

# Yoga's Reintroduction to Modern China via the West

**Abstract.** As the Buddhist community in China carried forth the Buddhist yogic traditions into the modern era, a new form of yoga was imported to China via the West as the intermediary in a global network of knowledge transmission with metropolitan port cities like Shanghai as its enclaves. By examining newspapers, archives, and books published in the first half of the twentieth century, this chapter recollects the largely forgotten early history of yoga in modern China. Buddhist scholar Liu Renhang, with his translation of Japanese scholar Kaiten Nukariya's study of yoga in North America, was the first to introduce yoga as a remedy for the nation, then suffering from endless warfare. The theosophist Hari Prasad Shastri lectured on yoga and established a yoga study group called "Holy Yoga". The first teacher to offer yoga classes regularly in China was Eugenia Peterson, later known as Indra Devi, and her assistant Michael Volin. They successfully enlisted hundreds of pupils, many of whom were Westerners living in Shanghai. However, with the demise of the Shanghai concessions, the spread of yoga in modern China halted abruptly before it was incorporated into the everyday life of ordinary Chinese people.

**Keywords.** Yoga, Global Shanghai, Liu Renhang, Theosophical Society, Indra Devi

## Introduction

On 23 April 1980, *Gongren ribao* (Workers' Daily), a newspaper run by the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, reported a miracle performed by an Indian yogi.<sup>1</sup> This was the first article on yoga to appear in Chinese media since China's reform and opening up initiated in 1979. In the following years, the popularity of yoga snowballed. By 2012 there were around 20,000 yoga clubs, 60,000 yoga teachers, 500 yoga teacher training institutes, and about 20 million yoga prac-

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1 "‘Huomai’ batian" 1980.

tioners in mainland China.<sup>2</sup> By 2016 the number of yoga clubs had more than doubled to around 50,000.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, the spread of yoga in China is still a largely unstudied topic in English-language academic scholarship.<sup>4</sup> The editors of the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditations Studies* (2021) also regret the absence of a chapter on the growth of yoga in China.<sup>5</sup> Although the situation is different in Chinese-language scholarship, where there is an increasing number of studies on yoga, most of these are empirical investigations into the physiological effects of yoga practice and the sociological and economic impact of the growing yoga fever.<sup>6</sup> The early history of yoga in modern China remains largely neglected.

Due to the spread of Buddhism and the translation of Buddhist scriptures, the concept of yoga (*yujia*), yoga philosophy, and tantric yogic practices and rituals were known to Chinese Buddhists long before its reintroduction to the modern Chinese public. The Buddhist Yogacara philosophical text *Yogācārabhūmi-Śāstra* (Treatise on the Foundation of Yogācāra) has been well received by the Chinese Buddhists. A section of the text was first translated into Chinese as *Pusadichi jing* (Treatise on Bodhisattva Stages) by the Indian monk Tanwu Chen (Dharmakṣema, 385–433/439). Xuanzang (600–664), who studied in Nalanda, a Buddhist monastic university in India, translated the whole treatise into Chinese as *Yujiaoshi lun* and further established the Faxiang zong (Dharma Characteristics' school) based on the Yogachara school. A tantric ritual performed to feed flaming-mouthed, hungry ghosts called *yujia yankou* (flaming-mouthed, hungry ghost yoga) was also introduced to China via the translation and works of Indian monks Shicha Nantuo (Śikṣānanda, 652–710), Bukong Jingang (Amoghavajra 705–744), and others. It remained a popular Buddhist ritual to release ghosts from suffering.<sup>7</sup> More transgressive practices termed as yoga were later introduced by tantric works like *Foshuo miaoqixiang yujia dajiao jingang peiluofulun guanxiang chengjiu yigujing* (The Scripture Containing the Buddha's Discourse on the Rites for Contemplation and Siddhi about the Wheel of the Auspicious Yoga Tantra of Vajrabhairava) translated in 995. Moreover, elements from Yogachara philosophy, Buddhist tantric yoga, Confucianism, Taoism, and folk religion were appropriated by a local cult called *yujia jiao* (yoga religion) in Fujian, a south-eastern coastal province, no later than the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127).<sup>8</sup> Later, Tibetan la-

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2 Yang 2012.

