

Halvor Eifring

Sitting quietly in China - a Participatory Genealogy of a Sensitive Term

One should perhaps think that sitting quietly was an innocent thing to do. Not so in China. The word *jìng-zuò* 靜坐 - literally, 'quiet-sit', but more often used as a general term for meditation - is a word to be avoided if you do not want to come in trouble.

Political sensitivity

One obvious reason for the sensitivity of the term *jìng-zuò* is that it also has a political meaning. Sitting quietly is sometimes done for political reasons even in Europe, as in sit-down or sit-in strikes. In China, sitting quietly may be a way of protesting, of telling without words of one's dissatisfaction with the current situation, or of expressing one's demands. In this sense, the term *jìng-zuò* is often combined with the words *shì-wēi* 示威 'to demonstrate' and *kàng-yì* 抗議 'to protest', sometimes also with *jué-shí* 絕食 'to hunger-strike'.¹

This usage of the word is also found outside the Chinese mainland. During Taiwan's democratization process in the 1990s, sitting quietly in protest, often in front of the Presidential Office Building, became one of the favoured ways of expressing one's discontents. Professor Iau-hoei Chien 簡曜輝, with whom I have often collaborated in developing Acem Taiwan School of Meditation 台灣雅肯靜坐學會, once told me that a friend had been shocked to hear that he was involved in *jìng-zuò* active-ties. His friend associated the term with oppositional demonstrations, and at the time Professor Chien represented the ruling party as Director of the Department of Physical Education under the Ministry of Education.

¹ A Google search for 靜坐示威 yielded 214,000 results, while one for 靜坐抗議 yielded 1,340,000 results (30 November, 2013).

More recently, as I was going to translate a lecture on *jìng-zuò* 'meditation' for a student organization at National Taiwan University in March 2014, I was told by the organizers that the turn-out would be low, since many students were busy with their *jìng-zuò* 'sit-down protest' in the Legislative Council, which had been occupied by students opposed to a free-trade deal with the People's Republic.

Spiritual sensitivity

In Mainland China, however, the main reason for the sensitivity of the term *jìng-zuò* lies not so much in its openly political meaning, but rather in the fact that sitting quietly, often with closed eyes, and being engaged in inner activities far beyond the reach of the party-state, is itself a sensitive issue. The final blow to the word as a viable term for legitimate pursuits came when 10,000 Falungong practitioners surrounded the headquarters of the party and the government in Zhongnanhai in Beijing in April 1999, to protest against perceived oppression and to demand official recognition. As is well known by now, the eventual result was a fierce and often extremely brutal crackdown on the group. During the protest, Falungong members were actually mostly standing rather than sitting, but their spiritual training included (and still includes) forms of meditation, for which they used the term *jìng-zuò*.

After this event, the promotion of *jìng-zuò* in China became increasingly difficult. Although the form of meditation I was teaching was both secular and apolitical, the word *jìng-zuò*, as well as the fact that meditators were sitting quietly with their eyes closed, had become problematic. During my half-year academic stay at Peking University in 2000 I was advised to keep a low profile regarding my meditation activities, though some people did learn the technique. Later, I sometimes continued to teach meditation, but mostly on an individual basis to people who had come across Acem's Chinese website and had expressed their interest by e-mail. Even so, the atmosphere was sometimes tense. When a Chinese man learned the technique in a hotel room in Beijing a couple of years later, the "Do not disturb" sign on the door had been blown down by the wind, with the result that the cleaning personnel began knocking on the door just as we were starting the instruction process. The man showed signs of almost excessive fear, making me wonder if he was really that scared, or if he was only there to check on me and felt that he needed to look scared for the sake of his own credibility. Another time, I rented the top floor of a Guangzhou hotel for a full two-day course with eight or ten participants. The first day went by without trouble, except that the hotel

manager came in during a group meditation and was politely asked to wait a little, since we were practising a relaxation technique. The next day also seemed to pass uneventfully, but towards the end the participants told me that a uniformed guard had been standing outside the locale the entire day, apparently to make sure we would not behave in ways that might compromise the hotel.

In 2007, I began teaching meditation in the southeastern city of Xiamen. By now the Falungong movement was so completely eradicated from the Chinese mainland that the sense of danger clinging to meditation activities was almost gone, at least in this open and tolerant seaport just across from Taiwan. Many local participants used their virtual and physical networks to promote the technique. In the end, however, language still did matter. I was firmly advised to avoid the word *jìng-zuò*, and instead to call what we were doing *jìng-xīn* 靜心 - literally, quiet heart/mind. Like *jìng-zuò*, this latter term has a long history in Chinese, going back to the Daoist thinker Zhuāngzǐ 莊子 (c. 369-286 BC), and in Taiwan and then China it has sometimes been used as an alternative translation of the word meditation, particularly in the Osho organization. There is, of course, no inherent reason why cultivating a quiet heart or mind should be any less sensitive than sitting quietly. However, the connotation of a compound is not simply the combined product of each component of the term, but just as much of the history of the compound itself. Both the political and the spiritual connotations of *jìng-zuò* were to be shunned, simply to avoid unwanted attention from authorities who would happily accept (or at least ignore) our activities as long as we did not use the wrong word.

