



# online

HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET

Institute for Religious Studies - University of Heidelberg



## Volume 13 (2018)

HEIDELBERG  
UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING

# Table of Contents

- 01 **Cloud Strife: The Intertestamental Hero – A Theological Exposition of the Differentiation of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children***  
*Benjamin Banasik*
- 17 **VR Mediated Content and Its Influence on Religious Beliefs**  
*Stefan Piasecki*
- 56 **Video Games Facilitating Discussions of Good and Bad Religion**  
*Heidi Rautalahti*
- 79 **Discovering Buddhism Online – A Translocative Analysis of Tibetan Buddhist Forum Discussions**  
*Maria Sharapan*
- 99 **“Black-eyed Bastard” – The Outsider Charakter in the Dishonored Series**  
*Michaela Šimonová*
- 116 **How To Download the Divine – Religion Meets the Internet in the *qigong* Healer Dr. Zhi Gang Sha and His “Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment™”**  
*Franz Winter*



## Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, Volume 13 (2018)

As an open-access journal, *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* can be permanently accessed free of charge from the website of HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING (<http://heilup.uni-heidelberg.de>).

ISSN 1861-5813

This work is published under the Creative Commons license (CC BY-SA 4.0).



### Editor in Chief:

Prof. Dr. Gregor Ahn, Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

### Editorial Team:

Tobias Knoll, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Simone Heidbrink, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

### Members of the Editorial Board:

Dr. Frank G. Bosman, Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Netherlands

Prof. Dr. Oliver Krüger, Chair for the Study of Religion Department of Social Studies,  
University of Fribourg, Switzerland

Dr. Gernot Meier, Studienleiter Ev. Akademie Baden, Karlsruhe, Germany

### Contributors to this Issue:

Benjamin Banasik

Stefan Piasecki

Heidi Rautalahti

Maria Sharpan

Michaela Simonova

Franz Winter

© 2018



## How to Download the Divine

### Religion Meets the Internet in the *qigong* Healer Dr. Zhi Gang Sha and His “Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment™”

Franz Winter

#### Abstract

The Chinese born spiritual teacher “Dr. Zhi Gang Sha” makes up part of a growing global healers market and provides various techniques of purported ancient Chinese origin in his centres in Canada and in Europe. Most of his teachings belong to the vast and heterogeneous array of practices, methods, and beliefs which developed within the modern *qigong* scene that emerged in China in the second half of the twentieth century and spread into the West in close connection with the so-called “Traditional Chinese Medicine”. This article takes a look at a rather recent religious offspring with a particular focus on his innovative take on the internet. This approach has its roots in a specific history of the internet in the Chinese context which is commonly referred to as “cyber-sectarianism”. The movement founded and led by Zhi Gang Sha may be interpreted as a continuation of major techniques and strategies applied by cyber-sectarian movements which emerged during the 1990s and the 2000s.

#### Keywords

Qigong, Traditional Chinese Medicine, global spirituality culture, contemporary China, trans-national aspects of qigong, religion and the internet

## 1 Introduction

Religious topics have played a major role in the internet since the start of the new technology and its manifold possibilities. The World Wide Web and all the other arenas of “the net” seem to be an ideal ground for the presentation and propagation of religious material. Consequently, religions and their use of the internet have been an object of scholarly attention since the inception of the IT-era. This contribution deals with a rather recent religious offspring of Asian origin who became active in North America and in Europe, substantially in the last decade. The spiritual teacher and healer “Dr. Zhi Gang Sha” is a new supplier on the spiritual market and presents healing techniques of purported ancient Chinese origin.

As will be shown, most of them belong to the vast and heterogeneous array of practices, methods, and beliefs popular within the *qigong* scene and the so-called “Traditional Chinese Medicine” that developed in China in the second half of the twentieth century and spread into the West. In addition, Sha’s healing abilities are combined with a specific religious message that evolved in the course of his recent development, namely the propagation of the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind as initialised by and connected with his activity. The most conspicuous aspect of his approach, however, is the rather innovative use of the internet which became an integral part not only of the propagation but also of his teachings and methods. As this article will show this approach has its roots in a specific history of the internet and its use in the Chinese context which is commonly referred to as “cyber-sectarianism”. The movement founded and led by Zhi Gang Sha may be interpreted as a continuation of major techniques and strategies applied by cyber-sectarian movements which mainly evolved due to the restrictive attitude of the Chinese government towards religious movements and the plethora of *qigong* teachers and healers in the 1990s and the 2000s. In the course of the recent development of Sha’s movement, however, there seems to be a shift in the approach towards the use of the internet, insofar as the blatant and too obviously commercial attitude that dominated the 2000s was removed and replaced by other, interestingly more traditional media. This article is meant as a micro-study of one specific example in the big spiritual global market and his approach to the internet with all its changes and corrections. In addition to examining the innovative implementation of the internet as a means of propagation and presentation this article also covers a new figure on the spiritual market for the first time and therefore is also conceptualised to locate and place this new religious offer in the framework of currently relevant spiritual and religious interests. Thereby the transnational aspect also plays a major role. Sha is of Chinese origin and evidently connects to specific Chinese traditions, but he actually started his career outside of China, namely in North America and from there in Europe as well.

## 2 Preliminary remarks: Religion and the Internet

Research on the relation between religion and the internet emerged already in the late 1990s when academic studies focused on the various ways in which religious consumers or movements were taking notice of the possibilities of the new medium and how this approach might influence religious belief and practice (see, for example, Ess 1999; O’Leary and Brasher 1996; on this early phase of research see Campbell 2011, pp. 233-234). Soon a diversification took place in the study of religions and their approach to the internet, initially mainly within journalistic publications, focusing, for example, on how religions were being imported and treated online (Zaleski 1997), the

ethical and moral challenges arising with the new digital technology (Houston 1998), or the ways in which the Internet could reconnect people with spirituality in a purportedly “postmodern” society (Cobb 1998; Wertheim 1999), and the rise of new cyber-religion (Davis 1998).

With the growth of the internet, however, a basic distinction became necessary due to the simple fact that several religious movements began to use the new medium as the major and sole way to propagate their material. Rather than simply making use of the web as a means of providing information the internet became an integral part of religious practice. The web developed into an interactive venue for religious practice, *inter alia* for carrying out rituals, or gathering people in a virtual “cyber”-space (Cowan 2007, pp. 291-292). Methodologically, this led to an important and basic distinction first suggested by Christopher Helland between *religion online* and *online religion* (Helland 2000). The first approach means use of the internet as a medium for providing information about or from religious movements or traditions (for a summary, see Cowan 2007; Helland 2005). In this regard the Internet is an additional medium complementing those media traditionally used, such as books, magazines, lectures, or the like. *Online religion* as the second type refers to the use of the Internet as an active and involving medium that invites internet users to participate in religious practices. The practices that are offered “online” range from “online prayer”, “online meditation”, the opportunity to observe a Christian Mass or a Hindu *pūjā* virtually, to spiritual counselling in chatrooms, “teleclasses” etc. (Cowan and Dawson 2004, p. 7; see also Campbell 2011, pp. 234-235).

As was soon stated by its propagators this distinction is only basic and should not be understood as exclusive alternatives. With the further development and sophistication of the internet it became clear that there was a growing opportunity to develop a broader internet offer that, to a certain extent, mixes the two approaches. This was already noted by Glenn Young who pointed out that the model proposed by Helland primarily refers to two major distinctions, namely “(1) the provision of information about religion versus the opportunity for participation in religious activity, and (2) primary reference to offline, pre-existing religious traditions versus primary reference to religious activities taking place online” (Young 2004, p. 93). Based on this assumption an absolute distinction between “online religion” and “religion online” is not possible.<sup>1</sup> These cautious remarks become more and more relevant when considering the further development of the internet (Campbell 2011, pp. 239-240).

To a certain extent this amplification is also mirrored by the academic question, how and whether *new religious movements* in particular refer to the web and use it in a way different from traditional religions. Already in 1999 Lorne L. Dawson and Jenna Hennebry explored this

---

1 For a summary of Young’s criticism see Helland 2005; see also Cowan 2005, where the internet use of modern neopagan (Wicca) communities is researched with the fundamental conclusion that most of the websites use both modes.

phenomenon and came to the conclusion that most of the (then) websites composed by recently emerged religions simply posted reproductions of their print materials and wanted its visitors to go to the nearest temple or centre. Consequently they concluded that “it is unlikely that it [sc. the web] has intrinsically changed the capacity of NRMs to recruit new members” (Dawson and Henneby 2004, p. 164). This was followed by cautious remarks from Jean-François Mayer, who focused on the question, “whether the Internet has proved to be a viable instrument for recruiting new members” and came to the conclusion that the answer simply cannot be given due to the lack of supporting evidence (Mayer 2000, p. 250 and 272). This was in accordance with a general approach at this time, that the Internet was far from being a totally accepted new ground, some of the movements even showing signs of scepticism and disapproval, since access to the confusing mass of websites could cause puzzlement and could not be controlled (Cowan 2004, referring to the Church of Scientology as a typical example).