3 Cao 2016.

4 There are, however, a few examples. See, for instance, Singleton/Byrne 2008; Singleton 2010.

5 Newcombe/O'Brien-Kop 2021: 8.

6 For example, Chen/Wu 2005; Liu 2017; Yan/Tian 2013.

7 Yang 2010.

8 Ye 1999.

mas introduced *yantra yoga* (yoga of movement), which shares certain similarities with hatha yoga, to the royal elites of the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1664), and Qing (1636–1912) dynasties.<sup>9</sup>

While the Buddhist community in China carried forth these traditions into the modern era, a new form of yoga was imported to China in the context of China-West contacts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1896, almost a century before the *Gongren ribao* report, the *North China Daily News*, an English-language newspaper based in Shanghai—one of the five “treaty ports” opened to Western trade after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking that ended the First Opium War (1839–1842)—had already reported the story of an Indian yogi in London.<sup>10</sup> In the ensuing decades, yoga would find its way to China again, over a thousand years after its elements were first introduced to the Chinese as part of Buddhism. Who were the first people to transmit yoga to modern China? What motivated them to spread yoga? How was yoga received by the Chinese? What implications can we draw from this phenomenon? By examining newspapers, archives, and books published in the first half of the twentieth century, this chapter seeks to piece together fragments of the forgotten early history of yoga in modern China. I argue that yoga, though originating in India, was introduced to China via the West in a global network of knowledge transmission. “Global Shanghai,”<sup>11</sup> the metropolitan port city with foreign settlements and a diverse population, was instrumental in providing a space for the spread of yoga and its interaction with Chinese Buddhism and other beliefs and practices. The following three sections of this chapter will focus on three prominent figures/groups who played an active role in the transmission of yoga: (1) the Chinese Buddhist scholar Liu Renhang (1881–1938) and his translation of the Japanese scholar Kaiten Nukariya (1867–1934), (2) the Theosophical Society in China, and (3) the famous yoga teacher Indra Devi (1899–1968) and her assistant Michael Volin (1914–1997).

## 1 Liu Renhang and Kaiten Nukariya

In 1918 one of the most influential Chinese publishing houses, the Commercial Press, Shanghai, published a new book titled *Yangqi lianxin: beimei yujia xueshuo* (The Cultivation of Qi and Practice of Mind: The Doctrines of North American Yoga). This was the first book on yoga to appear in modern China, as far as we know. From the book's back cover, one can find the name of the original Japanese author: Kaiten Nukariya. Nukariya was a Buddhist scholar and authored many

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9 Shen/An 2017.

10 “Who Wouldn't Be a Yogi?” 1896.

11 Wasserstrom 2008.

books on Buddhism, particularly Zen. The original Japanese version of the book was published in 1913.<sup>12</sup> The book systematically introduces the philosophy and practice of yoga, with a particular emphasis on the latest development of yoga fever in America. Nukariya compared yoga to Buddhism and found many similarities between yoga and Zen Buddhism; for instance, both Zen Buddhists and yoga practitioners use the cross-legged sitting posture, breathing techniques, and follow vegetarianism.<sup>13</sup> Nukariya thus termed yoga a heretic form of Zen.<sup>14</sup>

Liu Renhang, a Chinese Buddhist scholar, prepared the Chinese version. Having received both traditional Confucian and modern education, Liu started his career as the principal of the Jiangsu Seventh Normal School. He left for Japan to study and escape the political persecution of local warlord Zhang Xun (1854–1923). Liu's mother passed away during his stay in Japan, the shock of which led him to convert to Buddhism.<sup>15</sup> It was probably around this time that he came across Nukariya's book and decided to introduce it to the Chinese public. However, instead of preparing a literal translation of Nukariya's book, Liu left many personal imprints on the Chinese version. Alongside a foreword, he added a new first chapter titled "Alas, Where is My Real Freedom?". He also divided the original ninth chapter, "Distinction between North American Yoga and Indian Yoga", into two, titled: "The Origin of North American Yoga" and "Distinction between North American Yoga and Indian Yoga". More importantly, Liu added many comments to the translated texts.

Since Liu returned to China in 1917 and the first edition was published in March 1918, we may speculate that the book's publication was a priority for him. What makes this book unique? After all, why did he decide to translate this book and introduce yoga to the Chinese public? What drove him? His Buddhist belief or something else? And what was the impact of this book?

Liu defines yoga as "a new liberal eudaemonism" that teaches American people, who are "oppressed by materialism", "what 'self' is".<sup>16</sup> This remedy, according to him, can also heal China, which is suffering from endless warfare. Liu lived in an era of turbulence. After the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, warring parties and warlords tore the country apart. As mentioned earlier, Liu had himself been persecuted by Zhang Xun, a royalist warlord. This experience may have encouraged Liu to seek a remedy for the nation. Contrary to the statist approach shared by many revolutionaries and reformists, Liu saw people's hearts as the root of the problem. In the foreword, he clearly states that:

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12 Nukariya 1913.