Meditative terminology

The 12-volume Chinese dictionary *Hànyǔ dà cídiǎn* 漢語大詞典 gives four meanings to the term *jìng-zuò*, roughly translated below:²

Sit calmly and quietly

Sit calmly with closed eyes, ridding the mind of thoughts; a method used by Confucians and Buddhists

A type of Qigong therapy; closing the eyes, moving the body's energies, ridding the mind of thoughts, sitting calmly without moving

Sit down for a long time without leaving the place, in order to

² *Hànyǔ dà cídiǎn* 漢語大詞典 vol. 11 p. 569.

have certain demands met or to express protest

Let us first focus on definitions 2 and 3 and return to the general meaning (definition 1) and the protest meaning (definition 4) below. One may wonder why meaning variants 2 and 3 are not amalgamated into a single definition, since both refer to forms of meditation. As so often in China, the explanation is political. While Buddhism and Confucianism have been looked upon with suspicion as remnants of "feudal" thinking and religion, the Communist regime defined Qigong as "scientific" - and therefore good - already in the 1950s.

Why are Buddhism and Qigong mentioned at all? In modern Western books on meditation, we are repeatedly told that "quiet sitting", whether in China or Japan, refers to Neo-Confucian practices stemming from the Song dynasty thinker Zhū Xī 朱熹 (1130-1200).³ We are even told that the Buddhists "sit in *chán*", the Daoists "sit in oblivion", and the Neo-Confucians "sit in quietude".⁴ Such formulations would be even more elegant, however, if they were correct. In fact, the term *jìng-zuò* appeared long before Neo-Confucianism, and although it is true that it got an extra boost during the Song dynasty, when it became a common term for any type of seated meditation, it was never restricted to Neo-Confucianism, but was always used in Buddhism and Daoism as well. In the dictionary definitions, definition 2 covers Confucianism and Buddhism, while definition 3 is closer to Daoist thought.

It is worth noting that a majority of Chinese terms for meditation relate to the body, in contrast to corresponding terms in Sanskrit, Arabic, Greek or Latin, which more typically refer to mental states or practices. While the unity of body and spirit is a widespread issue in several meditative traditions, the strong physical emphasis of Chinese meditation terms is unique, and it is reminiscent of a similar tendency in Chinese medicine. *Jìng-zuò* is only one of a number of terms involving seated body posture. The terms *dǎ-zuò* 打坐 and *jiǎo-fū-zuò* 跏趺坐 both refer to a cross-legged seated position, while *zhèng-zuò* 正坐 and *duān-zuò* 端坐 refer to any form of properly aligned sitting; all four terms may refer to the posture as such or to the practice of meditation performed while sitting. The Buddhist terms *zuò-chán* 坐禪 and *chán-zuò* 禪坐 combine the verb for

³ See in particular Rodney L. Taylor: *The Confucian Way of Contemplation: Okada Takehiko and the Tradition of Quiet-Sitting*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.

⁴ In Chinese, *zuò-chán* 坐禪, *zuò-wàng* 坐忘 and *jìng-zuò* 靜坐, respectively.

sitting with the Indian loanword *chán*, from Sanskrit *dhyāna* 'meditation'. The Daoist term *zuò-wàng* 坐忘 combines sitting with for-getting, reflecting the idea that meditation involves forgetting every-thing in order to realize a dimension beyond all phenomena. Some terms are linked to the breath, such as *shǔ-xī* 數息 'counting the breath', *guān-xī* 觀息 'observing the breath', *zhǒng-xī* 踵息 'breathing with the heels', *dān-tián hū-xī* 丹田呼吸 'breathing into an energy centre just below the navel', *yùn-qì* 運氣 'moving the cosmic energies residing in body and breath', and *qì-gōng* 氣功 'the skill of manipulating the cosmic energies residing in body and breath'. Other terms are not explicitly body-oriented, but typically refer to bodily practices, such as *gōngfū* 功夫 (or 工夫) for 'meditative body-mind cultivation' or, in modern parlance, simply 'martial arts', *cún* 存 and *cún-sī* 存思 for visualization practices that often link specific deities to the intestines of one's own body.

