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A person is lying on their back on a white mat on a stone courtyard floor, performing a yoga pose. The background features traditional Chinese architecture with dark wooden beams, red window frames, and a grey tiled roof. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

The New Yoga Superpower

Millions of Chinese are embracing the



ancient Indian practice of yoga—or at least its American version. **By Daniel Simpson**

When China's first yoga studio opened nine years ago, its founders were a couple of women from California. Robyn Wexler had been teaching asana in the gym of a luxury Beijing hotel while looking for a space more conducive to holistic practice. Her partner, Mimi Kuo-Deemer, took photos for a living but was eager to devote more time to yoga instruction. Together, they decided to create what they had sought in vain: “a clean room with a simple wooden floor.”

“We got the idea on holiday in San Francisco,” Kuo-Deemer recalls. “I mean, how hard could it be to create that in Beijing?” They found it in a Qing Dynasty residence. Secluded from busy traffic in a quadrangle, Yoga Yard was a haven of tranquility. To Wexler, it epitomized “consistency, stability, and continuation in a city undergoing so much transformation and change, building up and tearing down.”

Initially, classes were in English. Though Kuo-Deemer and Wexler speak Mandarin, most students were expatriates. That didn't last long. Across Beijing, Shanghai, and other metropolises, more and more gyms were offering yoga, hiring instructors who'd learned from DVDs and hyping it as the hottest trend

in fitness. Practicing was the acme of modernity: a way of channeling energy to succeed. “It's a symbol of the outside world,” Kuo-Deemer explains. “Like thin women on the beach.”

In less than a decade, yoga studios have sprouted all over China. They're dotted along urban sidewalks, and classes can even be found in the hinterlands. They've spread so fast that no one's keeping count. Estimates suggest that 10 million Chinese now practice regularly, compared to about 16 million Americans. Long before it displaces the U.S. economy, let alone its military, China will be the world's new yoga superpower.

“Yoga went to China via America,” explains Faeq Biria, one of B. K. S. Iyengar's leading disciples, who's been visit-

ing Beijing to train teachers since 2008. “They see it from an American point of view. At the beginning, they're attracted by the byproducts: to be handsome, to be pretty, to digest well, sleep well, have a nice body, be intelligent, unstressed. It's hard work to take them toward the deeper aspects.”

A burgeoning industry tempts them with distractions, hawking figure-hugging sportswear on models with Westernized features. Most styles of yoga are available, although the emphasis is squarely on physical practice. It's often an aspirational activity: the price of a class in Shanghai can be higher than in Los Angeles.

But there's more to Chinese yoga than meets the eye. As Biria observes, there are internal connections to indigenous arts, from Taoist tai chi to Traditional Chinese Medicine. “The moment you connect to the energetics of yoga, they catch it so fast,” he says. “Their eyes shine and they grasp it, because it's in their culture.”

For now, most young Chinese neglect this heritage. It's out of sync with their urge to consume new products. But that materialism is only skin-deep. Beneath the surface of its rapid transmutation, the country is troubled. While a few get improbably rich, a billion others struggle with inflation, unemployment, and migration. These widening inequalities breed resentment and despair, which drive increasing numbers to suicide.

“There's an urgent need here,” says Chen Si, a journalist working to promote more classical yoga teaching. He organized a conference this summer that brought Iyengar and a dozen of his protégés to Guangzhou, China, face-to-face with 1,300 students. Billed as



WESTERN INFLUENCE A yoga studio in Lijiang, Yunnan.

Previous spread: blue jean images / Getty Images; Left: Helen Hu

the China-India Yoga Summit, the event was endorsed by officials in New Delhi and Beijing, whose relations have been strained since the 1950s, when India opposed China's seizure of Tibet and gave refuge to the 14th Dalai Lama. Border wars promptly ensued.

Trade has diminished their hostility, culminating in a visit to India last December by Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, who paid tribute to Gandhi, quoted the Upanishads, and waxed lyrical on how Buddhism shaped China. To top it off, he announced that his daughter practiced asana.

