorimotor perception *inwards*, into the body’s ‘regions of silence’ alluded to Merleau-Ponty and Leder. In the language of Qigong practice, this is the unified ‘*Qi State*’ of mind, body and *qi*, and a mode of being which is a prerequisite for balancing the subtle-body energies and cultivating wellbeing. Unlike the foregrounded body of *Fig. 2* defined by incapacity and limited enaction of the lived-world, in Qigong practice the body-made-present is not objectified by sense perception. Instead, the body-made-present by sensory perception brings-forth the lived-world and becomes a living-subject actively transforming herself to be

healthier, happier, more able to live life to the full. While this state may be sustained during the practice session, it may also spill over into daily life as the processes of transformation on psycho-spiritual-physiological levels continue beyond the practice itself.

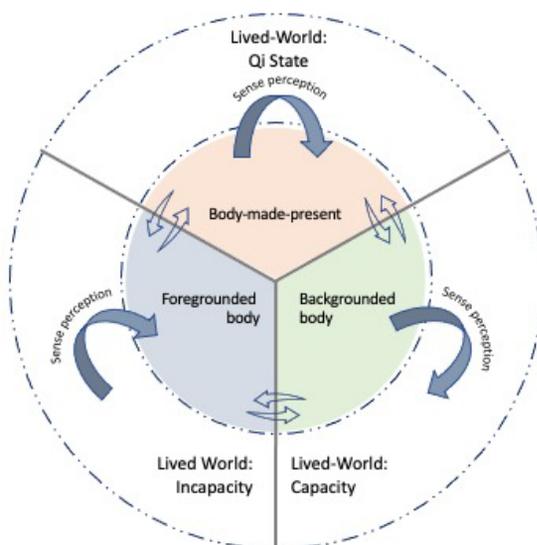


Fig. 3 Normal modes of embodiment and body-made-present

The diary entry below conveys how the experience of the body-made-present discloses new dimensions of the embodiment:

*I could visualise and connect to my lungs easily but found it a little harder to connect to my other organs. However, I suddenly had the thought that my skin is an organ too and felt a strong connection and awareness of the skin covering all of my body. I found it easier to visualise qi today and felt that my different energy points were more strongly connected to one another.*

Participant 43

The turning inward of sense perception discloses a mode of embodiment that is premised on the body being the source of life-energies that may be renewed by the

powerful energies inherent in nature. By creating *positive* awareness of the body and skilfully manipulating these energies the body becomes a powerhouse for wellbeing. This positive model of embodiment contrasts with many Western and Asian philosophical and religious views of the body as the source of human weakness through its finite nature, the propensity of the senses to mislead, and as the source of physical suffering. It is also distinct from ideas of physical fitness where the body is disciplined into a specific shape and functionality by different forms of exercise such as aerobics, gymnastics or jogging. The sense of enlivening that the practice produces is captured by the diary entry below:

*Qi means life force. I now believe it must have life in it as it can feel different each time I practice. Today it was much lighter and clearer than in previously practices. I feel qi strongly in my palms during the very first exercise and it has gotten stronger in my feet when I think of connecting to qi from the ground. Qi sometimes feels like electricity to me, or a radiance, but today it felt more like the sensation you have when sitting in a light breeze. It felt gentle today.*

Participant 43

The TCM Qigong practice thus serves to create a new perceptual field within the body's organismic and bio-energetic sphere. Through the accumulation of habit and repetition of the Qigong exercise the body becomes fluent in the practice routine but does not recede from conscious attention. On the contrary, embodiment is held in conscious focus throughout the exercise.

### **Introspective consciousness and the body-made-present**

As with many other forms of Qigong exercise, an important feature of TCM Qigong is the meditative aspect involving focussed awareness. However, this does not equate with mindfulness methods familiar in the West, used for relaxation or stress reduction, even though at first sight these techniques seem to emphasise being present as key to their therapeutic value. One of the main proponents of mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn, brings out the distinctive feature of mindfulness practice as the development of a skill for 'the cultivation of our capacity to pay attention.' (Kabat-Zinn, 2018). In this respect, the mindfulness differs from the TCM Qigong

practice where attention is specifically directed at the body. A further distinction, mindfulness practices derive from strands in Buddhist philosophy where the role of the body tends to be associated with suffering. For instance, Kabat-Zinn (2018) describes dis-ease as the basic constitution for many people, and mindfulness as a technique that can effectively identify damaging emotions, sensations, and behaviours before they become habitual and therefore harmful. So the techniques and goals of mindfulness are quite distinct from TCM Qigong's premise of cultivating the body's life energy in order to bring harmony and fulfilment to our life's concerns.