13 Liu 1919 [1918]: 193–194.

14 Liu 1919 [1918]: 19.

15 For accounts on Liu's life, see Guo 1999; Cheng 2018.

16 Liu 1919 [1918]: 1. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

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It is not the country, but the people who are sick. The disease of the people is in their hearts. The symptom is that they, without knowing what “self” is, stick to the false self recklessly. Therefore, what grows in hearts subsequently harms politics. Wang Yangming once said: “If you want to kill a person, cut the throat!” The humble author, therefore, suggests that to cure the country, we should apply medicine to people’s hearts.<sup>17</sup>

Liu here uses Confucian idioms, directly quoting the Neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and paraphrasing the maxim “what grows in hearts subsequently harms politics” from *Mengzi* (The Mencius, ca. 300 BCE). Thus we can see that Liu consciously contextualises yoga into a grand and ambitious sociopolitical project that aims to reform the nation. He reminds the reader that “the Chinese teaching asks one to first [cultivate] one’s own body and mind and then [deal with] the family, state, and world”, which is a paraphrase of the famous sentence from *Daxue* (The Great Learning, ca. 300 BCE). According to Liu, the Chinese people *are* like patients suffering from fever and mania. Yoga is a preliminary prescription, the formulae Qingliangsan (Lat. *Pulvis refrigerans*, a traditional Chinese medical prescription comparable to antipyretics), used to resolve the superficial symptoms. If yoga works, he will further provide other supplementary medicines.<sup>18</sup>

Liu followed Nukariya, believing that yoga had been transmitted to the United States after the 1893 Chicago World’s Parliament of Religions,<sup>19</sup> though, strangely, neither Nukariya nor Liu mention Vivekananda (1863–1902), who attended the 1893 Parliament and played an important role in spreading yoga through his lecture tours in the US.<sup>20</sup> However, according to Patrick Bowen’s recent research, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, a small order of practical occultists, began teaching yoga earlier in 1885.<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that Nukariya and Liu differentiate “North American yoga” from “Indian yoga”, which would perhaps surprise both the American and Indian yoga practitioners. The chapter titled “Distinction between North American Yoga and Indian Yoga” says that Indian yoga consists of Vedanta yoga and Patañjali yoga, which includes methods like “Raja yoga” (king yoga), “Gnani yoga” (wisdom yoga), “Karma yoga” (ritual yoga), and “Bhakti yoga” (devotion yoga),<sup>22</sup> whereas

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17 Liu 1919 [1918]: 2.

18 Later, Liu would turn to anarchism and socialism and put forward his own utopian solution to the contemporary situation in his *Dongfang datong xuean*. See Wu 2010.

19 Liu 1919 [1918]: 8.

20 See de Michelis 2005: 110–126.

21 Bowen 2020: 143.

22 Liu 1919 [1918]: 90–93. The translations of the different yoga names are based on Liu’s version, which may have been different from the prevailing understanding of yoga at the time.

the American school of yoga learns from various schools their strong points and gets rid of their shortcomings. It extracts their essence, removes the tedious rituals, and adds the new continent's scientific and philosophical explanations. The application of new intellect makes it a brand-new theory. Therefore, it is very different from the yoga in India.<sup>23</sup>

Here Liu adds an affirmative comment to Nukariya's observation, admitting that "a student can surpass his master, and a latecomer can surpass the forerunner".<sup>24</sup> The case of yoga reminds Liu of China and Japan. At his time, Japan has become the superior power of Asia, surpassing its "old master" China and becoming one of the major channels of Western knowledge to the Chinese intelligentsia, of which Liu's translation of Nukariya's book is but one example. We can imply from this comment that, in Liu's opinion, North American yoga is not just different from but better than Indian yoga.

What Liu was seeking from Nukariya's book was not the ancient practice of Indian yoga, which is referred to as "but a heretic form of Zen Buddhism",<sup>25</sup> but the modern wisdom from the United States. In the first chapter of the Chinese version added by Liu, he depicts how human beings have been enslaved by machinery and modern technology. He believes that the developed Western countries, particularly the US, must have medicine for "modern disease".<sup>26</sup> The reason to learn from the US was apparent to Liu, for he appraises America as "the county with [the] latest thoughts", "most advanced materially, most advanced in the freedom of thought".<sup>27</sup> Since it is the yoga's effectiveness in modern society, or, if we say so, the "modernity of yoga", that attracted Liu, his preference for the "modern" North American school over the "traditional" Indian school is understandable.

Soon after the publication of Liu's book, *Jueshe congshu*, the journal of a Buddhist society called Jueshe (Enlightenment Society), published a review of it. The anonymous reviewer readily accepted the distinction between Indian yoga and North American yoga. It was also the latter, alongside the recent development of spiritualism in the US, that attracted this reviewer.<sup>28</sup> He agrees with Liu's perception of yoga as Qingliangsan. However, unlike Liu's sociopolitical project to reform society, the reviewer thought yogic practice, which focuses on the "self", should ultimately help the people be aware of the Buddhist concept of "selflessness".<sup>29</sup> In Liu's book, the view on the "self" is one significant difference between yoga and Buddhism. According to Liu, yoga's perception of the "self" as immor-

23 Liu 1919 [1918]: 93.

24 Liu 1919 [1918]: 93.

25 Liu 1919 [1918]: 19.

26 Liu 1919 [1918]: 7.

27 Liu 1919 [1918]: 7.

28 "Beimei yujiaxue ping" 1918: 1.

