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Global breathing

Religious utopias in India and China

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Abstract

In most places in the world one can follow courses in Yoga and Qigong. These forms of Indian and Chinese spirituality have gone global, but are still connected to national identities. This article juxtaposes and compares contemporary Indian and Chinese spiritual movements after sketching the extent to which they are the product of the imperial encounter with the West.

Key Words

capitalism • globalization • imperialism • national identity • Qigong • Yoga

INTRODUCTION

In the current phase of globalization there is a fast spread of forms of evangelical and charismatic Christianity, as well as pietistic Islam. While much attention is given to the rise of these so-called fundamentalist forms of world religion, the globalization of Asian forms of spirituality escapes analytical scrutiny. One reason for this is the false assumption that the spiritual entails a withdrawal from social and political life and derives its authority precisely from that withdrawal. This assumption is operative in the idea that ‘spiritual masters’ live in the mountains, but ignores the possibility of them coming down onto the plains. In China one finds, for instance, the idea that the Daoist or Buddhist master lives on a mountain, but there also exists the possibility of his leaving the mountain as an accomplished master (chusanle) and serving a purpose in society. Moreover, eastern spirituality is often perceived as transcending secular reality. Here I want to argue that, in fact, the spiritual is political and the secular turns out to be spiritual.

In most places in the world, one can follow courses in Yoga and Qigong. These forms of Indian and Chinese spirituality have gone global, but are still connected to national identities. There is no contradiction between the global and the national, since the national is directly connected to a global system of nation-states. They are often described in the literature that accompanies such training courses as Indian or Chinese ‘gifts to the world’, but that does not mean that the givers have lost them. They are complex products of the national construction of ‘civilization’ and are at the same time aspects of cosmopolitan modernity. However transcendent they claim to be as forms of
spirituality, they are deeply embedded in political and economic history. Historically, Yoga is an ancient system of breathing and body exercises that was re-formulated at the end of the 19th century as part of Hindu nationalism, but simultaneously as a form of eastern spirituality that was alternative to western society's colonial materialism. Today it is embedded in global ideas of health and good living, but also in modern management practices and corporate culture. Historically, in China there are several forms of exercise, including breathing, that are called Qigong, which develop skills (gong) to use the vital energy (qi) present in the body to connect it to the natural world of which the body is a part. Like Yoga, they are part of ancient systems of thought and practice, but have been reformulated in recent history and made part of national heritage. Whatever the connections of these exercises in Yoga or Qigong with theologies, cosmologies and broader discursive traditions, the central issue for those who participate in them is to learn what the exact practice is and what the benefits of that practice are. Much of the study of such practices, like Eliade's (1958) classical treatise, is therefore devoted to their phenomenology and historical connection to textual traditions. The differences between breathing techniques and their mental and physical effects are also the subject of much debate among the different schools that propagate certain styles. This is not, however, my approach here, as I want to compare Yoga and Qigong not as breathing techniques or spiritual exercises, but as historical and political phenomena that are intimately related to the construction of modernity.

That religious movements dealing with spiritual matters and body exercises (in short, with spiritual transcendence attained through the body) are a central part of modern political and economic history may confound those who believe in a sharp division between the religious and the secular. Such a secularist view of modernity can be found in India and China as much – and perhaps even more so – as in other parts of the world. For example, in January 2001, I saw in one of India's English-language newspapers a photograph of an Indian holy man who had taken a bath in the sacred confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganges at Allahabad during the Kumbh Mela, a bathing festival occurring once every 12 years and attracting more than 20 million pilgrims. The caption read: 'This sadhu has taken his bath at the Kumbh and now he is off again to the Himalayas'. At one level, this can be taken to express the essence of renunciation – namely that its proper place is outside normal society, in a cave in the Himalayas. At another level, one can take this also to express the normative view of modern, English-reading Indians: renouncers do not belong to modern, secular society, and thus should be confined to their Himalayan caves. These oppositions between the world and the transcendent also haunt the sociological theory of renunciation. Dumont (1966), in his influential essay on world renunciation, posits the caste society of the householder as a holistic universe, squarely opposed to the world of the renouncer who is conceived as the individual outside society. Of course, Weber (1925) emphasizes a transition from tradition to modernity when, in his analysis of the emergence of Protestant modernity, he makes a famous distinction between inner-worldly and outer-worldly asceticism. The latter belongs to the grand religious systems of ancient civilizations, like Hinduism and Buddhism, while the former is central to the emergence of capitalist modernity.

