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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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TCM Qigong (中医气功 *Zhōngyī Qìgōng*) Research Project

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The TCM Qigong Study

- 20 February 2021 to 8 April 2021
- 170 participant volunteers
- Practice: 2 – 3 times per week
- Demographic: white, female, aged between 45 and 74
- Mixed background of little or no prior experience of Qigong or Taiji, plus some more experienced practitioners

Lung-Strengthening Qigong Exercise



Pose: sequence of physical movements with *some* specific controlled breathing interventions

Mindfulness: development of a relaxed, receptive state of mind that enables focussed intent and concentration

Cultivating Qi: learning to feel Qi in the body's energetic centres, and to direct the movement and accumulation of Qi

DISCUSSION:

Clinical Research into Qigong

- Recent clinical studies have closed the cultural gap between Western medicine and practices based on TCM
- However, Western research methodology has limited tools for capturing first person experience
- TCM worldview is not easily quantified
- TCM view of wellbeing becomes locked into circularity

Wellbeing as Embodied Experience

The lived-body, lived-mind, and lived-environment are all thus part the same process, the process by which one enacts one's world.

Varela, Thompson and Rosch: *The Embodied Mind*

The body is our medium for having a world.

Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*

It may be said the body is ‘the hidden form of being ourself’...

Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*

- Perception is rarely directed inward towards the body's functions
- In health and wellbeing the body is not our focus
- Our attention thematises our life concerns and issues *other* than our body
- In illness we shift focus specifically to our body

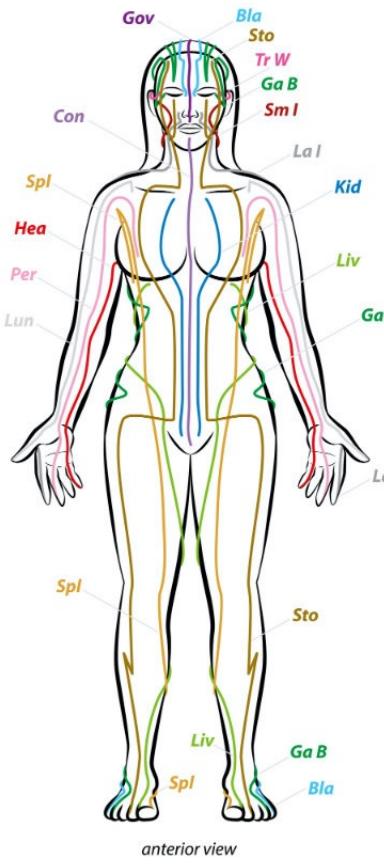
The Participants' Experiences

"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*



The Interior Landscape of the Subtle Body



The Body Meridians

Two Centerline Meridians:

Conception Vessel
Governing Vessel

Twelve Principal Meridians:

Stomach Meridian
Spleen Meridian

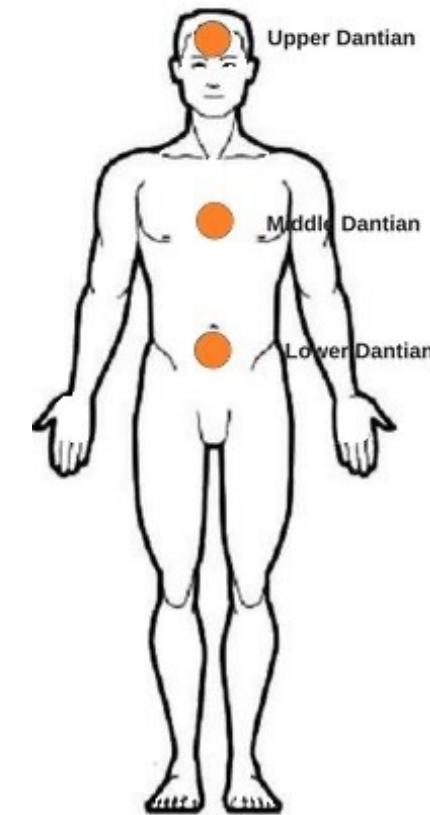
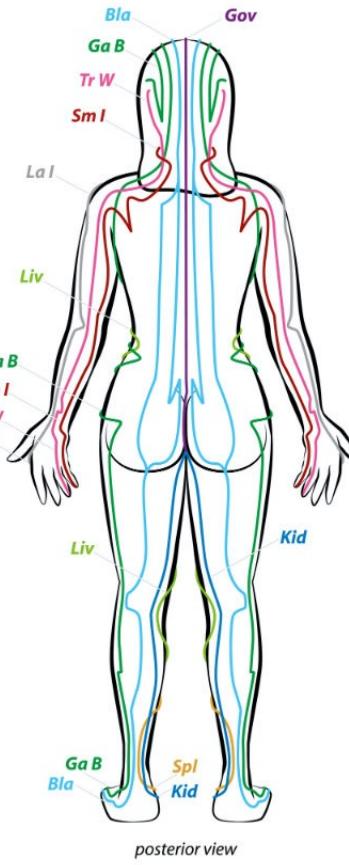
Small Intestine Meridian
Heart Meridian

Bladder Meridian
Kidney Meridian

Pericardium Meridian
Triple Warmer Meridian

Gall Bladder Meridian
Liver Meridian

Lung Meridian
Large Intestine Meridian



Participant 43

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 68

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 dantien 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.

'...every habit is both motor and perceptual...'

Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of Perception*

- Diary entries document the gradual process of learning: from initial self-conscious movements to a developing flow of experience and resultant feelings of wellbeing, meaning and satisfaction.
- As the practice becomes embedded through habit, a new inner world is synthesized
- Senses of sight, hearing, and touch, which are at first faltering when turned inwards, gradually become sensitized, and responsive to the inner environment

Participant 68

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 43

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.

Conclusion: Wellbeing as Mindful Embodiment

The diaries relate a process of positive change and transformation, and often a new sense of personhood as participants discover hitherto unknown dimensions to their inner world-scape.

- Crossing cultures: experiences of embracing and living within a TCM worldview based on the system of harmonious balance of energies of people and nature
- Crossing boundaries of inner and outer body, interior and exterior experience
- Mindful embodiment as the source of wellbeing cultivation

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