29 "Beimei yujiaxue ping" 1918: 4.

tal and imperishable is incorrect.<sup>30</sup> Here, we can see that the reviewer furthered Liu's comparison and positioned yoga as a preliminary method for Buddhist practitioners.

Multiple meanings of yogic terminologies could have further confused ordinary Chinese readers and blurred the boundaries between yoga and Buddhism. *Yujia xue* (the study of yoga), used by Liu, had been used by Buddhists for centuries to denote the Yogachara philosophy. For instance, in 1928 (or 1929?), Buddhist scholar Wang Yuji published *Yujiaxue shijieguan* (World View from the Perspective of the Study of Yoga), which was just such a Buddhist Yogachara book. Later, Liu's co-believers set out to incorporate yoga into a Buddhist narrative. In 1936 *Fojiao ribao* (Buddhist Daily), one of the earliest Buddhist newspapers in China, and *Haichao yin* (Sound of Sea Tide), a Buddhist monthly based in Hangzhou, published a news report translated by World News Translation Agency.<sup>31</sup> This report first appeared in the *New York Times* on 18 December 1935. The title of the original report was "Hindu Ascetic Fasts 45 Days, Walled Up; Utters Sacred Word at the Time Appointed and is Freed After Test of Samadhi Doctrine", and the report stated clearly that the yogi was practising "the Hindu philosophical doctrine of Samadhi".<sup>32</sup> However, the Chinese version changed this expression and called it a "Buddhist Samadhi". *Fojiao ribao* placed this report among other Buddhist news, while *Haichao yin* placed it in a section headed "Materials on Modern Buddhism".<sup>33</sup> This needs to be understood in the context of the Yogachara revival, which is discussed below.

## 2 The Theosophical Society

On 26 June 1919, the Saturn Lodge, the first official Theosophical lodge in China, was established in the Shanghai French Concession.<sup>34</sup> The Indian theosophist Hari Prasad Shastri (1882–1956), then teaching at Shengcang Mingzhi University established by the Jewish merchant Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851–1931), became the first president of the Saturn Lodge. Shastri was a Sanskrit scholar and yoga teacher. He studied traditional non-dualist Adhyātma yoga (inner-self yoga) under the guidance of an enlightened Mahatma, Shri Dada of Aligarh (1854–1910).<sup>35</sup> Before arriving in Shanghai, Shastri had stayed in Japan for two years and taught

30 Liu 1919 [1918]: 197.

31 *Shijie xinwen yi she* 1936a, 1936b.

32 "The Hindu Philosophical Doctrine" 1935.

33 *Shijie xinwen yi she* 1936a, 1936b.

34 *Chuang* 2020: 155.

35 For an account of the life of Shri Dada, see Shastri 1948, a book compiled years after Shastri had settled in the UK and established his yoga institution Shanti Sadan.

yoga there.<sup>36</sup> By the time Shastri reached Shanghai, yoga was already a familiar topic among the international theosophical community.<sup>37</sup> Shastri established a yoga study group called “Holy Yoga” in Shanghai.<sup>38</sup> He also lectured on yoga to the public. For instance, on 25 February 1922 he delivered a speech at 7A Ezra Road on “Yoga and Yogees [*sic*] in Modern India”.<sup>39</sup> Due to a lack of records, the precise content of the lectures is not clear. Since 7A Ezra Road had been a regular congregation venue for the theosophists in Shanghai, some early theosophists were probably the first yoga practitioners in modern China. Wu Tingfang (1842–1922), a Chinese diplomat and keen theosophist, was among these early yoga practitioners.<sup>40</sup> Shastri also claimed to have taught Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the revolutionary leader.<sup>41</sup>

As an orator and writer, Shastri actively engaged in public life. Yoga remained one of the many topics Shastri would lecture on in the years to come. On 24 September 1926 he lectured on “Indian Mysticism and Yogi Philosophy”,<sup>42</sup> and on 8 October 1926 he lectured on “Yoga philosophy”.<sup>43</sup> By then, the theosophist branch had been reorganised. Alongside the Shanghai Lodge, Shastri founded the “China Lodge” with Chinese theosophists in 1925.<sup>44</sup> In the same year the society established the Besant School for Girls, which emphasised religious education and respect for different faiths.<sup>45</sup> However, it is not clear whether Shastri lectured on yoga at the Besant School or not.

Besides the education movement, there is also evidence that the Theosophical Society interacted with the Buddhist community in Shanghai. For example, in June 1937 Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa (1875–1953), future president of the Theosophical Society Adyar, came to Shanghai. Besides delivering a lecture on “The World and Individual” before the Theosophical Society on 14 June,<sup>46</sup> he was invited by a Buddhist association to talk on the history of Buddhism.<sup>47</sup> The following notice in Chinese also appeared in *Shen bao* (Shanghai News), one of the first

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36 Hashimoto 2020 doubts the credibility of Shastri’s account, claiming that Shastri used this as a cover story to hide the fact he was actually working as an undercover British intelligence agent in Japan and China.

