

# Origins and Popularization of Traditional Chinese Therapies in Argentina at the End of 20th Century: the Case of Daniel Alegre

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## Abstract

Various resources of the so-called traditional Chinese medicine, such as *taijiquan*, massage, diets, or acupuncture, have become widely available in the everyday therapeutic culture of contemporary Argentina. While these resources can be found in the first half of the 20th century, it is evident that from the 1960s onward their presence is more evident, with a strong emphasis from the 1980s on. This article aims to describe the reception and popularization of body and therapeutic techniques of traditional Chinese medicine in Argentina in the 1980s through the case of Daniel Alegre, a key figure in the dissemination of Chinese therapeutic techniques. To do so, it focuses on certain key mediators in the popularization of techniques such as *taijiquan* and Chinese massage: teachers, promoters, and specialized magazines. All these mediators are key artifacts in the processes of massification and dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine in a broader emerging horizon associated with two simultaneous processes, the Chinese cultural transnationalization and the boom of new forms of holistic management of personal well-being.

**Keywords:** Argentina; Daniel Alegre; *Taijiquan*; Traditional Chinese therapy

## 1 Introduction

The contemporary formation of a space linked to the so-called alternative therapies, a complex, heterogeneous and diverse horizon in terms of techniques for the management of discomfort, assembles old therapeutic traditions that permeate Argentine culture during the 20th century. The language and principles of naturism, with therapies based on homeopathy, hydrotherapy, or dietary practices such as vegetarianism, centered on energetic flows and old vitalist conceptions of balance have spread in Western societies since the mid-19th century, and have been available in the Rio de la Plata region since the early 20th century producing conflicts, hybridizations, and complementary uses with biomedicine. However, in the 1960s, within the context of social processes linked to the transnationalization of the so-called counterculture, this constellation of

practices generated a displacement in relation to the vitalist language of vigor and natural health, incorporating a new language and techniques centered on Oriental elements. There, therapeutic and wellness management techniques of Chinese origin played a fundamental role.

This article focuses on the trajectory of Daniel Alegre, a figure associated with certain countercultural experiments in the 1970s and during the early 1980s, a promoter of alternative therapies and a pioneer of traditional Chinese medicine. Interested in *Wu Shu* (武术 martial arts), acupuncture, and Chinese massage, we do not pretend that the case of Daniel Alegre is representative of all the ways in which therapies of Chinese origin are spread in Argentina. However, his case may be representative of a particular form of nativization of Chinese therapeutic techniques since the 1980s, their massification and their hybridization with other resources associated with the cultural changes and globalization of the end of the 21st century. His path is significant and offers a starting point for reflecting upon a much broader process, which includes the hybridization of languages and practices between traditional Chinese cosmopraxis and the medical,<sup>1,2</sup> the psychological, as well as its relationship with the broader space of the so-called “alternative therapies” and alternative lifestyles.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, this hybridization shows some continuities and discontinuities between the ideas of personal autonomy and well-being that – although they appear marginally in the 1970s, associated with positions of cultural heterodoxy – will be widely disseminated during the following years in the publishing market and mass culture.

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## 2 Daniel Alegre and alternative lifestyles

In the early 1970s, countercultural experiences in Buenos Aires are present in diverse manifestations such as the expansion of the practice of yoga, meditation, rock, or certain pioneering publications interested in environmentalism, community life, and alternative political thought. All of them are part of a generational crisis and of an incorporation-undoubtedly partial and very focused on the experience of the urban world of middle sectors – of alternative ways of life. Publications and references to practices involving new ways of conceiving health and well-being were still scarce and, in general, they did not emerge as hybrid practices or in relation to official therapeutic models, rather as relatively novel and exotic resources. Toward the end of the decade, experiences that incorporated both a spiritual language and group exercises inspired by heterodox psychologies of North American origin—such as transpersonal, Gestalt and even more radical versions of so-called “personal growth” workshops inspired by body work and emotionalism—would consolidate and gain legitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