From quiet sitting to meditation

The history of the term *jìng-zuò*, as far as we know it, started in what seems an unlikely source of meditative wisdom, the Legalist political philosopher Hán Fēi 韓非 (c. 280–233 BC). He relates how Duke Ling of Wèi 衛靈公 once hears a mysterious and exceedingly attractive form of music that he orders his court musician to copy, whereupon the court musician spends a night "sitting quietly plucking his zither to copy it" 靜坐撫琴而寫之. In this case, the term seems, on the surface, to mean little more than "sitting quietly", and this literal meaning of the expression is still in use (as in dictionary definition 1 cited above). However, the word *jìng* 靜 'quiet; silent; still; tranquil' often had and still sometimes has semi-mystical connotations. The quiet seated absorption of the court musician may go beyond the mental focus of a professional artist and border on the mystical or magical, possibly by establishing a contact with spirits, as argued by the Japanese historian Ryūzō Nakajima 中嶋隆藏.⁵ For it turns out that the music the Duke has heard stems from a long-dead court musician of by-gone days, who has drowned himself close to where they hear the music, and whose ghost presumably performs the music. Another court musician warns them that whoever hears this music played will see his native soil dismembered.

⁵ Ryūzō Nakajima 中嶋隆藏, *Jingzuò: Shijian yǔ lìshǐ* 靜坐—實踐與歷史. Translated by Chén Wēifēn 陳瑋芬 et al. Hsinchu: Guólì Qīnghuá dàxué chūbǎnshè, 2011.

After Buddhism came to China in the first centuries of the Common Era, the frequency of the term *jìng-zuò* gradually increased. It often had the same sense as in Hán Fēi: sitting quietly, perhaps with the aim of establishing some kind of supernatural contact. The word also came to be used in more regular meditative contexts. According to Nakajima's research, however, it is not until the Song dynasty that the word became a widespread standard term for meditation in Buddhism, Daoism and Neo-Confucianism.

Modern meditation

When the term *jìng-zuò* ran into problems on the Chinese mainland, one of the terms I was suggested to use instead was *míng-xiǎng* 冥想. This is an old term for deep reflection, in use at least since the Jin dynasty monk and literatus Zhidūn 支遁 (314-366). When the Western term *meditation* needed a Chinese translation in the early 20th century, the first choice was not *jìng-zuò* but *míng-xiǎng* (through Japanese *mei-sō*, which is written with the same characters). At the time, the English word *meditation* was more often used for deep reflection than for the kind of meditation techniques that became popular in the West from the 1960s onward. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* was, accordingly, rendered as *Míng-xiǎng lù-chāo* 冥想錄抄. The word is still used for meditation, and has acquired the new meanings of the western term.

The modern use of the term *jìng-zuò* was not so much a result of direct western influence as of the larger process of East Asian modernization. In Japan, Okada Torajirō 岡田虎二郎 (1872-1920) became an active proponent of the use of meditation for health, first referred to in Chinese journals in 1913.⁶ In China, Jiǎng Wéiqiáo 蔣維喬 (1873-1958) did more or less the same, partly building on Okada's methodology, partly developing his own style; his talks were first cited in Chinese journals in 1915.⁷ Both Okada and Jiǎng used the term *jìng-zuò*, or, in Japanese pronunciation, *sei-za*. This term also came to be used for Indian yogic meditation as early as the 1940s. In the second half of the 20th century, *jìng-zuò* commonly translated the English term *meditation* when referring to various Asian techniques that had been exported to the West and then reimported to Asian countries: *chāo-jué jìng-zuò* 超覺靜坐 'Transcendental Meditation',

⁶ Dōngfāng zázhi 東方雜誌 vol. 8 (1913) no. 7 pp. 1-4; Jiàoyù yánjiū 教育研究 1913 no. 1 pp. 92-92 (Shanghai).

⁷ Xuéshēng 學生 vol. 2 (1915) no. 11 pp. 21-24; Jiàoyù yánjiū 教育研究 1915 no. 22 pp. 10-12 (Shanghai).

yǎkěn jìng-zuò 雅肯靜坐 'Acem Meditation', zhèng-niàn jìng-zuò 'mindfulness meditation' etc.