37 Bowen 2020: 145.

38 Chuang 2020: 172.

39 ““Yoga and Yogees in Modern India”” 1922.

40 Chuang 2020: 172.

41 Another claim Hashimoto believes is unfounded. Hashimoto 2020: 80.

42 ““Indian Mysticism and Yogi Philosophy”” 1926.

43 ““Yogi Philosophy”” 1926.

44 Chuang 2020: 156.

45 “Besant School for Girls” 1925.

46 “Mr. C. Jinarajadasa is to Lecture” 1937.

47 “Mr. C. Jinarajadasa Will Speak” 1937.



Chinese-language newspapers that had been established by the British businessman Ernest Major (1841–1908):

Indian yoga scholar and Buddhist master Mr Jinarajadasa dropped in Shanghai during his trip back to India after visiting Japan. The *Faming xuehui* (Association of Buddhist Studies) of this city has learnt of Jinarajadasa's fame in India and that he has studied Buddhism in depth, and therefore invited him to deliver a public lecture. Jinarajadasa has decided to lecture at 8 o'clock pm tomorrow (23rd [June]) on the subject of "Introduction of Buddhism" at Jingyeshe No. 418 Hard Road. He will talk about the past and present of Indian Buddhism.<sup>48</sup>

Here Jinarajadasa is called a "Yindu yujia xuezhe, foxue dashi" (Indian yoga scholar and Buddhist master). A similar description, "Yindu yujia xuezhe Jinarajadasa Jinnai jushi" (Indian yoga scholar and Buddhist householder Jinarajadas Jinnai<sup>49</sup>), is used in a lecture proceeding published the same year in the *Foxue banyuekan* (Buddhism Half-Monthly).<sup>50</sup> Given that Jinarajadasa was a Sinhalese Buddhist and that the Theosophical Society was favourable towards Buddhism, Jinarajadasa's being called a Buddhist master or householder is understandable. In this context, what is confusing in the title is the meaning of *yujia xuezhe* (yoga scholar). As discussed above, *yujiaxue* (study of yoga) traditionally refers to the Buddhist Yogachara school in a Chinese Buddhist context. Therefore, the general Buddhist audience might have speculated the meaning of *yujia xuezhe* as a follower of that school. We may also recall from the previous section the report of 1936 in *Haichao yin* of a yogic miracle. In that report "yogi" is translated exactly into Chinese as "yujia xuezhe" (yoga scholar). By this time, the Yogachara revival movement initiated by the "father of revival"<sup>51</sup> Yang Wenhui (1837–1911) had already become the most influential Buddhist movement in China.<sup>52</sup> Yang established connections with foreign Buddhists, including the Sinhalese Buddhist revivalist and theosophist Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933).<sup>53</sup> Jinarajadasa's contact with the Chinese Buddhist community revived the link between Yang and Dharmapala, who both envisioned a world Buddhist movement.

It is arguable that Jinarajadasa's Chinese Buddhist hosts, by employing this polysemic title, were intentionally trying to bring their guest into the Yogachara narrative, a Chinese version of the world Buddhist revival movement. Yet we can find hints of disagreement between the hosts and the guest. The English lecture notice

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48 "Yindu yujia xuezhe" 1937.

49 Jinnai is the Chinese translation of Jinarajadasa's name.

50 "Fofa gailve" 1937.

51 Welch 1968: 2.

52 For a brief history of the Yogachara revival movement, see Yuan 2020.

53 For Yang's interaction with Dharmapala, see Welch 1964.

published in the *North China Daily News* and the Chinese one published in *Shen bao* both said that Jinarajadas would speak on Buddhism. The lecture proceeding published in *Foxue banyuekan* used the title “Foxue gailve” (Introduction of Buddhism). But what Jinarajadas eventually spoke about was the similarity between Buddhism and Hinduism and the necessity for Buddhists to study Hinduism.<sup>54</sup> By then, Hinduism was still less known, and Chinese Buddhists had for long seen Brahmanism as *waidao* (heretical). It must therefore have been difficult for them to accept Jinarajadasa’s argument of “Hinduism as the mother of Buddhism”.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Jinarajadasa, a Theravada Buddhist, might not have been aware that he was most probably understood by his audience as a follower of the Buddhist Yogachara school, which belongs to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

### 3 Indra Devi and Michael Volin

Apart from Liu’s translation of Nukariya and the theosophists’ sporadic yoga teachings, the first teacher to offer yoga classes regularly in China was Russian-born theosophist Eugenia Peterson (1899–2002), also known as Jane or Eugenie. She travelled to India in 1927 and established her celebrity as an actress and dancer using the name Indira Devi, which she would later change to Indra Devi. She learned hatha yoga from Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), the yoga master patronised by the Maharaja of Mysore who wanted Devi to help transmit yoga to the West.<sup>56</sup> After studying at Krishnamacharya’s yoga school for eight months, in 1939 Devi accompanied her husband Jan Strakaty (1887–?), a Czechoslovakian diplomat, to Shanghai.