In contrast to these views that focus on the internal development of these civilizations and their essential differences, I would argue for an interactional perspective, focusing
on the interaction of Indian and Chinese nationalisms with imperial modernity (van der Veer, 2001). These great traditions of renunciation and spiritual exercise in India and China are transformed and re-formulated in various political, economic and cultural encounters with western powers. Such interactions are a major element in the formulation of global and national modernities in Asia and Europe that simultaneously resemble and differ from each other. Basic to these imaginaries is the opposition between eastern spirituality and western materialism. This opposition is part of an exceptionalism on both sides of the equation. It explains the exceptional material success of western modernity and the material defeat of the colonized societies in the East, as well as the philosophical shallowness of that success in the face of the exceptional richness of eastern traditions. Ideological movements like anti-imperialism, nationalism, Pan-Asianism, spiritualism, and also scholarly developments like Orientalist philology and comparative religions, all partook in this basic opposition. It is within this broad context that the place of Indian and Chinese spiritual movements in global and national modernity can be understood. This entails an awareness that terms like ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ are not simple categories that can be innocently used for translating Indian and Chinese terms, but are deeply embedded in the genealogies of modernity that one is trying to grasp. It is precisely spirituality’s participation in secular, modernist culture that produces its traditional authenticity.

In this contribution I want to juxtapose and compare contemporary Indian and Chinese spiritual movements. Since I believe that these forms of spirituality cannot be understood without taking the imperial encounter and the nationalist response into account, I have to start by sketching some of the relevant historical background.

SPIRITUAL NATIONALISM

Yoga has a long history and a foundational Sanskrit text in Patanjali’s ‘Yoga Sutras’ which was probably composed around the 5th century AD. Breathing techniques as well as other bodily exercises were developed as part of religious disciplines that also entailed image worship or asceticism. Spiritual masters or gurus who, more often than not, had taken a vow of celibacy, were connected to spiritual lineages in which knowledge was transmitted to these religious disciplines. Celibacy in connection with other forms of renunciation has a number of sociological consequences. Celibacy replaces ideas of natural kinship and reproduction with those of spiritual kinship and reproduction. This is quite immediate in the case of the Ramanandi ascetics, among whom I have done fieldwork, and who use kinship terms like parivar (family) and bhai (brother) to refer to the ties between celibate initiates of one guru. They refer to the initiation-formula as the seed-mantra (bij-mantra), mimicking natural reproduction rather closely. In such a way, an alternative social network emerges that can be used for all kinds of purposes. Such a network is a reasonable conduit for pooling resources over a longer period of time, which explains the active role of Hindu ascetics in money-lending over a long historical period. Since the status-considerations, which are central to marriage practices in hierarchical societies, are of less relevance to the ascetic networks, they tend to be more open, more mobile – both spatially and socially – and thus quite amenable to particular economic activities, such as long-distance trading and soldiering, in which a sedentary, agrarian population finds more difficult to engage. I have argued in earlier work that the opportunities for Hindu ascetics to engage in long-distance trade, money-lending and
soldiering drastically declined during the 18th century due to the transformations brought about by the colonial regime (van der Veer, 1988). The famous Sannyasi rebellions of the end of the 18th century are a clear expression of this changing landscape.