In TCM Qigong practice, the body is made-present by 'Introspective Consciousness' (*nèixiàng xìng yùnyòng yìshí* 内向性运用意识). Participants are guided by the instructor to turn vision, hearing and consciousness away from external objects of attention, and to sense *qi* energy within the body. Guided visualisation plays an important role in helping the participants direct *qi* energy through the various stages of the practice routine. Key to the practice, and continually stressed by the instructor is the experiencing of complete harmonisation of mind, body and *qi*. Participants describe this experience in various terms:

*I love the way Qigong helps me to feel connected to myself. By focusing the mind on Qi and on the organs there is a sense of empowerment that I can look after my whole body. That I am not just an outer shell but there is so much more going on inside - I find that fascinating. Qigong shows me how to feel connected.*

Participant ID 68

*Yes, I feel more connected to myself than before the exercises. Like I am back in my body and not living in my head. Today I was able to detach from my thoughts by focusing more strongly on the sensation of qi and focusing on my internal organs. It also helped a lot to focus on the inside of my head as this released a lot of tension and a sense of overstimulation in my brain.*

Participant 43

### **The Lived-World of TCM Qigong**

As referred to earlier, there is in addition a cultural dimension of the practice. For the Qigong practitioners, this is a lived-world shaped by Traditional Chinese Medicine. The *Neijing Tu* map (shown in the Introduction) is an ancient Daoist depiction of the internal body which illustrates many principles that still relate to TCM practices today. It conveys the idea that in Qigong participants learn to inhabit a new internal landscape – or indeed a new World-scape - that has its own set of principles. One such principle is that human beings stand between Heaven and Earth (*tiān dì rén* 天地人). When in balance, human life is characterised by a harmony and wellbeing that is personal, societal and universal. This is not only a philosophical view based on a religious or moral understanding of the place of human beings in nature. It is also an observation of the processes that create equilibrium in lived experience.

Chinese cosmology presents the body as the microcosm of the macrocosm which is the universe (Colegrave, 1979). From the surface of our skin to our internal organs, the human body is alive with energy-centres and meridians which maintain life functions. The relationship between the macrocosm of our lived-world and the microcosm of the lived-body may be understood as that of unified harmony and constantly shifting points of balance that govern equilibrium. When out of balance, these energies may be adjusted by the intervention of an acupuncturist or TCM doctor, or, indeed, by the person themselves through prescribed exercise, such as the *Lung-Strengthening Qigong* routine.

To achieve the balanced ‘*Qi* State’, practitioners must first become familiar with the culture, landscape and ideas of wellbeing that belong to the practice. For many participants, its topography and meaning remain foreign territory until they master the physical movements that locate them within this interior World. This is achieved partly through the tutor’s explanations but mostly through the guided visualisation that is key to the exercise. The diary entries convey this process:

*I could focus on the lungs and kidneys while moving the arms to circulate Qi. With a specific focus on anatomy I find it easy to focus. While I didn't really know where the dantian is, I felt this time a warm sensation in the area, I think it might be it. I felt warm*

*between my kidneys and lungs. I feel connected to myself, and discover sensations/feeling that I wasn't mindful of before.*

Participant 68

In the unified state of the body-made-present, then, directing senses inward has the function of holding the gentle tension needed to maintain the present moment, and to experience the new dimensions that being present offers. Directed at the start of the routine by the tutor to 'look inside' and 'hear inside' their body, the TCM Qigong practice develops the participants' sense of sight, hearing, and touch to create awareness of their organs and, as if blind in a new environment, to feel the presence of their body Qi energy. These senses, which are at first faltering when turned inwards, gradually become sensitized and responsive to the inner environment. Participants start to bring-forth a new lived-world.

**Conclusion**

In exploring the experiences of Qigong practitioners phenomenology has provided a method for mapping wellbeing experience, and in doing so has disclosed a mode of embodiment that has not previously received much attention from phenomenological exploration. This mode is characterised by the body-made-present where sense perception is directed towards the body to reveal embodiment's inherently positive capacity for healing, health and wellbeing.

Moreover, a distinctive feature of this mode of embodiment is the cultural overlay provided by

Traditional Chinese Medicine. In the Lung-Strengthening Qigong practice as well as in other related therapies, Traditional Chinese Medicine offers a paradigm of wellbeing that prioritises the holistic relationship between human beings and nature, and so has implications for the way we lead our lives as individuals in balance with ourselves, with others, and with our environment.

TCM Qigong practice combines purposeful movement and introspective consciousness as highly effective tools for cultivating *qi* energy throughout the subtle-energy body to attain a unitive state where mind, body and subtle-energies are harmonized. Practitioners' diary entries relate how they in effect incorporate a new culture, create a new sensorimotor field for perception and enaction, and thus

create new meaning. Their diary entries attest to a process of positive change and transformation, and often a new sense of personhood which are the hallmarks of cultivation. This cultivation of embodied wellbeing is at the heart of Qigong practice.

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