Shanghai was by then already a metropolitan city with a diverse international community. Buddhists like Liu Renhang and theosophists like Shastri had already introduced concepts and practices of Vedanta yoga and Patañjali yoga to the Chinese public. However, hatha yoga, in the form of physical culture, was still a novelty, though not unheard of. On 25 July 1939, the *China Press* published a story about American heavyweight boxer Lou Nova (1913–1993) being trained by a Hinduized yoga teacher, “Oom the Omnipotent” Dr Pierre Bernard (1875–1955).<sup>57</sup> From the pictures and explanatory notes (Fig. 1), we see the “philosophical fighter” Nova practising some yogic postures to control his muscles.

Before Devi left for China, Krishnamacharya told her to start her own yoga school. Though her husband Jan was not supportive, she nevertheless liked the

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54 “Fofa gailve” 1937.

55 “Fofa gailve” 1937.

56 Goldberg 2015: 120.

57 On Bernard’s life and contribution to modern yoga, see Love 2010.

# "Oom The Omnipotent" Works Yoga Wonders On Lou Nova

And Thus--Philosophical Pighiter Phinds Physical Pithness!



Plain, old-fashioned chinning is still good for a fighter, so Lou Nova chins himself plenty. One of Oom the Omnipotent's monkeys assumes the role of an assistant trainer.

By PAUL ROSS  
(NEA Service Staff Correspondent)

NYACK, N. Y.—Gene Tunney's penchant for Shakespeare used to give the wise boys a laugh. But now Lou Nova, rising young heavyweight, has come along with a zopper. Lou is training on philosophy for his June 1 fight with Maxie Baer at the Yankee Stadium, New York.

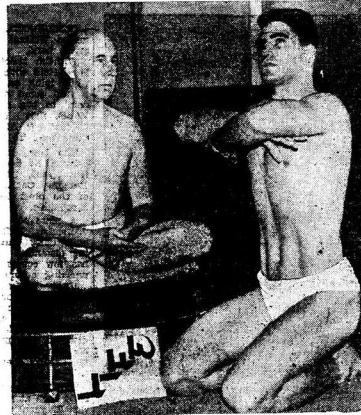
It's not that Lou has abandoned the time-honored workout. Only that the 24-year-old pugilist spends a lot of his time at the feet of a 66-year-old Hinduized American who teaches him the involved mysteries of Yoga, an ancient Eastern philosophy which begins with exercises and ends with nearly incomprehensible concepts.

The Yoga expert is Dr. Pierre Bernard, known to the working press as "Oom the Omnipotent." According to Oom, Lou Nova's wind will be 400 per cent better by the time he climbs into the ring with Baer. "My gosh, I can see five difference already," Lou has reportedly declared.

### MAYBE LOU WILL GET AIR-MINDED

The elderly Yoga practitioner became interested in Nova after the fighter had bung up a string of victories on the Coast. "He's about as fine a physical specimen as you could find to demonstrate Yoga," says Oom.

Lou, who is a physical culture fan, accepted an invitation to go to Dr. Bernard's health resort



Seated at the feet of Oom the Omnipotent, fighter Lou Nova goes through a set of muscle control exercises, obeying each command of the Hinduized philosopher.

near Nyack, to learn the physical part of Yoga. Now he is being initiated into the complicated breathing exercises whose object is to "fill up" the body—even the intestines—with air and store up physical and mental energy.

Should Lou win the bout with Baer, he will begin training to fight Joe Louis. For that, Dr. Bernard will teach him the mental part of Yoga. "I'll give him the whole works and he'll get it, too. He has a noodle on him that would fit a man of 40," says the Doc.

### OOM IS MAN OF VARIED INTERESTS

Oom is quite a figure heresabouts. At one time he had a ball club to represent his place. Now he is head of a bank and a mortgage company, runs his reconditioning resort and maintains a flock of animals—including elephants, monkeys, llamas, a lion, a chimpanzee, an eagle—which he rents to circuses. He keeps a trainer to handle the beasts. The Yogi learn things from observing animals.

His title of "Doctor" was handed him by two Hindu universities. His interest in Yoga is inherited from his father and grandfather who were students in India and the Far East. Oom himself, has spent time there. According to those who know him, Oom is a regular fellow who can chat on anything from philosophy to batting averages.



A fighter's stomach muscles have to be tough. Here Dr. Bernard tests out Nova's control over the bread basket.