In pre-colonial India, military groups of ascetics developed ascetic practices, techniques of breathing, as well as fighting techniques. The colonial state banished all marauding groups that could challenge its monopoly of violence, and consequently warrior asceticism came to an end, especially after the conquest of the Sikhs in the Punjab. Ascetic violence has never been totally eradicated from the Indian religious scene, as shown by the Khalistan movement, for example, but it definitely became more marginal to it in the colonial period. In 19th century urban religiosity, a number of new elements came into play. First of all, there was the challenge of Christian missionaries who claimed that Christianity not only was the true religion, but also that Hinduism was a backward religion. A number of movements responded to this challenge by arguing that Hinduism was not only spiritually more true than Christianity, but also modern (as opposed to backward), though in dire need of reform. It is in this context that traditional practices such as Yoga and martial arts became part of an urban religious lifestyle. Indian religious movements in the second half of the 19th century re-appropriated western discourse on ‘eastern spirituality’. I would not quite know how to translate ‘spirituality’ into Sanskrit, but it is a fact that Hindu religious discourses are now captured under the term ‘spirituality’. To be useful in the contestation of Christian colonialism, the translation of Hindu discursive traditions into ‘spirituality’ meant a significant transformation of these traditions. This process can be closely followed by examining the way in which one of the most important reformers, Vivekananda, made a modern, sanitized version of the religious ideas and practices of his guru, Ramakrishna (a practitioner of tantric Yoga), for a modernizing, middle class in Calcutta. While we can still interpret most of Ramakrishna’s beliefs and practices in terms of Hindu discursive traditions, we enter with Vivekananda into the terrain of colonial translation.

Vivekananda’s translation of Ramakrishna’s message in terms of ‘spirituality’ was literally transferred to the West during his trip to the USA after Ramakrishna’s death. He visited the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, a side-show of the Columbian Exposition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ voyage to the New World, but perhaps more importantly Chicago’s recovery from the Great Fire of 1871. Religions represented in this show of religious universalism included Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam, Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism and various others (Ziolkowski, 1993). But the show was stolen by the representative of Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda. In his speech to the Parliament, Vivekananda claimed that ‘he was proud to belong to a religion which had taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance’ (Mullick, 1993: 221). Vivekananda’s spirituality was not modest or meek; it was forceful, polemical and proud. As the response in the Parliament and in his further lecture tours in the United States indicates, this was a message which resonated powerfully among American audiences. His writings in English often compare the lack of spirituality in the West with its abundance in India. Vivekananda was probably the first major Indian advocate of a ‘Hindu spirituality’, and his Ramakrishna Mission the first Hindu missionary movement, following principles set out in modern Protestant evangelism.4
A major achievement was Vivekananda's creation of Yoga as the Indian science of supra-consciousness. Yoga was now made into the unifying sign of the Indian nation, and not only for national consumption, but for the entire world. This was a new doctrine, although Vivekananda emphasized that it was ancient 'wisdom'. This was especially true of the body exercises of Hatha Yoga, underpinned by a metaphysics of mind-body unity, which continue to be a major article of the health industry, especially in the USA. What I find important in Vivekananda's construction of Yoga as the core of Hindu 'spirituality' is that it is devoid of any specific devotional content that would involve, for example, temple worship and thus a theological and ritual position in sectarian debates.

This lack of religious specificity, together with the claim to be scientific, is crucial for the nationalist appeal of Vivekananda's message. From Vivekananda's viewpoint, religion is based upon reason, not belief. Yoga is legitimized as a scientific tradition in terms of rational criteria. An offshoot of this is that health issues could be addressed in terms of a national science of Yoga. I would suggest that Vivekananda has developed a translation of Hindu traditions in terms which are remarkably similar to what is cobbled together in theosophy and its later offshoot, Steiner's anthroposophy.

Vivekananda's construction of 'spirituality' and its relation with nationalism has had an enormous impact on a whole range of thought and movements. It has influenced thinkers on India as different as Savarkar, Aurobindo, Gandhi and Nehru, but it also had a huge impact on a great variety of western 'spiritual' movements, including the current New Age one. It is a construction crucial to Hindu nationalism. McKean has shown the extent to which the idea of spirituality is even used in promoting national products, such as Indian handlooms and handicrafts (McKean, 1996). There seems to be no escape from the relentless marketing of India's spirituality today.