Further developments, however, proved that this was a rather hasty observation. It became evident that the endless realms of the internet offer an ideal place for all kinds of presentation. In an article on the emergence of a movement *within* the internet Marilyn C. Krogh and Brooke Ashley Pillifant showed already in 2004 that there is a layer within the religious use of the web that provides the opportunity for movements to emerge, grow, and develop (Krogh and Pillifant 2004, p. 206).

Most of these developments, however, have not been studied so far, since it is often about rather small and not publicly known spiritual suppliers and movements. As this article will show, the detailed study of a movement’s approach towards the internet provides an opportunity for dealing with substantial questions regarding the presentation of religious material and the use of media. All of that is intimately connected to various traditions and the religio-historical background. In addition, attitudes towards the internet may also change over the course of time. Zhi Gang Sha made extensive use of all the possibilities of the internet particularly in the 2000s but began to make a major shift only recently when he introduced more traditional methods of propagation once again.

### **3 “Dr. Zhi Gang Sha”**

#### **3.1 Introduction: a new healer comes to town**

The person mostly referred to with the full title “Dr. Zhi Gang Sha” is a rather recently emerged Chinese teacher and healer who became active in North America and Europe in the last two decades. In an early short Chinese description Zhi Gang Sha is introduced as *quanqiu zhuming de*

*ling xue daoshi*—*Sha Zhi Gang dashi* 全球著名的靈學導師—沙志剛大師 (literally, “world-renowned spiritual teacher, Master Sha Zhi Gang”) thereby already claiming his utmost importance and place on the global scale.<sup>2</sup> Other common epithets used in the various publications and presentations are “soul leader”, “world-renowned master healer”, and “divine servant”.<sup>3</sup> As far as can be seen from the available sources Zhi Gang Sha (born 1956; in Chinese: Sha Zhi Gang 沙志剛) interprets himself in specific Chinese traditions of healing techniques and claims to be in a lineage of various teachers of methods including (at least in the common descriptions) areas such as *Taiji*, *qigong*, *fengshui*, or the use of the ancient *Yijing*. He connects mainly to various *qigong* teachers without any deeper information on the actual contacts<sup>4</sup> with the exception of one person Sha is intimately obliged to, namely the *qigong* healer and teacher Zhi Chen Guo.<sup>5</sup> He seems to be the most important source of much of Sha’s teachings and shares with him an encounter with a power called “the Divine” that is constitutive for his own development, as will be shown in the detailed exposition of his biography.

A more or less official description of his life and spiritual development is given in a book by William Gladstone, an admirer of Sha, which was published in 2014. William Gladstone is a Harvard trained anthropologist who worked as author and film producer with an obvious and keen interest in alternative spirituality. His best known book is *The Twelve* (published 2009), a thriller, that deals with the 2012 Maya calendar topic. William Gladstone has also worked with authors and spiritual teachers such as Deepak Chopra, Neale Donald Walsh, or Michael Beckwith, all of them well known figures in the current US-American alternative spirituality scene. The book with the title “Dr. and Master Sha. Miracle Soul Healer. Exploring a Mystery” basically consists of a description of Sha’s life from the beginnings until around 2003 in the first part, and a collection of

---

2 See <http://newnews888.blogspot.co.at/2009/10/blog-post.html> (accessed July 27, 2017). It is worth noting that “teacher” is here *daoshi*, a word which has (in contrast to the more common *laoshi* 老师) a more formal, academic flavour.

3 Quoted from the information on the book cover of Sha and Xiu 2014.

4 One example would be the author and *qigong* teacher Liu Dehua 刘德华 (born 1938) who teaches in Paris and connects with the legendary long-lived figure and popular Daoist saint Pengzu 彭祖, both considered as important sources for Sha (Sha 2009a, p. 160-161). Liu Dehua published on Pengzu and draws on his teachings as the main source for his own version of *qigong* which he received in a “secret transmission” (*michuan* 秘传) as presented in the book Dehua Liu 刘德华, *Michuan jianming Pengzu wu bugong. Chatu Liu Dawei* 秘传简明彭祖五部功. 插图刘大卫 [Secretly Transmitted Concise Five-steps Gong of Pengzu. Illustrations by Liu David]. Ha’erbin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1987 [non vidi]; a French translation is Liu 1992. Pengzu (literally, “Ancestor Peng”) is a very popular figure in China and commonly dated to the Yin 殷 dynasty (1900 to 1066 BC), where he allegedly lived for 800 years. His purported longevity owes to his practice of gymnastics (*daoyin*), circulation of breath (*xingqi*), and sexual techniques (*fangzhong shu*). See Sakade 2011; a traditional, canonical description of his life may be found in Kaltenmark 1953, pp. 82-84.

5 Further information on Zhi Chen Guo will be given in the detailed portrait of Sha’s development below.



devoted adorer's stories and reflections on diverse aspects of his teachings and the purported effects of his healing power in the second.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 The early years in China and abroad: Healing many sick people

According to Gladstone's rather hagiographical account Sha was born 1956 in a small town in Northwest China, his parents moving with him to Xi'an when he was six years old. His father was the "top executive of a coal mine with ten thousand employees" and his mother was a "technician who worked at the mine" (Gladstone 2014, p. 21). Sha was a "sickly child" but was able to help himself by learning Taiji from an old man he accidentally encountered at age six. Following a rather well established narrative it is stated that Sha, although he was rejected by the master at first (because Sha was too young at this time), soon happened to become his pupil due to a dogged and stubborn tenacity that would become a major characteristic of his whole life (Gladstone 2014, p. 23).

His wish to help people led him to study medicine at a medical college beginning in 1977. Studying medicine meant at this time primarily the study of Western medicine (referred to as *xiyi* 西医 in Chinese) which became heavily promoted by the then Communist government. In addition to this conventional training Sha was also interested in various Chinese healing traditions. After he had once been healed by a student of classical Chinese medicine he "made a commitment to master traditional Chinese medicine including Chinese herbs, acupuncture, and Chinese massage" (Gladstone 2014, pp. 24-26). The three areas mentioned, namely Chinese herbs (*zhongyao* 中药, literally, "Chinese pharmaceuticals"), acupuncture (*zhenbian* 針砭, or, when as usually combined with moxibustion, *zhenjiu* 針灸) and massage (*tuina* 推拿), are together with *qigong* 气功 (as the basis for the *Taiji*) traditional elements of "Chinese medicine" (*zhongyi* 中医)<sup>7</sup> as practiced in manifold ways.<sup>8</sup> In this context it is worth noting that the idea of "combining" the two medical approaches, namely *xiyi* and *zhongyi*, was a major aspect of the Chinese state attitude towards the

6 This book was written after major shifts towards the use of the internet had already taken place and does not mirror the original take on it, as will be shown en détail in course of this contribution.

7 *Zhongyi* is the most common umbrella term denoting the various areas of the so-called "Traditional Chinese Medicine". Other expressions would be *zhong yixue* 中医学, literally "Chinese medical learning", or the more full and formal expression, used for example in legal texts or state's announcements *zhongguo viz. woguo chuantong yiyao* (中国 viz. 我国)传统医药, literally „China's/Our Nation's traditional medicine." For more details on terminology see Hsu 1999, pp. 6-8.