Unlike the Dalai Lama or Falun Gong, a spiritual discipline banned in China, yoga is being embraced by the state. Chinese authorities talk it up as a force for "harmony," echoing their coun-

to China, and China was thus reduced to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society," an official exhibition declared. Visiting London later, Wen added: "This has taught the Chinese never to talk to others in a lecturing way, but to respect nations on the basis of equality."

Fearing unrest, the government is wary of outside ideas, especially if they mention liberation. While Communist regimes were crumbling in Eastern Europe in 1989, non-violent protestors were massacred in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. A decade later, Falun Gong was denounced as a cult, its followers tortured for meditating en masse. Yoga proponents have had to walk a fine line, demonstrating that the practice enhances individual well-being without undermining collective order.

everyone was fired. "It was an immediate reaction," says John Abbott, *Yoga Journal's* former publisher, who set up the venture in China with government backing. "It was closed and we were notified."

Abbott was told that an anonymous "rogue website" had been discovered, hosted in Singapore, and "titled something like *Yoga Journal Against China*." It apparently listed references to Tibet in the U.S. edition and included photos. "I understand that one of the photos was me in a quasi-embrace with the Dalai Lama," Abbott says. *Yoga Journal* says it's "in the early exploratory phase" of plans to reopen.

According to Wang Zhicheng, a philosophy professor at Zhejiang University: "We basically have religious freedom in China, unless somebody

CHINA NOW HAS A YEARNING FOR MORE ON THE SPIRITUAL LEVEL AND HAS A TRADITION OF SEEKING NEW IDEAS.

terparts in India. "There is a growing social conflict due to our relentless pursuit of material objects," an Indian diplomat told the summit. "Yoga can be a useful instrument for promoting social harmony. After all, only individuals at peace and in harmony with themselves can build a peaceful and harmonious society."

By inviting an Indian master to teach, Chen aimed to empower the Chinese to practice yoga more deeply, and thereby foster social change. While these are sensitive issues in a one-party state, he feels fairly secure. "China has a tradition of embracing foreign cultures and making them its own," he says. "That's why it's been so vibrant."

A Fine Line

But it's not always that clear-cut, for reasons the Communist Party stressed in July, when it marked its 90th anniversary. "Since British invaders launched the opium war in 1840, the Western capitalist powers came one after another

In the early days of the yoga boom, teachers felt watched. "We had some very awkward stiff men who'd appear in class," one remembers. "Like totally out of context, with fake leather belts."

This mutual suspicion has subsided as China adapts to a breakneck pace of change. Falun Gong's popularity horrified hard-liners, who thought it was building a network beyond their control. In contrast, yoga studios have been slow to form a national federation. The government seems to see them as allies, not as hotbeds of subversion, apparently hoping they'll calm a restive populace. Booming business also helps. At the summit in Guangzhou, most discussions were focused on marketing.

Yet as recently as 2009, officials shuttered a Chinese version of *Yoga Journal*, citing political objections. Editors are confused about what happened, and some say other factors were involved, such as jockeying for power at the magazine's state-run media partner. Regardless, ev-

uses religion to stir up tensions." Yoga, he adds, is "more like a spiritual-mental practice, a way of thinking, or a way of keeping healthy and happy," and "Chinese culture very much appreciates the 'cultivation of character,' which is basically a humanist idea."

It's also at the core of Confucian ethics, which held sway, at least in theory, for over 2,000 years. Order was defined in terms of moral standards, to be upheld by everyone from paupers to the emperor. Mao Zedong exploded this ideal, saying power derived from the muzzle of a gun. In their efforts to reconcile commerce with control, his successors have revived the spirit of Confucius. "The state strengthens the building of socialist spiritual civilization through spreading education in high ideals and morality," reads the Chinese Constitution.