China does not have a cultural translator like Vivekananda, which can be at least partly explained by the fact that English language and literature was not a 'mask of conquest' as it was in British India (Viswanathan, 1989). But there are interesting parallels between the transformation of Yoga and the emergence of Qigong in the 20th century. Qigong consists of skills to exercise qi: to 'cultivate and temper mind and body along their paths to enlightenment'. These bodily exercises are connected to conceptions of cosmology, of bodily health, of concentration of the mind, of meditation and quietness. Together, they form part of religious traditions that date back to the 14th and 15th century (or the middle of the Ming Dynasty). As in the case of Yoga, these conceptions are very variable, and in fact, one can say that we have here traditions of bodily exercise that can be connected to all kinds of understandings of spirituality and cosmic order. Moreover, again as in Yoga, there is a direct connection with health. Traditional Chinese medicine used qi exercises to improve the health of 'the sick and the weak'. Thus, qi exercises were practised in the name of a religion, a school of medicine, or even martial arts. That is why these exercises were practised, developed and passed on by religious specialists who, as in the Indian case, were organized in religious networks of training and socialization, such as monasteries and other religious institutions. Again, similar to the situation in India, these networks also developed martial arts, and the bodily exercises were part of 'internal boxing', which was seen as excellent preparation for 'external boxing'. Taiji is the name of a form of internal boxing and is now commonly associated with Qigong. Spiritual and bodily exercises belonged to groups that, in their
very organization, could be seen as militant. However, it seems that the imperial state in China regarded them as being far more of a threat to state control than was the case in India: the official documents of the Chinese state refer to them as ‘heterodox cults’ and forms of ‘White Lotus’ opposition. There is therefore a long Chinese tradition which sees these activities as threatening the order imposed by the state and its heavenly mandate.

Historically, White Lotus was the name of a set of folk Buddhists’ lay practices, which date back to the Song Dynasty (ter Haar, 1992). They entailed certain breathing practices that often went with meditation, and magical means to cure illness and maintain health. This is connected with notions of universal salvation, the idea that most people, if not everyone, should be saved. Groups that sometimes rebelled against felt injustices perpetrated by central authority or landowners carried these traditions forward, and such protests tended to be messianic in nature. In the 19th and early 20th centuries there were dozens of such groups. There were probably millions if not tens of millions of people enrolled at one time or another in these sorts of religions. In the Republican period, in some instances, they borrowed from the ‘White Lotus’ complex the ideas of the end of the world and of universal salvation. Many of these groups also added to their practices all sorts of charity works, famine relief, education, opium-addiction cures and the education of women. While these movements were originally part of peasant culture in the 19th century, responding to the rise of the bourgeoisie, middle class participation soon emerged. To this changing world there also belonged secret societies, such as the Heaven and Earth Society, which arose in the 18th and 19th centuries (Ownby, 1995).

These groups were significantly transformed, in the context of imperialism, into some movements which were deeply influenced by Christianity and which become messianic, such as the Taiping movement, and others which saw themselves as defending traditional Chinese religion against Christianity and imperialism (for example, the Boxer movement). The imperial context is immediately clear in the religious uprisings of the mid-19th century. China had seen the failure of two major religious movements that had tried to transform society after the Opium Wars. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom movement – a huge group that had a death toll far exceeding 10 million people before it was put down by the Qing government – was heavily influenced by Christianity (Weller, 1994). The Taiping believed in one god and that Jesus had died for their sins. Their leader projected himself as the younger brother of Jesus. They used the Bible but gradually connected their beliefs with traditional concepts of spirit possession. They attacked and destroyed the shrines of other religions and showed in that way that their God was superior to the many local gods of the Chinese rural pantheon. At the same time, the uprising was a peasant rebellion against landlords and injustice.

The other major religious movement was the Boxer one at the end of the 19th century which, in contrast, responded violently against the expansion of Christianity and imperialism. In the Boxer riots secret societies were involved that used their martial techniques in attacks on Christian converts. Christian missionaries were seen as agents of imperialism. The Boxers saw themselves as defending Chinese civilization against the West. The failure of these religious movements to transform Chinese society and expel the foreign powers may have helped in paving the way for the strongly secularist movements that followed them. It is certainly true that these movements have continued to fuel the nationalist imagination in many ways, inspiring such films as Zhang Yimou's