FIGURE 1 Image of the *China Press* story about Lou Nova and Pierre Bernard. Source: Ross 1939, image archived at the Quanguo baokan suoyin (National Newspaper Index).

idea and started a yoga class.<sup>58</sup> As far as we know, it is the first of this kind after Shastri's yoga study group in Shanghai. However, exactly when she started her first class is unclear. According to Devi's biographer Michelle Goldberg, Devi reached Shanghai in December 1939,<sup>59</sup> but a report published in the *North China Daily News* on 29 October 1940 suggests that she had already been teaching yoga for a year and a half in China.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, she probably started her class soon after arriving in Shanghai.

Recruiting hatha yoga students in Shanghai proved difficult.<sup>61</sup> There is no clue of the lasting impact of either Liu's or Shastri's introduction of yoga to the city. According to the above-mentioned report, by the time Devi started her class, "nobody here knew anything about it, and most people had a notion that the practice of Yoga exercises meant lying on broken glass, walking on burning coals, sitting on nails, etc."<sup>62</sup> Devi soon decided to reach out to various communities and organisations and eventually recruited her first students from the American expat community in Shanghai.<sup>63</sup>

Like other modern yoga teachers, Devi tried to dissociate yoga from ascetic practices and reintroduce it to the Chinese public as a practice that cures illness and helps one to attain permanent health and youth. A talk delivered at a Rotary club meeting on 5 December 1940 illustrates her attracting yoga pupils. Distancing herself from "'fanatic' ceremonies" conducted by "filthy fakirs", she called her yoga the "classical form which, by deep breathing, draws into the human body a sort of 'vital force' existing in fluid form in the air".<sup>64</sup> She called hatha yoga "the first phase of yoga" and tried to convince her audience that practising yoga can help recapture spiritual youth and cure various diseases.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, it was the physical benefits that drew people to her class. For example, a *North China Daily News* article quotes statements from Devi's pupils about how yoga cured their severe headaches, copied from an album she authored.<sup>66</sup> Goldberg also mentions examples of Devi curing pupils with insomnia and asthma.<sup>67</sup> Thus, while Devi introduced both spiritual and physical benefits of yoga, her practice, at least as far as the general public was concerned, was more about physical exercise and alternative therapy.

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58 Goldberg 2015: 133

59 Goldberg 2015: 127

60 "Yoga Is No Mystery" 1940.

61 Goldberg 2015: 133

62 "Yoga Is No Mystery" 1940.

63 Goldberg 2015: 133

64 "Yoga Votary" 1940.

65 "Yoga Votary" 1940.

66 "Yoga Is No Mystery" 1940.

67 Goldberg 2015: 136

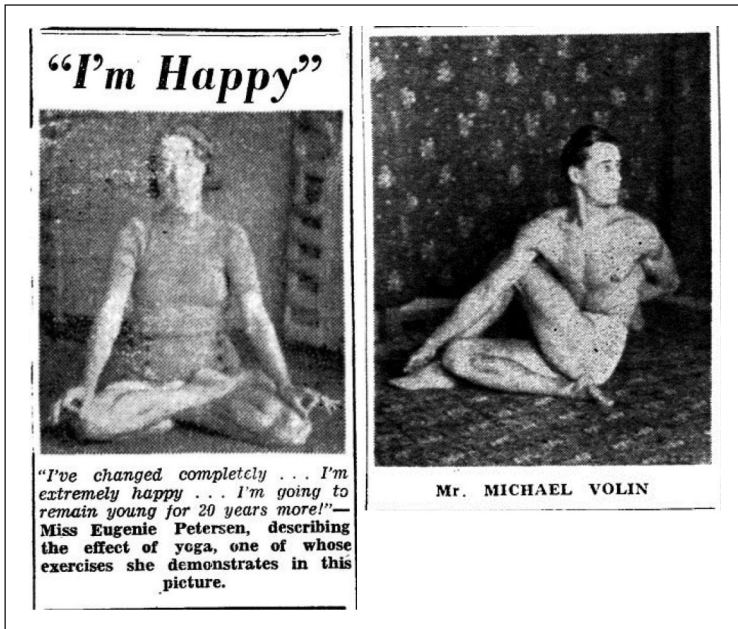


FIGURE 2 Photos of Devi (then using the name Eugenie Petersen) and Volin in yogic postures published in the *China Press* (6 December 1940) and the *North China Daily News* (18 May 1948), respectively. Archived at the National Newspaper Index.

With more and more pupils coming for classes, Devi moved to an apartment on 1826 Avenue Joffre in the French Concession. Michael Volodchenko (who later changed his name to Michael Volin and was also known as Swami Karmananda), a Russian sportsman born in the north-eastern city of Harbin, joined Devi as her assistant. Having undergone instructor's training, Volin started to teach a men's class. Thus Devi and Volin offered one morning and one evening class.<sup>68</sup> The popularity of both classes soon grew, and they moved to 9 Rue Francis Garnier, a spacious bungalow owned by Song Meiling (1898–2003), wife of the Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975).<sup>69</sup> In the new venue, Devi was able to teach twenty-five pupils simultaneously, and the total number of students exceeded 100.<sup>70</sup> No later than July 1941, Devi, using the name Eugenie Peterson, established

68 "Yoga Is No Mystery" 1940.