A clear example of the peripheral and novel place of these practices can be found in an article by the journalist and writer Francisco Urondo published in the magazine *Leoplán* in 1962. There he describes something that appeared very curious at that time within the therapeutic scenario of Buenos Aires: a group of yoga practitioners and their conceptions of energy and balance of Oriental origin. For example, the author makes reference to the Western practices of “Hindu spirituality” in yoga and meditation, in which the centrality of the concept of *prana* is highlighted, mentioning also the case of “yogic rhythmic gymnastics” coordinated by a certain Susana Milderman, who declared that she had been working as a yoga teacher for 15 years with a group of instructors and more than 500 followers. Urondo notes the tensions with other therapies in vogue and the suspicious gaze of psychoanalysts, as well as the presence of a practice rooted in a new lifestyle that could well be read in continuity with other techniques of personal transformation centered on the body and the idea of autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, such references already seem less exotic and are recurrent in pioneering publications related to countercultural and alternative experiences, but always carrying a strong emphasis on personal and subjective change as the axis of collective transformation. Daniel Alegre is initially linked to some of these publications. In his writings, he focuses on the problem of “social alienation”, the critique of technocratic society, but, above all, on the subjective dimension of this process. His proposal is not a structural critique or one based on class or popular arguments typical of intellectuals and militants of the institutional left, but that of a thinker concerned with the change of life and the work with the self. This aspect will lead him to develop an

interest in the problem of well-being, health and ways of managing oneself that initially had to do with theoretical and political reflections.

In 1971, Alegre edited the homemade journal *En Cuestión*,<sup>5,6</sup> where he reproduced declarations of May 1968, texts by student leaders such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and translations of essays by heterodox authors of the European left such as Wilhelm Reich, Karl Korsch or Henri Lefebvre. The pamphlet, organized, designed, and edited by Alegre himself, is a typewritten facsimile, a handmade publication, with very low circulation and destined to the university environment of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Buenos Aires. It contains comments by local authors on these European references, with a didactic tone and very conscious of an innovative ideology, and brief essays on sexuality, university politics, and the problem of repression by security forces. On its cover, you can read the title “*En Cuestión*” accompanied by the image of a kneeling skeleton and Marx’s quote: “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” In the upper left section, the caricature of a painted street graffiti reads: “Number 1, August and September 1971, monthly publication, Buenos Aires, Argentina.”

While it may seem that Alegre and his magazine were an isolated event, they were part of a web of like-minded publications and networks of sociability that circulated among people involved in experiences of communal living, dissident sexualities, New Age-style spiritualities, and alternative therapies. Also, this circuit deployed a conception of political transformation that went hand in hand with an idea of personal change. The magazine’s only advertisement was another publication of the time: *Contracultura* magazine, edited by Miguel Grinberg, a representative of alternative culture, rock, and ecology in the late 1960s. This cross-reference to another contemporary magazine evidences a network in which Alegre himself participated, and which included referents on alternative journalism who wrote or circulated through affinity spaces.

Magazines such as *Eco Contemporáneo* (1961–1969), *Contracultura* (1970), *2001 Periodismo de Anticipación* (1968–1974) and, later, *Mutantia* (1980–1987) constituted a space for dissemination and a fundamental network of sociability. Within this network, certain figures stood out who, like Alegre, would play a significant role in the emerging alternative culture of the 1980s. Juan Carlos Kreimer is a paradigmatic example. After an experience in Europe and Brazil, toward the end of the 1970s, he returned to Argentina and became a cultural disseminator of certain novel cultural products such as punk-rock, meditation, and alternative therapies. Kreimer had participated in some of Grinberg’s editorial projects and was the founder, toward the end of the 1980s, of the magazine *Uno Mismo*, one of the most important journalistic organs that gathered the alternative therapies movement in Argentina. Another example

of biographies that come from the relatively marginal countercultural world and that in the 1980s occupied a privileged place in the conformation of an alternative network is Osvaldo Baigorria, who participated in the world of journalism of the so-called subway magazines during the 1970s. After almost a decade as a traveler and having gathered experiences in the alternative culture of the West Coast of the United States and Canada, upon his return to Argentina, he joined several journalistic and literary projects linked to the cultural aperture that accompanied the crisis of the dictatorship and the consolidation of democracy.