This amounts to propaganda, at odds with the yogic goal of shedding illusions. But state "ideals" are hard to instill in practice. Despite placards extolling "a

peaceful society,” there are protests all the time in modern China, in places few outsiders ever hear of. Farmers riot when land is grabbed for factories and apartments, as urban sprawl eats badly needed crops. In the cities, migrant workers fight police, and polluted water and smog trigger rants at apparatchiks.

The government tolerates limited dissent. Critical blogs are prolific, yet comments are censored. Letting off steam is tacitly allowed, but cross the line into rallying resistance and you’re in trouble. Journalists sometimes get beaten and activists jailed. Minorities are enemies within. Talking about devolution is taboo. And the number of people executed is classified. It’s said to be more than the rest of the world combined.

Most people’s lives are full of challenges: affording food as prices soar; finding wives when men outnumber women, thanks to sex-selective abortion and a one-child policy; securing jobs; and surviving grueling hours without the right to unionize. Workers at Apple’s Chinese supplier have dived to their deaths from factory windows. Women often kill themselves by drinking pesticides. Domestic violence is rampant.

“What we call modernization brings so much mental and physical stress,” says Chen Si, the yoga summit organizer. “Compared to drugs and psychiatry, yoga is a much better tool for social harmony.”

But is it reaching the masses, or just urban elites? So far, it’s mainly the latter, though as people explore connections with Chinese arts, more might practice by themselves.

A Booming Market

China’s largest chain of yoga studios, which boasts more than 20,000 students, has a two-tier price plan. In big cities, Yogi Yoga

charges \$1,000 for unlimited access for a year—a quarter of average annual income nationwide. At provincial franchises, fees drop to \$10 a month. Yogi Yoga made \$4 million last year, including earnings from teacher training and equipment sales. Revenue has quadrupled since 2005.

“There is a big market,” agrees Birjoo Mehta, a visiting teacher from Mumbai, “but what happens if the brand doesn’t meet its promises?” Addressing Chinese businesses at the summit, he urged them to develop their understanding of yoga and present it more authentically: “Do not restrict yourself with the technology you have. There needs to be a continuous technological development.”

When Yogi Yoga opened in 2003, it promised to “bring pure yoga from India.” This arrived in the form of Yogi Mohan, a teacher from Rishikesh. But when he settled in China, he was shocked: people asked if he’d studied yoga in America.

To educate them, he and his partner at Yogi Yoga, the Beijing publisher Yin Yan, translated books. They began with Iyengar’s *Light on Yoga*, then a couple of texts by Swami Kuvvalayananda. In 2005, they invited Iyengar to teach. He declined at first but sent several senior

pupils. Workshops by foreign yogis have grown more common, as have 200-hour teacher-training programs, some with Yoga Alliance accreditation.

Priorities are starting to change. Indian teachers are now in demand, and those who are willing to emigrate get paid well. “People have become more appreciative of what yoga is really about,” Yin says. “They’re not just working on the physical level.”

Away from better-run centers, however, instruction varies wildly. Some teachers claim to be qualified when they’re not. “I’ve basically been crossing their names off a list,” says a woman who lives on the coast, north of Shanghai. “These days I mainly practice at home alone.”

Meanwhile, countless companies cash in. The premier Chinese sports brand, Li Ning, is launching a yoga line, while some of the attire sold by rivals looks fit for the disco. Built-in push-up bras are popular among practitioners, most of whom are women under 35. Other products also prize form over function. A thick towel-like variant on the sticky mat is slippery when dry. Meanwhile, premium goods are shipped abroad, supplying the likes of Lululemon, which sell at a markup. Once Chinese firms master marketing, they could export directly.

“There’s more interest in yoga because of celebrities like Madonna, but it’s also because yoga is well marketed,” Yin says. She ought to know. One of her ventures is a free online magazine called *Yoga Digest*, which has 200,000 readers compared to the 30,000 who bought *Yoga Journal*, which she also edited. Like its forbear, *Yoga Digest* plugs her studios. Marketing “makes a strong force to push people into practice,” she says.