8 For an overview see the contributions of Xu 2011 (on Chinese herbal medicine), Wang 2011 (on acupuncture), Xutian, Sun and Tai 2011 (on Taiji), Manek and Lin 2011 (on *qigong*), Engen 2011 (on massage). An additional area in *zhongyi* not mentioned in the listing above would be diet and nutrition (see Jones 2011). For the theoretical framework see Xuan 2011. A useful overview of TCM is also provided by the US-American National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH) at <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/whatiscom/chinesemed.htm> (accessed July 27, 2017).

revitalisation of its own medical traditions which should be interpreted as “scientific” by Western medicine. “Combining Chinese and Western medicine” (*zhongxi yi jiehe* 中西医结合) is a phrase which originally referred to People’s Republic of China chairman Mao Zedong’s 1956 policy of pushing doctors of Western medicine to study Chinese medicine, with the explicit goal of creating a new medicine that would combine the Chinese and Western medical culture (and, therefore, be a future great contribution to the whole world). It was a reversal of the older policy of requiring doctors of Chinese medicine to study Western medicine in order to promote the “scientification” (*kexuehua* 科学化) of their practice (Bridie 2014, p. 5). With his education and his studies Sha is a clear outflow of this attitude which became particularly prominent in the late 1970s and the 1980s as a matter of national policy.<sup>9</sup>

After graduating from the medical college in 1984 Sha received a kind of initiation as a healer with very special skills when he was able to cure a severely injured physician whom nobody could help after an accident. According to Gladstone’s biographical account this was the reason why he became introduced to the head of the “Ministry of Traditional Chinese Medicine” (Gladstone 2014, p. 28) which presumably is the “State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine” (*Guojia zhong yiyao guanliju* 国家中医药管理局).<sup>10</sup> In Gladstone’s account the young doctor with a specialisation in the traditional medicine offered *Taiji* and *qigong* training and soon rose to a top position since his reputation as a “miracle healer” became “known in one of Beijing’s top institutes of acupuncture in China, as well as in the Ministry of Traditional Chinese Medicine” (Gladstone 2014, p. 28). The above mentioned contact with and promotion by the “State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine” is a little bit odd since this institution was not established earlier than 1987 (which does not correspond to the chronology proposed in Gladstone’s account). It was part of the program of propagating Traditional Chinese Medicine by the Communist state to promote the study and interest in “genuine” Chinese medical treatments.

From 1986 to 1990 Sha went to the Philippines, initially to study at the University of the Philippines and to gain a master’s degree in hospital administration. But soon his alleged healing abilities made him famous and he became once again famed as “miracle healer” during that time.<sup>11</sup> The most decisive event when taking into account his further biography, however, was an invitation from a friend to come to Canada in 1989. Once again his preeminent knowledge on Chinese healing

---

9 Article 21 of the 1982 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China stated that the state “promotes modern medicine (*xiandai yiyao* 现代医药) and Chinese traditional medicine (*woguo chuantong yiyao* 我国传统医药)” which form the pillar of the public health system “to protect the people’s health (*baohu renmin jiankang* 保护人民健康).”

10 See also the timeline in Gladstone 2014, pp. 321-322: “1984: healed a senior physician and this miracle was reported to the Ministry of Traditional Chinese Medicine.”

11 See Gladstone 2014, p. 31: “He was a miracle healer in the Philippines from 1986 to 1990. He was so popular that even today many people, rich and poor, hold Dr. Sha in the highest regard and gratitude for the healings they received.”

techniques helped him on his way (even when he applied for a passport)<sup>12</sup> and already at the beginning of his stay in Canada he was allegedly interviewed by leading broadcasting companies. In 1992 he met Sylvia Chen, who is introduced as “a multimillionaire business entrepreneur” (Gladstone 2014, p. 34). She was actually searching for a doctor – and thankfully found “the best doctor [...] in Toronto”, namely Sha (ibid.). After their encounter Sylvia Chen became obviously very helpful in establishing Sha in Toronto by providing him space for his practice, which was mostly “acupuncture” at this time. In the biographical account she is introduced as a “key person in helping to support Dr. Sha especially in the early years beginning in 1992” (Gladstone 2014, p. 35). She also plays a major role in the formation of the upcoming business contexts which would become relevant in the second half of the 1990s, all of them allegedly very successful.<sup>13</sup> According to the material provided by the movement Sha earned “more than one million dollars a year” between 1990 and 2003 (see the timeline in Gladstone 2014, p. 323).

### 3.3 Zhi Guo Chen, “the source”

Another major change happened in 1993 when Sha started to make regular trips to a doctor and *qigong* healer in Mainland China named Zhi Guo Chen. Already at the end of the 1980s his father allegedly sent him a book entitled *Dong Yi Gong*<sup>14</sup> which moved him so much that he wanted to become a student of Guo.<sup>15</sup> He was able to realise this goal years later and this happened due to the mediatory help of Sylvia Chen, who allegedly financed an important portion of Guo’s medical centre (Gladstone 2014, p. 43).

Zhi Chen Guo (born 1943; Guo Zhi Chen 郭志辰) is the founder of a healing center in Shijiazhuang, which is the capital of the province of Hebei in North Eastern China. He is one of many *qigong* teachers who upgrade and magnify traditional Chinese techniques with a certain flavour of cosmic validity and transcendence, a focus which increased in the 1990s. The whole process transformed the *qigong* scene and eventually led to major state action against *qigong* teachers in the 2000s when some of them started to develop their own religious movements (with Falun Gong 法輪功 viz. Falun Dafa 法輪大法 being the most prominent but not the only

---

12 Gladstone 2014, p. 32, with the episode of how he was able to enter Canada.

13 Gladstone 2014, pp. 2011, p. 35-38, devotes a whole chapter to Chen and emphasises her “loyalty” over the years of intense cooperation with Sha. He also describes his own experiences when encountering Sha and Chen in Canada.

14 It is probably the book Guo Zhi Chen 郭志辰. *Dong yi gong jing hua* 動意功精華 [Essence of Dongyi Gong]. Taipei: Taiwentang chubanshe, 1993.

15 See also the timeline in Gladstone 2014, pp. 321-322: “1988: Master Guo’s influence; read his book *Dong Yi Gong*; became Master Guo’s disciple.”

example).<sup>16</sup> In Guo's case the program is called "space medicine" (*kongjian yixue* 空间医学) or "human body space medicine" (*renti kongjian yixue* 人体空间医学), which includes several traditional features of Chinese medicine, such as "examining the tongue" (*she zhen* 舌診) as "the main method for diagnosis" (*zhuyao zhenduan fangfa* 主要診斷方法),<sup>17</sup> or the use of various pharmaceuticals (referred to as *bencao* 本草<sup>18</sup>)<sup>19</sup>, but interestingly not including "acupuncture" which is so important for Sha. In addition he claims insight into major mechanisms of the universe that form the alleged basis for his teachings. To summarize, Guo makes up part of the bewildering plethora of *qigong* and medical teachers with their slightly variant interpretations of traditional Chinese techniques combined with a constant reference to Western (pseudo-)scientific concepts and terminology.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the purported insight into the underlying cosmic mechanisms of various healing methods another important aspect of Sha's teachings obviously goes back to Guo, namely the use of chanting formulas (referred to as *mantra* in the English texts) to secure and support the healing process. In Gladstone's biographical account the scenery, where Sha is confronted with this aspect for the first time, is described *en détail* and it is important to keep in mind that this is also the

- 
- 16 More details on this development will be presented below. A sketchy insight into the variety of comparable offers may be found in the list of teachers labelled "China Qigong talents" (*Zhongguo qigong rencai* 中国气功人才) at <http://www.chinaqigong.net/english/qgsk.htm> (accessed December 18, 2015). They all share a certain sympathy for various additional increments to their *qigong* offer. A comparable approach would be Shen Chang (b. 1956) who is introduced as the "Chinese Originator of Human Science and technology". On the "Shen Chang Centre Human Body Applied Science and Technology" see also Porter 2003, p. 81, focusing on juridical problems and altercations with the Chinese government in 1996. Chang's movement was initially classified as an "evil religion" or "cult" (*xiejiao* 邪教) and finally prosecuted for tax evasion and illegal business practices according to newspaper sources (see <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be1e20.html> [accessed July 27, 2017]; Lipton 2002, p. 85).
- 17 A short manual of Guo's approach to *she zhen* can be downloaded at <http://www.dandelion-hk.net/page221.php> (accessed July 27, 2017). On the history of this important aspect of Chinese medicine see Maciocia 1995, pp. 1-12 and particularly 7-12, for the approach to tongue diagnosis in the People's Republic of China, showing that in that time a lot of effort was made to combine and reconcile Western and Chinese approaches to this topic. See also Xuan 108-109; Jiuzhang and Lei 2009, pp. 41-42; Hertzner 2010.
- 18 The expression *bencao* 本草 (literally, "roots and grasses") is a traditional term referring to the Chinese *Materia Medica* regarding pharmaceuticals used traditionally; see Yang 1998, pp. ii-iii; Wu 2005, pp. 3-8, on the history of this term.
- 19 See the brief information (in Chinese) at <http://www.dandelion-hk.net/page123.php> (accessed July 27, 2017).
- 20 Brief information and a description can be found in English at <http://www.chinaqigong.net/english/qgsk/gzc.htm> (accessed December 18, 2015), emphasising his unifying approach, much of which is comparable to Sha's later approach: "... he presented the scientific theory on the combination of the traditional Chinese medicine, western medicine, Qigong and the extraordinary functions." Information on his approach is also given on the website <http://www.3396815.cn> (which is in Chinese, but has a highly condensed English version as well; accessed July 27, 2017). Just to give an impression of the scientifically sounding language a short quote from the general description of Guo's approach should serve as an introduction (quoted from [www.3396815.cn/en/](http://www.3396815.cn/en/)): "Body Space Medicine revolutionizes medicine with its emphasis on how energy density and pressure in the spaces of the body affect our health. Its prime focus is to make energy flow freely in Gong Zhuan the main energy circle of the body. Adjusting the movement of energy is to provide proper and optimal inner environment for cellular vibration, and recovering cell digestion and absorption as well."