As I have mentioned earlier, China had known a long tradition of statist distrust of folk traditions. Consequently, all the variants of Chinese nationalism took an anti-religious, scientist stance. When the Enlightenment category of ‘religion’ moved into China, ‘folk religion’ was condemned as ‘feudal superstition’ (funjian mixin), while clerical traditions like Buddhism and Daoism came to be recognized as ‘religions’ that should be brought under the control of political authority. Christianity, which had considerable success in China, was essentially seen as ‘foreign’ and ‘imperialist’. All this is quite similar to the Indian case, but a major difference is that Chinese nationalism did not focus on religious identity and difference as its main marker. On the contrary, it was the attack on folk religion as feudal superstition that marked Chinese nationalism in the 20th century. The modernist attack on magic and superstition is also found in India, but it is part of reformist strategies within the world religions. In China, it was intellectuals who had absorbed a scientist worldview who led the campaigns against popular religion in the early 20th century. In India, however, clerics and intellectuals who wanted to reform their religions by removing superstition and embracing more scripturalist versions led the campaigns. I would suggest that both in China and in India nationalism was confronted with an aggressive Christian missionary project, but that in India that project was directly supported by a central colonial state, while in China imperialism, however important in the Opium Wars and the attacks on the Qing Government, was never fully in control of the state. In India, nationalists felt that within the colonial state they had to defend their religious institutions through reform. This produced the nationalization of Yoga or the making of Yoga as a national symbol of true Indianess. In China intellectuals, building on the long statist distrust of folk traditions, chose to become truly secular nationalists. This is borne out by the May Fourth Movement and by the attacks on religious institutions and practices during the Republican period. On the other hand, there was an efflorescence of religious movements and uprisings connected to warlords who were fighting each other in this period.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

In China, both in the Republican period and in the Communist regime that followed it, science was the sign under which the nation and modernity were conceived. Historically, this is first expressed clearly in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 that saw itself as ‘already enlightened’ and on the way to bringing secular enlightenment to the people of China. This gave rise to a number of campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s against religion. The Kuomintang government appropriated temple land and activists destroyed images and attacked temples and other religious institutions. All of this resembles the Boxer Uprising of the 19th century in its iconoclasm (although this similarity would be completely lost on the participants), but the main difference was that it was supported by a state that embraced western science and rationalism. Where in India nationalists often saw it as their duty to protect religion against imperialism, in China nationalists saw religion as an obstacle to the modernization of Chinese society. Religion was seen as superstition, not as a traditional essence of Chinese culture. This attitude derived partly from a Confucian tradition of disdain for the popular, partly from Christian attacks against Chinese traditions, and largely from the
great unifying power of the idea of science in modernity. According to Duara, religious groups and secret societies increasingly resisted these attacks in the late 1920s and 1930s, and the Nationalist Party responded to this by trying to distinguish between moral religion and superstition (Duara, 1991). In that way, the modern ideal of freedom of religion was maintained while traditionalism (often seen as connected to feudalism) was attacked. What Duara may neglect is the importance of a new urban consumer culture in which popular cinema was filled with so-called martial arts/magical spirit films. Film spectators burnt incense in the cinema halls and some spectators went to learn Daoism or martial arts from teachers in the mountains (Pang, 1994). After the victory of the Communists, all the religious groups and movements that had been present in the Republican period were gradually marginalized and subsequently violently suppressed in the 1950s. The spirituality of consumer culture was also repressed until the 1980s.

Although in 1917 Mao Tse-Tung had written negatively about qi exercises as promoting tranquility and passivity, while he wanted to promote activity as essential for the survival of China, qi exercises did survive the attacks on traditionalism and feudalism by being aligned to science (Xu, 1999). In the 1950s, qi exercises were more and more part of a state-sanctioned medical science. In this way qi exercises came to be practised by spiritual masters who were simultaneously acknowledged physicians. Qigong therapy was thus taken out of the realm of superstition into the realm of scientific clinics. Not only medical science, but also physics and biology produced experiments focusing on the existence of qi. However, this scientific sanctification and purification of Qigong did not result in total state control. This is partly inherent in the fact that traditional Chinese medicine, while claiming to be ‘scientific’, simultaneously claims to transcend the limitations of ‘western’ science. At the same time, it is a nationalist claim of a superiority of ‘Chineseness’ that is difficult to attack by a state that promotes ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, as Deng Xiaopeng called it in 1978. Palmer (2007) has shown how much the spread of Qigong depended on networks within the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Personal belief in Qigong by some Chinese leaders helped the growth of interest in these techniques despite constant attacks by skeptics. Outside state control, however, was the spontaneous Qigong craze of the 1980s in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. People started to do qi exercises everywhere, and to some extent this can be read as setting the body free from the constraints imposed by the state and signifying a transition to greater individual freedom and interaction. The state tried to channel this spontaneous outburst of Qigong activities into Qigong institutions and movements, but some of them, most notably the Falun Gong or Falun Dafa, as it was called later, turned out to be a real challenge for state control.