Traditional Chinese disciplines work differently. “Tai chi stays in a relationship of



INDIA'S BUDDHIST LEGACY Seated Buddha Sakyamuni and Baistrajyaguru, Dunhuang, 9th century.

Left: Chinese School / Getty Images; Right: Wu Guofang / Xinhua Press / Corbis

master to disciple, so there's nobody to push it," Yin says. That doesn't stop millions of pensioners meeting in parks at the crack of dawn to glide gracefully through such movements as White Crane Spreads Wings and Swallow Skims the Water. The scene plays out daily from Beijing to Hong Kong, where yoga took root before Britain surrendered its colony 14 years ago. Nowadays, hip Hong Kongers would rather splurge \$35 on a flow class than flow with their grannies.

Even so, some young Chinese still do *wushu*, the collective name for hundreds of martial arts, including "supreme ultimate fist," as tai chi is known. Like yoga, it aims to balance mind and body, working on posture to circulate energy more freely.

To Vicky Wong, who practices both, they're complementary. "The two disciplines merge quite beautifully," says Wong, a Hong Kong native who lives in Beijing. "Doing asana helps my whole body wake up, and tai chi mind-set techniques help me focus internally."

When Iyengar taught in China, he drew upon a tradition the Chinese know well: Buddhism. "The mind has to be absorbed in the pose," he told students. "If you use your mind it is a Zen mind."

Zen resonates widely in Guangzhou. Roughly 15 centuries ago, an Indian monk came ashore there. Known as Bodhidharma, he is considered a direct descendant of the Buddha, and he worked his way northwards through China, disseminating wisdom. Legends of his feats abound. It's said that he stared at a wall in silence for almost a decade and trained Shaolin monks to use kung fu. Primarily, he practiced meditation, and the sect he inspired was a fusion with Chinese arts. Called *chan*, it spread as *Zen* to Japan (and as *seon* to Korea), teaching experiential awareness of transcendence.

Iyengar's arrival was hailed as the second coming. "Is it wrong that we compare him to Bodhidharma?" Chen



YOGA CLASS on the bank of West Lake in Hangzhou, a city in Zhejiang Province.

Si asked the summit. "Guruji manifests 5,000 years of civilization on the subcontinent. China will take yoga to heart, like we embraced Buddhism. Who will be the next masters of this tradition? Let's wait and see."

For three days, participants were stretched. Lined up in a sports hall, most looked bendy. But they were told they'd "just come to the base level, and there's a Mount Everest in front of you." At 92, the Lion of Pune stood for hours on end, vowing to show "how to start from scratch and aim for the ultimate."

He described "how to listen to the sound of your inner voice" by observing how the senses distract you and "moving closer to the center." The five *mahabhuta* (elements) and *koshas* (sheaths) were demystified in the context of adjusting imbalances in poses. "Alignment leads to enlightenment," he said. "Using the power of the body with a skillful brain is nothing but surrender to God."

For now, many people's engagement is superficial, even if they smile while doing the splits. "It is natural to make yourself work to keep your beauty," Iyengar conceded. But we should "practice yoga to experience the inner beauty

and inner light, and not for the external beauty only."

His parting words were blunter. "I gave you all the knowledge of yoga," he said as they garlanded him, "which may take maybe ten years for you to digest."

Chen believes the master's visit was timed to perfection. "China is mad for success," he says, a throwback to the "greed is good" 1980s. But there's also a yearning for more on the spiritual level and a tradition of seeking new ideas next door. One of China's classic novels is *Journey to the West*, known abroad as *The Monkey King*. Revived of late as an opera, it's a quest for sacred Indian inspiration.

"Yoga is such a wonderful gift from India to China," Chen says. "Chinese society is ready to understand another oriental philosophy. What you saw in America is nothing compared to what will happen here." ■

Before he moved to London and took up yoga, Daniel Simpson worked as a foreign correspondent. He resigned from the New York Times to run a music festival, which got him embroiled with gangsters in Belgrade. This inspired him to leave the Balkans and write a book. Nowadays he mainly writes about yoga.