*Contracultura* was a paradigmatic publication of this process. The magazine continued the editorial experience of *Eco Contemporáneo*, which was carried out by an editorial collective headed by Migue Grinberg himself during the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Both publications had an irregular periodicity and the members of the varying editorial team belonged to an informal network constituted around Miguel Grinberg, who was the man behind the promotion and financing of the publication. The magazines's edition varied between 1,000 and 6,000 copies. It is difficult to find data about the level of circulation, which was clearly restricted to a circumscribed target audience, but its availability at the newsstands of downtown Buenos Aires-at that time, a space of expanded youth sociability-may account for a circulation among a somewhat more diverse and heterogeneous public that shared those kinds of interests. While initially *Eco Contemporáneo* was more linked to poetry and literature, from the end of the decade, it began to publish essays on anti-psychiatry, racial vindications, spirituality, and alternative ways of life. In that last stage in *Eco Contemporáneo*, and later in *Contracultura*, this group consolidated a proposal on collective change, a highly significant theme at the time, but based on a specific and singular interpretation that distanced them from the youth activism and revolutionary change disseminated by the political organizations of the New Left. The emphasis on radical change and on disputing inherited values had to do with the idea of "personal transformation" and a mode of public action that vindicated convergence instead of competition, peace instead of violence, the human *vs.* the technocratic, and, in short, the centrality of the body and well-being as the axis of a therapeutic work and the "spiritual" as the horizon of transformation.<sup>8</sup>

Although Alegre did not sign any of the notes of the mere six issues of *Contracultura*, it is highly probable that his imprint is behind some of the notes dedicated to situationism. For example, in issue number 3 published in October 1970, we find a note referring to situationism accompanying a publication on May 1968. The note is entitled "the dependent spectacle" and reflects upon the phenomenon of "spectacularization" in Latin America. His argument considered that the European phenomenon of the exacerbation of cultural products and of

an alienating symbolic world is less influential in Latin America, where the problems have to do above all with scarcity, and stressed that in this region peripheral capitalism does not produce an overabundance of goods and, therefore, the logic of the commodity appears with less intensity. He also pointed out that, despite this difference between central and peripheral capitalism, the substantive problem remained: the "limited artificiality of the spectacle" embodied in peripheral societies (such as the Argentinean) is expressed in "dehumanized ideologies" such as developmentalism. For example, the article stated that:

"The ideology of economic development is an attempt to channel that neurotic charge. But the actual decomposition of everyday life accelerates that burden to a point where it is no longer possible for power to channel it into the decomposition. This is how everything that the proletariat in the world centers gains [...] is gained also by the proletariat of the periphery but by qualitatively transforming its burden. [...] The Tupamaros and Che Guevara are the individual and collective realization, the social appropriation, the humanization of James Bond."<sup>9</sup>

This exercise of reflection upon the situationist analysis in Argentina, which recognizes a regional specificity in developmentalism as an alienating national ideology and in a typically European or North American "crisis of spectacularization", is in tune with the political and cultural operation that Alegre stated in *En Cuestión*. There he attacked developmentalism in its double sense, as a social project but also as a personal project associated with psychoanalytic psychotherapies. Both were described as forms of an alienating "local" modernity. Thus, Alegre criticized the experts on social development, the sociologists, and the specialists on personal development, the psychologists.