On 25 April 1999, more than 10,000 Falun Gong adherents from all over China gathered around Zhongnanhai, the capital's political heart, setting the stage for the most serious political case since the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1989. The reason for this gathering was to request from the government the official recognition of the Falun Dafa Research Association, the lifting of the ban on Li Hongzhi's latest publications, and the release of Falun Gong practitioners detained during previous demonstrations. According to the People's Daily, the government had never forbidden the practice of normal exercises:
People have the freedom to believe in and practise any kind of Qigong method, unless when people . . . use the banner of exercises . . . to spread superstition, create chaos and organize large scale gatherings which disturb social order and influence social stability. (15 June 2000)

Three months after the demonstration in Beijing, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a circular that forbade members of the Communist Party to practise the Falun Dafa. Three days later, on 22 July, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the decision to outlaw the Falun Dafa Research Association (Chang, 2004).5

Falun Gong was founded by Li Hongzhi, born, according to the authorities, on 7 July 1952, but according to his own autobiography on 13 May 1951, which would be the date of birth of Sakyamuni, the Buddha, and thus allow him to claim that he is a reincarnation of the Buddha. In 1991 he started Qigong activities. In 1992 he began giving lectures to a growing audience, and in the following years he registered his Falun Gong association with the official China Society for Research on Qigong Science. This association is quite typical in its claim to be scientific and connected to health, but it seems to go further in its moral teachings and connection to Buddhist and Daoist cosmology. It connects to the ancient idea that through physical qi exercises one also cultivates one’s moral character. There is a messianic streak in the teachings of Li Hongzhi, with an emphasis on all kinds of evils that threaten the world (now including the Communist Party) and the position of Li Hongzhi as saviour. When the state cracked down on the Falun Gong it claimed that it had outnumbered the 55 million-strong Communist Party in April, but this was revised down to a mere 2 million in November 1999. It is impossible to say how many followers have gone underground, but it is probably a substantial number. Moreover, the Falun Gong has become very active transnationally among diasporic Chinese communities, especially since its founder has fled China and lives in New York. However, it is hard to say how important the Falun Gong has become, since it is only one movement in a global spread of taiji, Qigong, and forms of martial arts under the rubric of Wushu, like Qiaolin and Kung fu. Although the practitioners emphasize the differences between these practices and traditions, from a historical and sociological viewpoint they form one tradition with a number of variations.

In India, modernity is also understood under the label of science. However, the Indian discussions already in the 19th century emphasized the scientific nature of indigenous traditions. Secularist attacks on traditional religion were rare, while attempts to purify religion from so-called superstition and show the scientific foundations of religion were taken up by reformers in a number of proto-nationalist and nationalist movements. Rational religion, as a major current in these reform movements, offered a home to intellectuals who wanted to reflect on developments in science from Hindu traditions. A good example is J.C. Bose (1853–1937), a renowned physicist and plant physiologist, whose work on electrical waves and on plant consciousness was animated by attempts to understand the unity of nature from the perspective of the Hindu philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta in which Bengali intellectuals had been trained. In this regard, the intellectual projects of Hindu scientists remind one of those of British scientists like Edmund Gosse, Sr. The social network formed by such scientists and Hindu reformers like Swami Vivekananda shows how the development of scientific and religious thought
was interwoven. Philosophers like Henri Bergson and Aurobindo embraced Bose’s vitalistic science eagerly (Nandy, 1995).