first time that a crucial aspect of the further development of Sha is presented, namely the reference to a transcendent power called “the Divine”. It actually serves as a guiding and initiative force for those who are chosen by it (Gladstone 2014, pp. 43-44). “The Divine” contacted Guo already in 1978 and gave him the number 3396815 that, in the Chinese pronunciation *san san jiu liu ba yao wu* 三三九六八幺五,<sup>21</sup> serves as a powerful *mantra*. This “body number” is referred to as “the divine sacred code to bring out Soul Language” (Gladstone 2014, p. 44).<sup>22</sup> As will be shown in the further course of Sha’s development these concepts seem to be a major basis for all the endeavours to come. This is also expressed by the admiring words Sha has for his teacher who is labelled as “the source” because of his unique wisdom and teachings thereby quoting the popular Chinese phrase *yin shui si yuan* 飲水思源 (literally, “when drinking water think of the source”) which should remind one of the necessity of thankfulness.<sup>23</sup> According to the official biographical account there were at least three further visits to Guo until 2005, the last with “daily teachings to Dr. Sha on the secrets of the soul and the power of the soul for healing” (see the timeline in Gladstone 2014, pp. 321-322).

The close relation between Guo and Sha is also at the centre of a documentary film entitled “Soul Masters. Dr Guo & Dr. Sha” which was made by the US-American filmmaker Sande Zeig and released in 2009. After her father was allegedly healed by Sha she follows him to Guo’s healing centre in China and relates her impressions of the situation there. The film mainly portrays the close relationship between the two healers and their cordial bond.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.4 Encountering “the Divine” and its penchant for IT-language)

After Sha becomes acquainted with the concept of “the Divine” through Guo in the 1990s (at least according to the information in his biography) there is a temporal leap in Gladstone’s account which

21 On <http://www.3396815.cn/en/Body%20Number.html> (accessed July 27, 2017) the correct pronunciation is indicated as *sahn sahn joe lew bah yow woo*.

22 On the English website the “purpose of chanting the mantra” is explained as follows (quoted from <http://www.3396815.cn/en/Body%20Number.html> [accessed July 27, 2017]): “The sound wave of each number in 3396815 produces energy vibration for cells in a specific part of the body. The number sequence provides an inner energy and massage to the body’s organs and cells. It guides energy to flow in a specific circuit through the body.”

23 See Gladstone 2014, p. 46: “The source is from Master Guo and all of my great teachers, the Divine, and the Source, are all the source of the wisdom and the power of my service.” Also referred to in Sha 2014, pp. 53-54. Similar references to Guo full of reverence may be found in Sha 2008a, p. 10; Sha 2008b, p. 15. In Sha 2014, p. 13, Sha is introduced as the “worldwide representative of his well-known teacher, Dr. Zhi Chen Guo, who was one of the greatest *qigong* masters and healers of the world” (“weltweiter Repräsentant seines bekannten Lehrers, Dr. Zhi Chen Guo, der einer der weltweit größten Qi-Gong-Meister und Heiler war”).

24 The film is enthusiastically welcomed by Michael Beckwith who speaks of an “inspiring documentary” that “has masterfully captured the vital healing work and global mission of Dr. Guo and Dr. Sha. Watching Soul Masters is a healing experience in itself and opens one’s heart in gratitude that such profound teachings are being generously disseminated in the West by Dr. Sha” (blurb given on the cover of the DVD-edition).

introduces the confrontation of Sha himself with this undefined force in 2003 and the significant changes introduced thereafter (Gladstone 2014, pp. 47-51).

The crucial confrontation with “the Divine” is described in many publications and it is definitely one of the decisive points in Sha’s own self-representation pointing to a superordinate religious framework.<sup>25</sup> According to the various descriptions the spiritual entity called “the Divine” introduced itself in April 2003 to Zhi Gang Sha during a “Power Healing Workshop for about one hundred people” held at a retreat centre in Soquel, California (Sha 2009a, p. xviii; Sha 2009b, p. xvii; Gladstone 2014, p. 47).<sup>26</sup> The spiritual entity, which “looked like a human being” and was “floating in the air”<sup>27</sup> approached with a rather concrete message for the surprised and reverent Sha, namely introducing “a spiritual law” called “the Universal Law of Universal Service” which is “the highest spiritual law in the universe” and “applies to the spiritual world and the physical world” (Gladstone 2014, p. 48). In the following conversation “the Divine” exhorts Sha (and consequently all human beings) to fulfil his duty as “a universal servant” (Gladstone 2014, pp. 47-49). After this first encounter a second *tête-à-tête* followed a couple of months later. At this time the definite plans of “the Divine” for Sha himself were revealed and he became elected as the “direct servant” (Gladstone 2014, p. 50) viz. “vehicle, and channel” (Sha 2009a, p. xx; Sha 2009b, p. xix), or “chosen direct servant and channel” (Sha 2009a, p. xxi). The main feature now introduced by contact with the transcendent force is Sha’s healing abilities, which become enhanced and from this moment on directly derive from “the Divine”.<sup>28</sup>

The event described is interpreted by referring to a system of cosmic periods and eras. In the book *The Power of Soul* Sha speaks of the beginning of a new “era for humanity, Mother Earth, and all universes” that is called “Soul Light Era” and dates exactly to August 8, 2003, i.e. the day of his encounter with “the Divine”.<sup>29</sup> This period is a time of “transition”, whose rather sketchy description includes typical apocalyptic features, such as natural disasters, drought, extreme temperatures, famine, political, religious, and ethnic wars, terrorism etc. All this is purportedly a necessary ingredient of a major transformation process, as expressed in the following quote: “The consciousness of humanity needs to be transformed. The suffering of humanity needs to be removed” (Sha 2009a, p. XVII). Evidently Sha interprets his own work and abilities in a greater

25 More or less parallel accounts of this decisive event can be found in Sha 2009a, pp. xviii-xxiii, Sha 2009b, pp. xvi-xxii; Sha 2010c, pp. xxxiv-xlii.

26 The centre in Soquel with the name “Land of Medicine Buddha” is a rather small but popular place which offers the opportunity for groups to hold sessions and retreats (see <http://dharma.landofmedicinebuddha.org/> [accessed July 27, 2017]). It is used by all kinds of spiritual groups, including Yoga practitioners or Buddhists (see Zopa, for a description of a Buddhist retreat there; Loundon 2002, p. 77, for another example).

27 Gladstone 2014, p. 47; see *ibid.*: “... he was a light being in the air. It was a human being form that was standing in the air.”

28 See Gladstone 2014, p. 50: “The Divine said, ‘This service is unique. From today you offer the healing. I will do the job.’”

29 Sha 2009a, p. XVI; see also Sha 2009b, p. xxii; Sha 2010d 12, for a summary of this topic.

horizon of major cosmic developments and upheavals. Although this content is not of major concern for his further development and Sha does not develop a major interest in apocalyptic sceneries, the purported timeline is elaborated a little bit more in the aftermath and in a couple of further publications. There is a basic distinction between various “eras” in history, namely *xia gu* 下古 (translated as “near ancient” by Sha), *zhong gu* 中古 (translated as “middle ancient”), and *shang gu* 上古 (translated as “far ancient”) that return cyclically and shape the history of the earth. On August 2003 *xia gu* allegedly ended and a new *shang gu* began, but there is no further explanation of how this cosmological model is understood (Sha 2014, p. 55, and a more extended version on 239-241; Sha 2012, pp. xliv-xlv).<sup>30</sup>

### 3.5 Downloading “soul software”

The most conspicuous feature of the encounter with the transcendent power called “the Divine” is the introduction of a specific terminology that becomes more and more important in the course of his further development. The healing process as purported by “the Divine” *via* Sha is described by using rather explicit IT language, as will be evident with the detailed description of the encounter and the healing process initiated in 2003: In the course of the above described crucial encounter “the Divine” transmits his healing force to a person named Walter with liver cancer. The phenomenon, i.e. the healing power itself is defined as a “golden light ball, that instantly started spinning.” To make Sha understand what just had happened “the Divine” compares the healing force to “software”:

“Software is program. Because you asked me to, I transmitted and downloaded my Soul Software for Liver to Walter. It is one of my permanent healing and blessing treasures. You asked me. I did the job. This is what it means for you to be my chosen direct servant and channel” (Sha 2009a, p. xxi).