This critique of technocracy and the apology for everyday life, which *CounterCulture* reports, bears resemblance to the arguments that Alegre deploys in *En Cuestión*. In both, criticism acquires a central political dimension. In a pamphlet distributed among the students of the Faculty of Humanities in 1971, which he includes in his magazine, he states:

"I place myself within the generalized conflict that goes from domestic quarrel to revolutionary war, and I have made my bet in favor of the will to live. What I claim by demanding hierarchical power (given in the East just like in the West, in the North just like in the South), under apparently diverse forms which the historical gaze penetrates and identifies as forced continuity, is everything. [...] Insofar as the specialist (sociologist, psychologist, etc.) participates in the elaboration of the instruments that condition and transform the world, he makes way for the revolt of the privileged. Up to the present, such a revolt has received the name of fascism."<sup>5</sup>

In the first article of *En Cuestión*, signed by Alegre himself, Wilhelm Reich's ideas are presented as some kind of a posthumous homage to the Austrian heterodox psychoanalyst. The article introduces some of his basic



principles, as a tool against “all authoritarianism”, both Freudian and Marxist. It is interesting to expand on how Alegre describes the problem of “illness” for Reich:

“Illness is a result of disturbances of the natural capacity to love. In the case of orgiastic impotence - from which a vast majority of human beings suffer - the biological energy is blocked and thus becomes the source of the most diverse manifestations of irrational behavior. The cure of psychic disorders requires - in the first place - the reestablishment of the natural capacity to love.”<sup>6</sup>

In such a description, the suffering is the result of a psychoenergetic blockage linked to a way of life that impedes the circulation of emotions and fullness, which – according to Reich – has to do with the capitalist system. This essentially sums up a holistic conception of suffering that goes beyond a purely psychic or social problem. Reich’s critical holism understands that malaise has to do with immanent conditions, psychoenergetic flows and macrostructural conditions. All these elements will reappear – undoubtedly without the critical component of this revolutionary proposal – in Alegre’s immersion in “soft therapies” and Chinese medicine, with a holistic conception associated with energetic balance in the search for health and well-being.

Alegre’s interest in Wilhelm Reich should not be considered merely anecdotal. Reich’s trajectory also shows a shift from social criticism to heterodox therapies. After being expelled from communist and psychoanalytic circles due to the radical nature of his approaches, he moved to New York to escape Nazism. During the 1940s, he ran a business in the United States dedicated to the sale of “orgone accumulators”, an “energetic” substance that he himself named so, in order to produce the synthesis between “organism” and “orgasm”. These devices, he claimed, were beneficial to health. This enterprise had catastrophic consequences, as in 1947 he was accused of swindling and in the mid-1950s was sentenced to 2 years in prison.

On the horizon of publications in which Alegre participated, undoubtedly the most popular at the time was the magazine *2001 Periodismo de Anticipación*. Initially dedicated to esoteric topics, futuristic technology, anti-psychiatry, rock, alternative therapies, sexuality, and cultural experimentation, after 1972 it incorporated a more political vein and became known as *2001 Periodismo de Liberación*. In this context, the magazine itself and its editorial board functioned as a space for reflection and as an organ of collective action. For example, the magazine organized a series of round tables and experiences of collective dialogue on sexuality and liberation that constituted one of the pillars of future sexual and gender rights organizations. Some of these experiences were registered in a dossier called “Sexual Morality in Argentina”, in which one could notice between the lines the inspiration coming from the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and situationism, especially regarding the centrality of bodily self-inquiry and erotic

experimentation as a form of “liberation.”<sup>10</sup> In that 1972 dossier, Alegre wrote what is possibly his last text on situationism, where he revisits the French experience and the importance of the “playful construction of events” as a way of responding to the authority and hierarchy of capitalist society, but also to his own local experiment.<sup>11</sup>

In this initial stage of intervention in a network of alternative culture magazines, one can identify a dialog with the currents of thought vindicating everyday life that questioned certain principles associated with authority and hierarchy, mobilized by a new cultural sensibility. Although minority and avant-garde in nature, this sensibility developed the principles of autonomy and self-management that would later shape some of the basic features of the alternative therapeutic scene and of the personal growth groups emerging during the 1980s.