Traditions of rational religion show a familiar fight against superstition and popular religion. Common Hindu practices, such as image worship, are rejected as recent accretions of the pristine faith. We can find similar rejections and active repressions of popular religion in contemporary Buddhist and Islamic reform movements, and also Chinese ‘scientism’. In the early 20th century, Chinese nationalist intellectuals supported campaigns for destroying popular religion because they saw it as an unnecessary anachronism and an obstacle to progress. Their view was called ‘scientism’ – placing all reality within the natural order and deeming it knowable by the methods of science (Duara, 1995). Modernization is seen as a scientific project, but not only by secularists or by the colonial state. Active repression of popular religion is shared by secularist and fundamentalist movements and legitimized under the sign of science and rationality. Secular nationalists like Jawaharlal Nehru, who became India’s first Prime Minister, were convinced that the spirit of science had to be harnessed to the project of re-industrializing India. They did not see techno-science as, in itself, solving the basic needs of life. It could only do so if supported by a morality superior to that available in colonialism. In *The Discovery of India* (1946), Nehru argued that Indian civilization possessed great moral resources that could help it to appropriate modern science for the common good.6

The great dissenting voice here was Mahatma Gandhi who was, in my view, both a political and religious leader. In his *Hind Swaraj* (1947), Gandhi launched a fundamental critique of modern civilization. In Gandhi’s view, India could only be truly (that is, spiritually) independent if it rejected the violence of techno-science and instead located ‘industry’ within the tradition of artisanship. A strong element in this was the notion of ‘inner-worldly’ asceticism – a spiritual rejection of the materialism of western (colonial) civilization. It is not that such voices do not exist in China, but they are quite marginal. Gandhi called himself a *karmayogi* – a man who practises the Yoga of activity – and in this way combined Mao’s revolutionary spirit and the ancient spiritual tradition of inner tranquility. Gandhi modernized and nationalized Yoga by calling it ‘experiments with Truth’.

From Vivekananda’s pioneering work in the 19th century, many offshoots have emerged. One clear direction is the same as was taken by the Chinese: namely, Yoga as primarily a physical exercise (Hatha Yoga) and a health practice that can be experimented with by medical science. Yoga is seen to be extremely healthy for the body and for the mind. Another clear direction is the creation of the healthy, strong masculinity for the Hindu nation. This is primarily the field of martial arts to which Yoga practices can be linked. Like the Falun Gong in China, the religious organization of bodily disciplines in India can gain a political meaning. This is true for organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (a militant nationalist organization in which bodily discipline is central) and the related Vishwa Hindu Parishad which is organizing the various spiritual leaders and their movements under a common nationalist platform. These organizations are anti-secular and, since India is a democracy (unlike China), they are, politically, part of a nationalist party – the Bharatiya Janata Party – that was able to rule India for ten years before the elections of 2004. Clearly, the democratic system in India is able to give a wide berth to nationalist movements that promote traditional practices,
together with a political agenda. At the same time, one needs to observe that such Hindu nationalist movements strive for an Indian utopia that leaves little space for Muslims and Christians and are deeply involved in widespread violence against minorities. It is this kind of violence in civil society that the Communist Party in general has been able to control by repression.

A particularly interesting development in Yoga is its alignment with the development of global capital. Since Yoga was never seen as subversive by the powers that be, it became a recognized element in middle class religiosity. As such, it followed the trajectories of this class that became more and more transnational in its orientation during the 1960s. Its older connection with nationalism was not thereby forgotten or marginalized, but utilized in identity politics in the countries of immigration, especially the USA. Indian spirituality is something to be proud of since many non-Indians are also attracted to it. The global reach of Yoga was stimulated by groups, such as the Divine Life Society, founded by Sivananda, but can be best understood by the fact that its origins lie in an imperial modernity mediated by the English language. From the English-speaking world Yoga, however, has spread to the rest, making for 4 million Yoga practitioners in Germany and 13 million in the USA (Strauss, 2005). In the 1960s, Yoga became part of the youth revolution that shook western culture. Promoted by popular music groups like the Beatles, Indian spirituality became a lifestyle element that could be commodified and marketed in a variety of ways. In the West it became part of a complex of alternative therapies based on lifestyle and bodily exercise. In light of the therapeutic worldview that is part of global capitalism, it has now also come back to India in the new perceptions of the urban middle class of Indian tradition. Due to the opening up of the market for Eastern spirituality not only Yoga has benefited, but a variety of Chinese spiritual exercises such Taiji Quan and Qigong have also gained a transnational market.