For the person who receives this kind of “soul software” it is important to know that he has to continue doing practice with this material: “Walter must spend time to practice with my Soul Software [...] Tell him that simply to receive my Soul Software does not mean he will recover. He must practice with this treasure every day to restore his health, step by step”. Basically this “practice” consists in a chant where the formula “Divine Liver Soul Software heals me” is repeated

---

30 There is, however, a tendency to emphasise the contacts Sha has with the powers beyond. In 2008, for instance, Sha claims to have established contacts with another cosmic force, namely “the Source” that is introduced as the creator of heaven, the mother of earth and of all the planets, stars, and galaxies (Sha 2014, pp. 240-241). As will be shown below, it is allegedly “the Source” which opens up new modes of expressions according to the narrative provided by Sha.



“at least two hours a day”. At the end this will restore the sick man’s health: “If Walter does this, he could recover in three to six months” (Sha 2009a, p. xxii).

This description is the nucleus and explanation of the way Sha began to act as a healer starting in 2003. In his self-perception he is the one who functions as the intermediary authority between “the Divine”, which is the source of his healing abilities, and all the people with various illnesses. The events described are also the marker for a decisive change in Sha’s own healing techniques. Since that time, he has not practiced acupuncture, his former core discipline, but continued by relying “solely upon the Divine to heal” (Gladstone 2014, p. 323). The contact with “the Divine” legitimises his new attitude which makes him different from all the “normal” suppliers of various “Traditional Chinese Medicine” concepts.

The “downloading” mode developed into a rather flashy feature of his work, as Sha expanded his main website [www.drsha.com](http://www.drsha.com). The new website was launched in the second half of the year 2003, replacing the older version that was online before that, i.e. in the years 2001 and 2002. The older versions were restricted to basic information on Sha’s activities and products (including books and CDs for sale) and mainly visualised the image of “Sha’s golden healing ball” (recalling the healing force coming from “the Divine” as described in the detailed account of his encounter above), additionally surrounded by the above mentioned “divine sacred code to bring out Soul Language” or simply “body number” 3396815 that goes back to his teacher Guo. This website would represent the *religion online* typology according to Helland.<sup>31</sup> A totally new version of the website was launched in the second half of 2003 which initially still continued to use the “golden ball”-image (which was later disbanded), but added a separate and new aspect called “zhi gang sha soul software”. It had all kinds of “healing offers” in store, which could be downloaded after having paid the necessary fee by credit card, and literally provided a “shopping cart” where anyone interested might be able to put his desired healing item. This included the various parts and organs of the body, the soul, but also all kinds of abstract items, such as success and luck in life, expanding even to separate healing offers for pets and other beloved animals. The rather blatant approach was enhanced by the fact that the healing powers and healing software were available for various regions and parts of the body. For instance a “Tao Highest Source Committee Soul Mind Body Healing and Transmission System” that was applicable “For ONE Organ, System, Body Part or Condition (Physical, Mental or Emotional)” was offered at a price of 500€ “for EACH condition”. After having paid by credit card the person received the above mentioned “service” and had to “activate the permanent healing treasures and practice with them daily” with a “minimum of 1 hour of daily practice.” An enormous number of different offers with a constantly changing range covering all kinds of “Divine Downloads, Soul Operations & Soul Transplants” had been at the

---

31 See the information in the “preliminary remarks” of this contribution.



centre of the website<sup>32</sup> since then, and a kind of “shopping cart” attitude has become characteristic. In this context the specific medical teachings of the Chinese tradition that are relevant for Sha become important since it fosters the idea of separate regions and parts of the body which all need separate treatment (see Zhang 1990, pp. 120-212, for examples), or “software transplants”. Sha was very innovative in this regard and the structure of his website was obviously based on classical shopping websites (such as amazon.com), including reduced rates for bigger packages or the like. A separate “Divine Blessing Membership Program”, for instance, provided different healing modes which were offered at a reduced price. This system was enhanced over the years, mainly by clustering the offers into bigger packages. “The Divine” helped again in this case, since “on September 2, 2008” it “created the *Divine Soul Mind Body* Soul Healing and Download System” that might remove all kind of “soul or karmic blockages”, “mind or energy blockages”.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the downloading mode there were a couple of further possibilities to get in contact with Sha by using the internet. A popular feature were (and are to date) the so-called “teleclasses”, where interested people might follow Sha in healing or teaching seminars online. It is basically meetings with Sha on various occasions where he exerts his healing powers on sick people,<sup>34</sup> which anyone who wanted to participate virtually (and paid for it) could stream live online. This approach had much in common with the forms of internet participation as introduced by many movements and it would clearly correspond to the *online religion*-type as proposed by Christopher Helland.<sup>35</sup> All of these developments emerged with the foundation of the umbrella organisation that covers all the efforts of Sha and his followers, namely the “Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment™”, which has its main seat in San Francisco.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.6 Recent shifts: from IT-technology to traditional calligraphy

Interestingly the above described attitude towards the internet and the overall implementation of it in self-presentation has obviously been an object of major modifications in the last couple of years. It is basically a shift in the general attitude towards the internet which is not used in this blatant and extremely commercialised way anymore. The different accounts of the crucial encounter with “the

---

32 See the information at <http://soulmindbody-medicine.blogspot.co.at/> (accessed July 27, 2017), a website which keeps the above mentioned attitude to date.

33 See <http://drsha.com/index.php?id=352> (accessed July 21, 2008).

34 Examples of these sessions are available on the platform [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) combined with reports of and interviews with people who were allegedly healed by Sha. The official channel of Sha is at <https://www.youtube.com/user/zhigangsha> (accessed July 27, 2017).

35 Just recently there is also the possibility to follow “online courses” on various subjects, which are offered for a fee. At <http://spi.drsha.com/online-courses/> (accessed November 11, 2015) there is a chance to watch one of those videos for free.

36 See the information at <http://storefront.drsha.com/about-drsha-store> (accessed July 27, 2017).

Divine” in 2003, as given in many of his publications, provide the opportunity to get a detailed impression of this development.<sup>37</sup> As described above, the “download” mode was a constant feature in most of the descriptions cited. In the most recent biography of Sha in 2014, however, this conspicuous analogy to IT-language is missing. Instead of the usual “soul software” the healing force is simply referred to as “golden new soul” and even the crucial *mantra* for the healing process which originally was “Divine Liver Soul Software heals me” is now changed to a simple “Divine Liver” (Gladstone 2014, p. 50).<sup>38</sup> The change is also evident on the main website where the “download” mode is not present anymore and the former “shopping cart” attitude seems to be abolished. A decisive date in the religious development of Sha’s biography would be June 2013. The decisive force is now referred to as the “Source” (not “the Divine” anymore), which “creates” the “Source Calligraphy for healing, blessing, and life transformation” as presented in the book *Soul Healing Miracles*, which was published in 2013. Therein Sha speaks of the former book series on “soul power” that is now enhanced by the new series, namely on “soul healing miracles” (Gladstone 2014, p. 15). The latter expression refers to phenomena of spontaneous self-healing which can be improved by several techniques (see Sha 2014, p. 335, for details). This seems to be combined with a shift towards more traditional Chinese modes of media expressions, namely the use of “calligraphy” (*shufa* 書法). It is basically items drawn by Sha himself which just recently have begun to play a major role in the public appearances of Sha.<sup>39</sup> In addition he even offers courses in calligraphy for people interested in learning how to draw the Chinese characters.<sup>40</sup>

These courses are naturally connected with a kind of transformation or healing process which becomes initiated by the procedure itself. The calligraphies represent common Chinese expressions, most of them interestingly associated with Buddhism.<sup>41</sup> An important term represented in these calligraphies would be *ling guang* 靈光, one of the traditional expressions for the divine light around the Buddha, the “halo” surrounding him (and in a more general context simply a “miraculous column of light”). The “Ling Guang Calligraphy” is a kind of umbrella term used by Sha to label all of his calligraphies and it allegedly derives directly from the “Source”. In defining its function, we encounter once again a mix of traditional expressions of Chinese origin and various

---

37 See the detailed analysis and information above in this contribution.

38 Interestingly there is no separate entry for “(soul) software” or “download” in the index of Gladstone 2014. The term “Soul Software” is only used in one account of a devoted follower who describes his encounter with Sha in 2003 (Gladstone 2014, p. 202). The “download” metaphor is used only once by quoting from a kind of prayer: “Master Sha has downloaded more than ten permanent divine treasures to all humanity and all souls, including countless planets, stars, galaxies, and universes” (Gladstone 2014, p. 117).