Alegre’s trajectory was accompanied by many others who circulated or were immersed in those same networks of sociality. Miguel Grinberg, for his part, developed a meditation method called “holodynamics”, which, during the 1990s, he offered to companies and applied at institutions. Finally, Juan Carlos Kreimer, as we anticipated, was the editor of the magazine *Uno Mismo*, a fundamental point of departure for the professionalization of the alternative therapeutic and cultural space. Daniel Alegre’s journey was thus part of a more general transformation of a space linked to counterculture which, at the beginning, undoubtedly with a more radical emphasis on the critique of capitalism and inherited life models, vindicated everyday life, the body, and intimacy itself as a field for experimentation. As we shall see, his definitions of illness and suffering as an energetic imbalance shows some continuities with the approaching traditional Chinese cosmopraxis and its technologies for the management of suffering, especially its holistic definition based on an energetic model.

Alegre’s more general political diagnosis as the ultimate cause of these ailments will reappear again when he adheres to the network of alternative practices of the 1980s; but the therapeutic framework will no longer be developed in terms of a social transformation or a radical critique of the capitalist way of life, but rather focusing on changing one’s way of life as personal work. The 1980s was a particularly relevant context for Argentina as it was a time of cultural and social opening that brought with it the end of the dictatorial political regime (1976–1983). This regime had deployed a climate of repression and persecution at the political level, prohibiting all participation and organization in civil society, and in everyday life, favoring a culturally conservative climate. This adaptation to the world of alternative therapies goes hand in hand with adjusting his terms to the scientific language of medicine and psychology, dominant expert knowledge socially legitimated to account for suffering and therapy. In this displacement, Daniel Alegre’s writings and interventions also constitute an example of the processes of adaptation, from the

countercultural imaginary to the professionalization of the last decades of the 20th century, which show processes of hybridization between holistic cosmologies of Oriental origin, the medical, and the psychotherapeutic. Recurring to so-called traditional Chinese medicine was a significant feature of this process, both in relation to the practice of kung-fu and *taijiquan* (太极拳) as specific disciplines and in relation to nutrition and health management in a more specific sense.

### 3 The path of alternative therapies: traditional Chinese medicine

Toward the beginning of the 1980s, we find Alegre's work in a series of publications of the nascent field of alternative therapies, which inherited some of the features of the countercultural project but relying on a language less focused on the revolutionary transformation and more on "personal change" and the so-called New Age. That transformation, mediated by the military dictatorship and a process of cultural withdrawal prompted by cultural globalization and new modes of living, found in those early years certain channels of expression that would be consolidated in line with that previous stage, as well as a new flow of knowledge and experiences brought by travels or by the experience of political exile in other Latin American countries, Europe, and the United States.

Among those publications of the time, the aforementioned magazines *Mutantia* and *Uno Mismo* stood out. *Mutantia* included translations of Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra, and other personal development referents, as well as essays by certain young local heterodox intellectuals. Among them were Alejandro Piscitelli, who reflected upon the innovations of cybernetics; Luis Jalfen, who approached the French "new philosophers", disavowing right and left authoritarianism; or the anthropologist Eugenio Carutti, professor of epistemology at the Universidad del Salvador and, in the last decades, Latin American referent on non-predictive astrology, responsible for the Casa XI center and personal growth workshops. Later, during the 1990s, the magazine *Uno Mismo*, directed by Juan Carlos Kreimer, carried on some of *Mutantia's* approaches but in a more commercial and less experimental version. Both publications consolidated themselves among the most important referents of New Age sensibility, the former still with a restricted horizon of readers and a more open project of intellectual discussion, and the latter more massive (in 1991 it sold 20,000 copies), focused on the offer of personal growth techniques and services and on the diffusion of the wider therapeutic circuit that became professionalized towards the end of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

In a series of notes under the title "Introduction to soft medicines", Alegre – who from then on was signing as Alegre Fidel – elaborated on the therapeutic aspects of "heterodox massage and self-massage systems." In

his first article published in *Mutantia*, he stated that "the author thinks that illness is a language, so each one should look for its dictionary among the methods described to interpret his body or that of those he wishes to do good to"; moving on to refer to the basic principle of the functioning of such therapy, he emphasized that the connective tissue and the lymphatic system of the human body are intimately related to circuits of energy ("qi" in Chinese and "ki" in Japanese) that is in constant circulation, connections that the massage of certain zones reactivates, recomposing health and personal well-being.<sup>12</sup>