CONCLUSION
The transformation in Asia of ancient disciplines of the body or disciplines of the self, as Mauss and Foucault called them, under the influence of the imperial encounter and nationalism has made Yoga and Qigong signs of Indian and Chinese tradition and modernity. One element of this complex story is that enlightened secular reason has not become hegemonic. Attacks on religious traditions that are the discursive foundations of these disciplines of the self have been mounted with varying success both in India and in China. But in both cases, a politics of difference emerged that had to assert a historical pride in one's national civilization against imperial projects. The claim that traditions were forms of superstition and signs of backwardness and that modernity had to be scientific could be responded to by a counter-claim that these traditions were, in fact, scientific when brought down to their very essence. Especially in the human encounter with the frailties of the flesh, such as disease and death, medical science clearly showed its limitations. It is thus particularly in concern for health that these practices come to compete with other (often western) forms of medicine.

In both India and China, movements that propagate religious traditions and especially alternative utopias can have a political impact. While in India such movements became part of, in principle, a legitimate nationalist project (although some offshoots were quickly de-legitimized as ‘extremist’), in China such movements were under
constant attack from both the Kuomintang and the Communists. The reasons for this significant divergence can perhaps be found both in pre-colonial and colonial histories of the Chinese and Indian polities. The Chinese imperial state constantly fought peasant rebellions that were inspired by a religious cosmology, and Chinese intellectuals were brought up in a framework of Confucian distrust of popular religion. The failure and bloodshed of two major religious rebellions against Christianity and imperialism in the 19th century further promoted the idea of secular science as an answer to China’s backwardness. In India, however, religious movements seem to become gradually part of a spiritual resistance against imperial power and, as such, a major element in the formulation of anti-colonial nationalism.

In the postcolonial period it is really the liberalization of the Indian and Chinese economies under the impact of global capitalism that frees the energies of spiritual movements to organize civil society. This is very clear in the Chinese case where liberalization first gave space to a spontaneous Qigong fever and later to the rise of movements like Falun Gong that connect Qigong to older ideas of a moral and political nature. In India, one can see this especially in the rise of a Hindu nationalism that rejects an earlier secular and multicultural project of the state by emphasizing Hindu traditions as the basis of Indian civilization, thereby excluding other contributions by religious minorities. It is especially a new-fangled urban religiosity that is both interested in Yoga and in a strong nation that supports this kind of politics.

Indian spirituality was formulated by Vivekananda during a trip to Chicago and has been further developed in constant interaction with the rest of the world. A political figure like Mahatma Gandhi fits seamlessly in this history. When, from the 1970s and 1980s and continuing till the present day, highly educated members of the Indian middle class migrate to the USA for medical and engineering jobs, they are confronted with a quite aggressive marketing of Indian spirituality in the markets for health, exercise and management practices. This, in turn, is brought back to India, where especially successful new movements like the Bangalore-based Art of Living with Guru Ravi Shankar cater for a mobile, transnational class of business entrepreneurs. China’s isolation between 1950 and 1980 has ensured a belated entry of Chinese spirituality into this market, but nevertheless it is quickly catching up with products like taiji quan and Qigong. In the Chinese case, this is enhanced by the strong link with sports and especially martial arts, which are also promoted by the globally popular Hong Kong and mainland movies.

Notes
1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the New School for Social Research in New York and at the Department of Religious Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara. I thank Carol Breckenridge and Mayfair Yang for their invitations.
2 This idea is important in the spread of Qigong (see Chen, 2003).
3 For a more detailed analysis, see the third chapter of my Imperial Encounters (2001).
4 See Peter van der Veer (1994).
5 See David Palmer’s excellent discussion in Qigong Fever and also the references in Barend ter Haar’s website: http://website.leidenuniv.nl/~haarbjter/falun.htm
6 I take here Gyan Prakash’s reading of this text in his Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India (1999).
References

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