39 Examples are provided in Sha 2014, where colour plates of Sha’s calligraphic efforts are inserted in the book.

40 A “Tao Calligraphy Special Training with Dr. and Master Sha” is offered on <https://www.drsha.com/tao-calligraphy-special-training-master-sha/> (accessed November 24, 2015). These training courses are offered “to chosen ones only”, viz. “only to two hundred people” and there seems to be a very exclusive stance on that as “Master Sha will personally approve all participants via Source Guidance.”

41 On Buddhism and *qigong* see the remarks by Penny 2005, pp. 42-44, on the references to Buddhism in Falun Gong.

other contexts. For instance, Sha defines the “Ling Guang Calligraphy” as the *jing qi shen* 精氣神 of the “Source” (Sha 2014, p. 241). *Jing qi shen* (literally, “essence, vital energy, spirit”) is a very common Chinese expression referred to as the “three treasures” (*sanbao* 三寶), which mainly goes back to Daoist sources and plays an essential role in the foundations of Chinese medicine.<sup>42</sup> Another of these calligraphies would represent *da cibe* 大慈悲 (literally, “great compassion”), or *da guang ming* 大光明 (literally, “great light”), both associated with Buddhism, or *san jiao chang tong* 三焦暢通 (literally, “free flowing of the three visceral cavities), an expression of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

A very conspicuous element of the further development in the late 2000s is the growing importance of all kinds of formulae which are used as *mantra*. Many publications contain specimens of these various short phrases or “prayers” as they are sometimes called. One example would be the “Sacred Text of the Tao of Healing, Rejuvenation, Longevity, and Immortality” (*Zhi liao fan lao huan tong chang shou yong sheng zhi dao* 治疗返老还童长寿永生之道) which basically consists of 220 phrases with wide ranging meanings.<sup>43</sup>

In addition Sha has also expanded into other areas of media implementation. In this regard an important aspect is his interest in music which has its roots in the use of all kinds of *mantra* and prayer formulae. Consequently, and with obvious confidence in his vocal abilities, Sha has composed several songs and even a “symphony”. They are all naturally connected with his healing powers and may enhance its benefits. On the cover of the *Soul Symphony of Yin Yang* (released in 2009) it is therefore stated: “This divine symphony can offer blessings of healing and rejuvenation. It can benefit your health on all levels: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. It also can offer blessings to all that exists, including Mother Earth, all planets and all universes. It is a most precious treasure.” The same applies for the collection entitled *The Voice of the Universe: Power Healing Music. Universal Light/yuzhou zhi guang* 宇宙之光 (“Light of the Universe”) that promises great success when chanting “universal light” “to bless whatever you wish to be blessed: your health, business, relationships, and any other issues”.<sup>44</sup> Sha has also introduced “audiobook”-versions of his major publications, usually “read by the author” himself.<sup>45</sup>

---

42 For the Daoist background of the trias *jing qi shen* see Despeux 2011.

43 The full text with Chinese characters, Pinyin transliteration, pronunciation guide, and English translation is provided in Sha 2012c, pp. 94-116.

44 Quoted from the cover text of the CD.

45 This information is given on the cover of two audiobooks of recent publications, namely of *Tao I. The Way of All Life*, released in 2010, and *Divine Healing Hands. Experience Divine Power to Heal You, Animals, and Nature, and to Transform All Life*, released in 2012.

## 4 Locating Sha's approach

When trying to evaluate the program of Sha and particularly his approach to the internet by locating it in a wider religio-historical framework there are basically two aspects that are important to consider. Firstly, it is the *qigong*-, Chinese medicine-, and Daoist (and sometimes Buddhist) background which forms the argumentative pool of most of the material Sha is putting forward. Secondly, there is the importance of the internet as a means for propagating his message, which has slowly become the central tool of his self-promotion, as was shown in the detailed portrait above. Both areas, though, are closely interconnected when taking into consideration specific developments in Mainland China during the last decades in regard to the *qigong*-scene. In addition the transnational aspect of Sha's endeavours is also worth examining.

### 4.1 Sha as qigong-teacher

Regarding the first topic a conspicuous feature of Sha's teachings and offers is a hodge-podge of various formulae, prayers, mantra and a confusing abundance of terminology which gives the program a specific Chinese flavour and standing. In this regard Sha might be compared to the plethora of *qigong* teachers and healers in China who only slightly differ from each other and draw on a mix of several traditions. As David Palmer has shown in his fundamental study of the *qigong* movement in Mainland China this marks already the very last stage of a development which began decades before and reached its peak in the so-called "*qigong* fever" (*qigong re* 气功热) in the 1980s and the 1990s (Palmer 2007, pp. 136-157; Chen 2003, pp. 36-60; Chen 1995). *Qigong* developed into a mass movement that provoked two major features which sooner or later caused a crash with the governing body, namely commercialisation and spiritualisation. For the first topic the movement called *Zhong Gong* 中功 is the best known example. It was founded by Zhang Hongbao 张宏堡 (1954-2006) in 1987 under the full name *Zhonghua yangsheng yi zhi gong* 中华养生益智功 (literally, "China Health and Wisdom Enhancement Practice") and had a strong emphasis on commercialisation from its beginning on. At its peak in 2003 the founder claimed to have around 38 million followers, but his organisation was forbidden by the government (Ownby 2008, pp. 69-76; Leung 2002, pp. 777-778). The second important aspect of the development of *qigong* in China particularly from the 1990s onwards has been its overall spiritualisation and the development of distinct religious communities within the *qigong* scene. This is in contrast to the initial idea of the Chinese state to foster a kind of "scientific" approach to the ancient Chinese health traditions (Palmer 2003, pp. 83-94; Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 92-93 and 120-122). Falun Gong is beyond doubt the most prominent example of a movement which became classified as an "evil cult" (*xiejiao* 邪教), but there are a couple of other examples that developed similarly (Marsh 2011, pp.

225-228, for details of the chronology of the Chinese state's actions; Thornton 2003, pp. 227-228; Perry 2001, pp. 170-171).<sup>46</sup>

To a certain extent Sha can be placed in this scheme with his development and approach as described above. He began as a typical healer integrating aspects of the traditional Chinese medical tradition, initially acupuncture and some advanced techniques, but later developed a specific religious interpretation of his healing powers at the beginning of the 2000s by referring to his encounters with “the Divine” and by introducing a kind of cosmological model where his own activity marks a crucial transitory period. These aspects clearly were enhanced over the course of time. It is important to highlight that Sha does not play a role in China and did not become the object of state action, but his program can clearly be interpreted as a result of the above described development.

## 4.2 The use of the Internet

As a second point the function and importance of the internet within the *qigong* context is a separate chapter. As Patricia Thornton has pointed out, the use of the internet became an integral part of the *qigong* and alternative religion scene in China right after the inception of growing state suppression (Thornton 2003 and 2008; for a summary see Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 292). She introduced the term “cyber-sectarianism” to denote this phenomenon, thereby including movements like the Suma Ching Hai movement<sup>47</sup>, along with Zhong Gong and Falun Gong. Those movements were banned in Mainland China, moved into cyberspace and “evolved into multinational conglomerates that blend media enterprises, public relations firms and commercial operations beneath a single quasi-corporate umbrella” (Thornton 2003, p. 217). Whereas Suma Ching Hai's virtual offer focused on promoting vegetarianism (and recently veganism) and the sale of merchandise such as pictorial books with poetry depicting the master in lovely surroundings, Zhong Gong and Falun Gong used cyberspace as a base for campaigns against the Chinese Communist Party (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 292 and 389-392).

---

46 See also the information on the *qigong* teacher Shen Chang (b. 1956) and his “Shen Chang Centre Human Body Applied Science and Technology” in Fn. 17 above.