The purely political use of the term *jìng-zuò* seems to have started with a number of reports on *jìng-zuò bà-gōng* 靜坐罷工 'sit-down strikes' among American automobile workers in 1937.⁸ In the same year, there were also reports on sit-down strikes in India.⁹ The fashion even spread to China, and two years later one journal brings a stage photograph of seventeen Chinese concubines on a sit-down strike to demand better treatment.¹⁰ The collocations *jìng-zuò shì-wēi* 'sit-in demonstration' and *jìng-zuò kàng-yì* 'sit-in protest' only occurred later, at least in Mainland China, and are only documented from around 1960, by then always in reports on protests outside China.¹¹

Political meditations

On the surface, there is no other connection between the political and meditative meanings of *jìng-zuò* than the fact that both take place in seated position. We have seen from other contexts, however, that meditative practice may take on political meanings, as when *vipassanā* meditation was used as a symbol of national identity and opposition to British colonial rule in Burma and, more recently, as a symbol of democratic opposition to the military junta of the same country.¹² The heading of a Chinese journal article from the early period of sit-down strikes in 1937 seems to indicate a connection between political protest and contemplative meditation: "The sit-down (*jìng-zuò*) workers' movement reaches the Egyptian desert; contemplatives resist police".¹³ In contemporary China, the sensitive nature of a seemingly innocent term like *jìng-zuò* underlines the fact that inner activities beyond the reach of the party-state are judged to be potentially dangerous. Perhaps, therefore, the two meanings of *jìng-zuò* are closer to each other than first envisaged.

⁸ Dōngfāng zázhi 東方雜誌 vol. 34 (1937) no. 6 p. 1.

⁹ Guówén zhōubào 國聞週報 vol. 14 (1937) no. 18 p. 1.

¹⁰ Jīnchéng yuèkān 金城月刊 no. 11 (1939) p. 1.

¹¹ Rénmín rìbào 人民日報 10 Dec. 1959 p. 6 (*jìng-zuò shì-wēi*), Rénmín rìbào 人民日報 17 Aug. 1963 p. 4 (*jìng-zuò kàng-yì*).

¹² Gustaaf Houtman: "Vipassanā in Burma: Self-government and the Ledi Ānāpāna Tradition". In Halvor Eifring (ed.), *Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist Meditation: Cultural Histories*, Oslo: Hermes, 2014, pp. 91-116.

¹³ 埃及沙漠中發生靜坐工潮，修道者抗拒警察。Tújué 突崛 vol. 4 no. 3-4 p. 63.

Lars Ellström

Walking Through China

Between March 2009 and November 2011 I walked from Beijing to Kashgar. I walked in stages, concluding each stage at some location to which I would later return for the next one. The aim was to see the country, the life in villages and towns and, specifically, to meet people and to learn how they go about their lives. For that reason I walked alone with the aim of focusing on the dialogue with those I met along the road. However, man is a social being and I would not have been able to cover the more than 500 kilometres to Kashgar and to transform the walk into a book ("Vägen till Kashgar", "Road to Kashgar") without interested support from some close friends. One of those friends was Torbjörn Lodén with whom I continually discussed matters related to Chinese history and language. The following reports from days 42 and 43 of my trek bear the impact of those exchanges. Of course, any remaining confusions are solely due to my own ignorance.

DAY 42: YULIN-ERLIN

In the morning of May 4th, I check out of the hotel in Yulin and walk with my backpack on my back to the northern bus terminal at which I arrived yesterday from Yiqi. I soon find a little local bus which can take me northwards along national road 210 towards the border to Inner Mongolia.

On my previous visit to Yulin I had found a couple of local tourist maps giving much more detailed information about the road network in this region than the maps I bought in Beijing. After studying them, I have decided to continue my walk along a side road off the 210 some distance south from the place I walked to last time. This way I will be able to walk smaller village roads along the border between Shaanxi and Inner Mongolia and also close to some of the oldest remains of the Great Wall. Even if this is the southern part of the Ordos desert there is, according to the maps, a string of villages along the roads I intend to walk. Thus I will have access to water, food and perhaps even hostels for the night.

ORIENTALISKA STUDIER

Nr 138, 2014

Tidskriften Orientaliska Studier utges av *Föreningen för orientaliska studier* vid Stockholms universitet och utkommer med 3-4 nummer per år.

MEDLEMSKAP & PRENUMERATION

Medlemskap i *Föreningen för orientaliska studier* kostar 120 kr/år och inkluderar tidskriften. Medlemskapet är öppet för alla privatpersoner och erhålles genom att medlemsavgiften insättes på föreningens postgirokonto 45 90 26-1.

Enbart prenumeration kostar 150 kr/år och beställning av enstaka lösnummer 30 kr inklusive porto.

För prenumeranter och medlemmar utanför Norden är priset 300 kr/år inklusive porto.

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<http://www.orientaliskastudier.se>

REDAKTION

Ansvarig utgivare: Torbjörn Lodén
Redaktör: Gabriel Jonsson

ISSN: 0345-8997
Tryck: Kalejdoskop
Omslag: Hiroko Kimura

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