69 By then both Chiang and Song had moved to Chongqing, the wartime capital of China. Despite some claims to the contrary, Devi did not in fact teach Song yoga. See Zhongguo Yujia Daoshi Lianmeng 2020.

70 Goldberg 2015: 134.

the “Yoga Health Classes Scheal [sic]” with her as the principal and Volin as her assistant (Fig. 2).<sup>71</sup>

All these happened under the shadow of World War II. The Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. The next day, the Japanese army took over the Shanghai International Settlement. Before long, the Japanese started to force citizens of the Allies, including many of Devi’s pupils, to move to concentration camps. It became thus impossible for Devi to continue her yoga classes until 1945. On 25 November 1945, three months after the end of the war, a fragment of a notice of a “Lecture on Yoga” delivered by Devi appeared in the *China Press*.<sup>72</sup> Later, she made a trip to India in 1946, during which she completed her book on yoga, *Yoga: The Technique of Health and Happiness*. Returning to Shanghai in the same year, she planned, according to one news report published on October 27, 1964, to “revive [her] yoga classes”. The report also mentions that she had learned a new technique that “enables people to dispense with glasses and strengthen their eyesight”.<sup>73</sup>

However, as the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party escalated, Devi left China for the United States and handed over the yoga school to Volin. An article titled “Devotees of Yoga in Shanghai” appeared in the *North China Daily News* on 18 May 1948 depicting Volin in a yogic posture. The article explains yoga as “a logical, exact and definite science” and says that hatha yoga “helps against insomnia, headache, neurosis, constipation and helps blood circulation”.<sup>74</sup> The end of the article notes that Volin was still running the yoga school established by Devi. This is, however, the last clue of either Devi’s or Volin’s yoga teaching in China. Before long, the People’s Liberation Army marched towards Shanghai and Volin, like Devi, fled the city. Over the previous decade, Devi and Volin had taught hundreds of students in their yoga classes, many of them Europeans and Americans living in Shanghai. After that, they spread yoga in North America, Europe, and other parts of the world. But the practice halted in China.

## Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century, *yujia*, a loanword from Sanskrit that used to mean only doctrines and rituals related to the Buddhist Yogachara school, started to associate itself with a new import from abroad. Unlike the Buddhist Yogachara philosophy, this “new yoga” was not transmitted to China directly from India. It was instead a part of a diffusion of knowledge via a global network. Liu Renhang’s

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71 “Yoga Health Classes Scheal” 1941.

72 “Lecture on Yoga” 1945.

73 “Indira Devi to Revive Yoga Classes Here” 1946.

74 “Devotees of Yoga in Shanghai” 1948.

interest in yoga followed on from its popularity in the United States and resulted in his translation of Nukariya's seminal work. Theosophists like Hari Prasad Shastri introduced yoga to China and recruited the first group of yoga practitioners in the country in modern times. The cases of Indra Devi and Michael Volin show how Western mediators further facilitated the spread of yoga in China. Yoga is indeed a system of knowledge and practice that originated in India, but it is also the global network of knowledge production and diffusion that essentially constructed the Chinese public's understanding of it as a spiritual and physical practice. Liu Renhang's writings and the reports of various Buddhist newspapers and journals betrayed their intention to assimilate yoga to a modern Buddhist narrative, that of the Yogachara school in particular. However, such efforts could hardly succeed because the core process of knowledge production was beyond them.

Following the demise of the Shanghai concessions in 1945 and the disappearance of the large-scale international community by 1949, the spread of yoga in modern China halted abruptly and completely. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, contemporary research has almost totally forgotten this early history. The disappearance and oblivion of yoga reveal the limitation of this stage of the reintroduction of yoga in China. Though Shastri, Devi, and Volin did teach Chinese pupils, most of their yoga pupils were foreign residents in Shanghai. Though Chinese Buddhists like Liu Renhang introduced yoga to the Chinese public, their interaction with foreign yoga teachers seems confined to mismatched guest lectures. As a part of the modern Western lifestyle transplanted to westernised elite enclaves in Shanghai, yoga had not yet transformed itself into a popular Chinese idiom when "Global Shanghai" shut its doors in 1950. Nevertheless, yoga would find its way back to China four decades after Volin left, largely thanks to public interest in the extraordinary power of *qigong* (breathing training), an indigenous body technique that may have a distant connection with yoga through Buddhism.<sup>75</sup> Comparing the two stages of yoga's transmission to modern China—the one I have explored here and the one that followed with the *qigong* fever—would be worth exploring in future studies.

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<sup>75</sup> For the *qigong* fever, see Palmer 2007.

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