47 Suma (= Supreme Master) Ching Hai viz. *Qinghai wushang shi* 清海無上師 (literally, “clear ocean, immeasurable teacher”) was born Trịnh Đăng Huệ in 1948 or 1950 as a Vietnamese of Chinese origin. She started her movement in the late 1980s in Taiwan. Her “Quan Yin method” viz. *Guānyīn fǎmén* 觀音法門 (literally, “method of Guanyin” = Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara) is close to and obviously based on the “meditation on the inner light and sound” (*surat shabd yoga* viz. *śuratśabad yoga*) of the Radhasoami teacher Sant Thakar Singh Ji Maharaj (1929-2005), whose disciple she became when staying in India for a certain time (see Irons 2004, Thornton 2008, pp. 188-189, Goossaert and Palmer 2011, pp. 291-292; a journalistic and rather critical overview is also given by Young 2010).

Sha, although acting outside of Mainland China, clearly adopts their strategies and adapts them to his specific interests. Therefore it seems appropriate to put his movement next to the above mentioned movements and alternatively classify it as a “new cyberreligious movement” (NCRM), a term introduced by Anastasia Karaflogka (285).

### 4.3 The transnational aspect

In addition Sha is also a typical representative of the “transnational” aspect of the *qigong* movement which became extremely important in the later 1990s and the 2000s (Chen 2003, pp. 159-184; see also Palmer 2014). The “Asian” *qigong* is an integral part of Western alternative religious and spiritual culture with various modes of adaptation (Madsen and Siegler 2011, pp. 237-239). A figure comparable to Sha in many aspects would be the Thai-born Chinese Mantak Chia (born 1944) who moved to New York City in 1979 and opened the “Taoist Esoteric Yoga Center”, later to be renamed “Healing Tao Center.”<sup>48</sup> Chia teaches a popularised, streamlined system of Chinese “internal alchemy” which he freely interprets and adjusts for his Western audience (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 292; see also Ryan 2008, p. 538). The same would apply for Sha, who is very active in becoming a part of the North American spirituality scene. As pointed out, his biographer William Gladstone makes up part of a heterogeneous group of authors, writers, and teachers including figures such as Michael Beckwith or Neale Donald Walsh, who, for instance, co-worked on the globally successful production of “The Secret” (released 2006) and its successor “The Moses Code” (2008). The key doctrine of this major film and merchandising projects is the so-called “law of attraction” which could be summarised in the idea that everything is attainable if one sincerely and absolutely believes in his goals. Alternative medicine is a key topic within this scene and the idea of “self-healing” through inner powers is in line with the doctrine. Interestingly Sha also shows obvious affinities to this all-pervading general *mantra* and stresses self-healing particularly in recent publications.<sup>49</sup>

---

48 As of today Chia offers his healing techniques in his “Tao Garden” in Thailand, whilst the “Healing Tao USA” is headed by one of his former students, Michael Winn (born 1951), and based in Asheville, North Carolina.

49 See, for instance, Sha 2009b, pp. 12-28, on the “soul mind body medicine” as a “complete soul mind body self-healing system”; or Sha 2010b, when describing the principle *wan wu geng xin* 万物更新 (“all things are renewed”) as the new way of healing in the “Soul Light Era” where “self-healing” will be the only method to apply for every cure; see also Sha 2010a, pp. 29-45, about “self-healing the physical body”.

## 5 Concluding remarks: From IT technology back to Calligraphy?

The thorough description of Sha's development given above is of course just a glimpse. As is evident with every supplier on the spiritual market and particularly in the ever changing field of new religious movements an important aspect is the constant changes, the reshaping, and the adaptation processes. Many concepts have a highly transitory nature and the organizations or movements can be perceived as 'experimental faiths' (Cowan and Bromley 2015: 197-198). Although in most cases religious founders have a background in a specific religious tradition, a new offspring has to undergo a very intense phase of formation by adapting new concepts and ideas to cope with the changing surroundings.

Interestingly it is exactly the use of IT language which is so prominent in the publications and with the appearance of the web in the 2000s that seems to have undergone changes just recently. One can only speculate about the possible reasons for this shift, but the all-too-obvious money-grabbing attitude of his internet approach might be one of the reasons. The attitude was criticised in various newspaper articles on Sha<sup>50</sup> and this is probably one of the reasons that he became discussed on "anti-cult" websites as well (although the criticism never reached very high levels and seems to have vanished only recently).<sup>51</sup>

The future will show whether "Dr. Zhi Gang Sha" will be able to thrive with his innovative take on Chinese traditions. He is beyond doubt just one example amongst many others who benefit from the positive image Asia and its legacy still have in the West.

---

50 Sha has received some controversial coverage in the media, where exactly this aspect is of major importance. See for example the article entitled "Dr. Sha, a Healer With a Modern Spin: He Downloads New Organs", by Lisa Katayama which appeared in the magazine *Wired* in 2007.

51 Sha's movement is classified as a "cult" on some websites and discussion forums that are associated with the US-American controversial "deprogrammer" and "exit counsellor" Rick Alan Ross, mainly his own *Cult Education Institute*, e.g. at <http://www.cultnews.com/2015/04/who-is-dr-master-zhi-gang-sha/> (accessed July 27, 2017), where there is apparently only very little information on Sha himself. Notwithstanding the lack of substantial material he is compared to the usual suspects of the "cult" scene. On the discussion forum of the "Cult Education Institute" there is a separate thread regarding Sha (<http://forum.culteducation.com/read.php?12,57321,page=1> [accessed July 27, 2017]), where Sha is associated with the "cult" term: His movement "is a very dangerous cult and is very seductive. Dr Sha makes incredible promises and claims." A major point of criticism is also the sometimes extremely high costs for his services. The thread, however, ended in 2009, and the initial fear that a new "cult" would sweep the earth seems to have vanished. Another website totally devoted to criticising Sha is <http://mastersha.weebly.com/>, which claims that the "purpose of this site is to gather and archive peoples [sic] thoughts and comments on 'Dr'/Master' Zhi Gang Sha in regards to him being a huckster, scam artist, and cult leader" (accessed July 27, 2017). The last entry on this site also dates to 2009.

## Bibliography

### *Books*

Bridie, A 2014, *The Making of Modern Chinese Medicine, 1850-1960*, Vancouver and Toronto, University of British Columbia Press, 2014.

Campbell, HA 2011, 'Internet and Religion', in Consalvo, M, Ess, Ch (ed.), *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, Malden and Oxford, John Wiley & Sons, pp. 232-250.

Chen, NN 2003, *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Chen, NN 1995, 'Urban Spaces and Experiences of Qigong', in Davis, D (ed.), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 347-362.

Cobb, J 1998, *Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World*, New York, Crown Publishers.

Cowan, D 2004, 'Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 255-272.

Cowan, D 2005, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge.

Cowan, D 2007, 'Teaching New Religious Movements on the World Wide Web', in Bromley, DG (ed.), *Teaching New Religious Movements*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 291-308.

Cowan, D, Bromley, DG 2015, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons.

Cowan, D, Dawson, LL 2004, 'Introduction', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 1-16.

Davis, E 1998, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, New York, Three Rivers Press.

Dawson, LL, Hennebry, J 2004, 'New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 151-173 (= a slightly edited version of an article that first appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, 1999, pp. 17-39).

Despeux, C 2011, 'Jing, qi, shen', in Pregadio, F (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, Volume 1, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 562-565.

Engen, DJ 2011, 'Massage', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 193-200.



Ess, Ch 1999, 'Prophetic communities online? Threat and promise for the church in cyberspace', *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* 34, 2, pp. 87–100.

Gladstone, W 2014, *Dr. and Master Sha: Miracle Soul Healer: Exploring a Mystery*, Dallas, BenBella Books.

Goossaert, V, Palmer, DA 2011, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Helland, Ch 2000, 'Religion Online/Online Religion and Virtual Communities', in Hadden, JK, Cowan D (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, London, JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000, pp. 205-224.

Helland, C 2005, 'Online Religion as Lived Religion. Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet', *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet: Volume 01.1. Special Issue on Theory and Methodology*. Online: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/5823/> (accessed December 18, 2015)

Hertzer, D 2010, 'Foreword', in Kirschbaum, B (ed.), *Atlas of Chinese Tongue Diagnosis. Volume I*. Seattle, Eastland Press, 2010, pp. xi-xvi (English translation of *Atlas und Lehrbuch der Chinesischen Zungendiagnostik*, Verlag für Ganzheitliche Medizin Dr. Erich Wuhr, 1998).

Houston, G 1998, *Virtual Morality: Christian Ethics in the Computer Age*, Leicester, Apollos.

Hsu, E 1999, *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Irons, E 2004, 'Suma Ching Hai', in Partridge, P (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religions: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities*, Oxford, Lion Publishing, 2004, pp. 263-264.

Jones, ME 2011, 'Diet and nutrition in Traditional Chinese Medicine', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 179-192.

Jiuzhang, Men, Lei, Guo 2009, *A General Introduction to Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press.

Kaltenmark, M 1953, *Le Lie-sien tchouan (Biographies légendaires des Immortels taoïstes de l'antiquité)*, Pékin, Université de Paris, Publications du Centre d'Études Sinologiques de Pékin.

Katayama, L 2007, 'Dr. Sha, a Healer With a Modern Spin: He Downloads New Organs', *Wired*, May 4, 2007; now available at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20080514174540/http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2007/04/drsha\\_0405](https://web.archive.org/web/20080514174540/http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2007/04/drsha_0405) (accessed July 27, 2017)

Krogh, MC, Pillifant, BA 2004, 'The House of Netjer: A New Religious Community Online', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds.), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 205-219.

- Leung, B 2002, 'China and Falun Gong: Party and society relations in the modern era', *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, 33, pp. 761–84.
- Lipton, EP 2002, *Religious Freedom in Asia*, New York, Nova Publishers, 2002.
- Liu, Dehua 1992, *Qi gong. Aux sources de la tradition antique de Pengzu. Traduit du chinois par Wang Chia-Yu. Préface du Lü Bingkui*, Mennecy, Édiru, 1992.
- Loundon, S 2001, *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists*, Boston, Wisdom Publications.
- Maciocia, G 1995, *Tongue Diagnosis in Chinese Medicine*, Revised Edition, Seattle, Eastland Press.
- Madsen, R, Siegler, E 2011, 'The Globalization of Chinese Religions and Traditions', in Palmer, DA, Shive, G, Wickeri, PhL, *Chinese Religious Life*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 227-240.
- Manek, NJ, Lin, Chunyi 2011, 'Qigong', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 167-178.
- Marsh, Ch 2011, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival*, New York and London, Continuum.
- Mayer, J-F 2000, 'Religious Movements and the Internet: The New Frontier of Cult Controversies', in Hadden, JK, Cowan D (eds.), *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, London, JAI Press/Elsevier Science, 2000, pp. 249-276.
- O'Leary, S, Brasher B 1996, 'The Unknown God of the Internet', in Ess, Ch (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication*, Albany, State University of New York Press, pp. 233–269.
- Ownby, D 2008, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, DA 2007, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Palmer, DA 2003, 'Modernity and Millennialism in China: Qigong and the Birth of Falun Gong', *Asian Anthropology* 2, 1, pp. 79–109.
- Palmer, DA 2014, 'Transnational Sacralizations: When Daoist Monks meet Global Spiritual Tourists', *Ethnos*, 79, 2, pp. 169-192.
- Perry, EJ 2001, 'Challenging The Mandate Of Heaven: Popular Protest in Modern China', *Critical Asian Studies* 33, 2, pp. 163–180.
- Penny, B 2005, 'The Falun Gong, Buddhism and 'Buddhist qigong'', *Asian Studies Review* 29, 1, pp. 35–46.

- Porter, N 2003, *Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Study*, Boca Raton, Universal-Publishers.
- Ryan, A 2008, 'Globalisation and the 'Internal Alchemy' in Chinese Martial Arts: The Transmission of Taijiquan to Britain', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 2, 4, pp. 525-543.
- Sakade, Yoshinobu 2011, 'Pengzu', in Pregadio, F (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*. Volume 2, London and New York, Routledge, p. 790-791.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2009a, *The Power of Soul. The Way to Heal, Rejuvenate, Transform, and Enlighten all Life*, New York, Atria.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2009b, *Divine Soul Mind Body Healing and Transmission System: The Divine Way to Heal You, Humanity, Mother Earth*, New York, Atria.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2010a, *Divine Transformation: The Divine Way to Self-clear Karma to Transform Your Health, Relationships, Finances, and More*, New York, Atria.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2010b, *Tao I: The Way of All Life*, New York, Atria.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2010c, *Tao II: The Way of Healing, Rejuvenation, Longevity, and Immortality*, New York, Atria.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2010d, *Seelensprache: Erkenne deine innere Wahrheit*, München, Knauer MensSana (German Translation of: *Soul Communication*, New York, Atria, 2009).
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2012, *Divine Healing Hands: Experience Divine Power to Heal You, Animals, and Nature, and to Transform All Life*, New York, Atria.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2008a, *Seele-Geist-Körper-Medizin. Eine Anleitung zur Selbstheilung durch Seelenkraft*, Third Edition, Burgrain, KOHA.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2008b, *Seelenweisheit. Kostbarkeiten zur Transformation deines Lebens*, Burgrain, KOHA.
- Sha, Zhi Gang 2014, *Wunder der Seelenheilung. Altehrwürdige und neue heilige Weisheiten, Erkenntnisse und praktische Techniken für die Selbstheilung des spirituellen, mentalen, emotionalen und physischen Körpers*, München, MVG Verlag.
- Sha, Zhi Gang, Xiu, Rulin 2014, *Soul Mind Body Science System. Grand Unification Theory and Practice for Healing, Rejuvenation, Longevity, and Immortality*, Dallas, BenBella Books.
- Thornton, PM 2003, 'The New Cybersects: Resistance and Repression in the Reform era', in Perry, E, Selden, M (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, 3rd Edition, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 215–238.
- Thornton, PM 2008, 'Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China', O'Brien, KJ (ed.), *Popular Protest in China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, pp. 179-205.

Wang, Yong Gao 2011, 'Acupuncture', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 125-144.

Wertheim, M 1999, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, London, Virago.

Wu, Jing-Nuan 2005, *An Illustrated Chinese Materia Medica*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press.

Xu, Bob 2011, 'Chinese herbal medicine and formulations', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 113-124.

Xuan, Wen 2011, 'Traditional Chinese Medicine: an overview', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 97-112.

Xutian, Stevenson, Sun, Feng, Tai, Shusheng 2011, 'Tai Chi', in Yuan, Chun-Su (ed.), *Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Boca Raton, CRC Press, pp. 145-166.

Yang, Shouzhong 1998, *The Divine Farmer's Materia Medica: A Translation of the Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing*, Boulder, Blue Poppy Enterprises.

Young, A 2010, 'Supreme Mystery', *VegNews*, October 2010, pp. 44-49.

Young, G 2004, 'Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity', in Cowan, D, Dawson, LL (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 93-106.

Zaleski, J 1997, *The Soul of Cyberspace*, San Francisco, HarperCollins.

Zhang, Enquin 张恩勤 ed., 1990, *Chinese Qigong/ Zhongguo Qigong 中国气功. A Practical English-Chinese Library of Traditional Chinese Medicine*, Shanghai, Shanghai Zhongyi xueyuan chubanshe 上海中医学院出版社.

## **DVD**

*Soul Masters. Dr Guo & Dr. Sha* 2009, DVD, Ontario Limited. Directed by Sande Zeig.

## **Audio Material**

*The Voice of the Universe: Power Healing Music. Universal Light (yuzhou zhi guang 宇宙之光 [Light of the Universe])* 2002, CD, Qi Records, Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment.

*Soul Symphony of Yin Yang* 2009, CD, Institute of Soul Healing and Enlightenment. Produced by Master Zhi Gang Sha and Mr. Chun Yen Chiang.

*Tao I. The Way of All Life. Read by the Author* 2010, CD, Heaven's Library Publication Corp. Produced by Dr. & Master Zhi Gang Sha.

*Divine Healing Hands. Experience Divine Power to Heal You, Animals, and Nature, and to Transform All Life. Read by the Author* 2012, CD, Heaven's Library Publication Corp. Produced by Dr. & Master Zhi Gang Sha.

## Biography

Franz Winter has received PhDs in Classical Studies (1999) and Religious Studies (2005) from the University of Vienna, and a Habilitation in Religious Studies (2010) from the same university, after having studied and done research at the Universities of Graz, Salzburg, Vienna, in Rome, at Boston University (Fulbright), and in Tokyo and Kyoto. He currently teaches at the University of Graz. Among his major areas of interest are the history of contact between Europe and Asia from antiquity to modern times, new religious movements in East and West, history of Buddhism, Western Esotericism, religion and the media. For further information see <http://homepage.univie.ac.at/franz.winter/>

Franz Winter, PD Mmag.Ddr  
Institut für Religionswissenschaft  
Universität Graz  
Heinrichstraße 78  
A-8010 Graz  
Austria  
[franz.winter@uni-graz.at](mailto:franz.winter@uni-graz.at)