Zone therapy involves massaging specific points distributed on the feet, and it mobilizes the circulation of energy throughout the body, which affects different parts of the body with the aim to treat specific ailments. In a certain sense, the working principle of zone therapy, inspired by traditional Chinese sociocosmology, presupposes an idea of disturbance as a consequence of energy flow that can be related, with all the limitations of each case, to Wilhelm Reich's idea of disease. In both theories, the etiology of discomfort is the result of a "blockage". In the case of Reich, as Alegre pointed out, it is an "energetic-psychic" blockage; in Chinese medicine, a strictly "energetic-bodily" one. Alegre himself will later reapproach this psychological dimension of Oriental therapy, making it clear that the therapeutic resource of traditional Chinese medicine is also effective for psychological discomfort insofar as it has a "holistic" character.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, if Alegre's description presented Reich's work as a revolutionary alternative to "medical and psychological bureaucracy", in this opportunity he took great care to make clear the complementary and non-conflicting status of "soft therapies" in relation to conventional medicine, for which he insisted that "it is perhaps not idle to emphasize that this method of gentle medicine does not exclude more direct methods, always serving as an effective adjuvant".<sup>14</sup> This hybridization between the corporal, the psychic, and the spiritual-energetic will later constitute a central feature of the alternative field.

Alegre moves, in less than a decade, away from a Latin American reading of Wilhelm Reich to zone therapy, from the spontaneous autonomism of May 1968 to the claim of the psychoenergetic-bodily well-being of Chinese medicine. It is true that Alegre maintained his situationist concerns. In fact, he was the translator of the Argentine edition of Guy Debord's *La Sociedad del Espectáculo*, published by La Marca Editora in 1995 in Buenos Aires.<sup>15</sup> However, he had already left a critique of the society of the spectacle far behind, and had moved much closer to an inquiry into traditional Chinese therapies, the problem of well-being, and quality of life.

Daniel Alegre's publications during the 1980s and the first years of the 1990s would increasingly focus on the problem of therapeutics. Alegre's relationship with traditional Chinese practices dates back to the 1970s,

although on several occasions he recounts that his interest in martial arts has been with him since childhood. But it was only at the beginning of the next decade that he became, first, an instructor and later co-founder of the South American Wushu (Kung Fu) Federation, the Asian-Argentine Cultural Institute, and the Two Dragons Association for Health and Inner Work, which consolidated his status within the world of traditional Chinese practices.

In 1993, he published *Taijiquan for Health: Manual of Therapeutic Functions*, perhaps his most important work, in which he delves into the techniques of *taijiquan*, its procedures, and also the history and cultural place of traditional Chinese therapies in contemporary society.<sup>14</sup> There, Alegre describes his approach to the therapeutic practices of Chinese medicine and highlights two key links through which he gained access to informal networks and relatively little information, as well as to significant aspects of the circulation of this alternative knowledge in the 1970s and early 1980s. At the same time, Alegre's own account shows how these links delimit a world of "false" practices from another that assumes "serious" practices and a path that constructs its own knowledge and lineages as legitimate within the nascent space of holistic practices in Argentina. The first of these links is the one he establishes with Felicitas Ramberg de Epstein, who is the first to teach the rudiments of Chinese boxing (Kung Fu) in the early 1970s in Buenos Aires. The second, the Shanghainese Cai Guanwei (蔡冠伟), from whom Alegre learned the Wu style of boxing while he lived in Argentina.

Felicitas had learned Chinese boxing from a Taiwanese instructor. In addition, according to Alegre, she was imbued with Chinese culture and served as a socio-cultural mediator, circulating books, magazines, and news. Her workshop was a space for sociability and access to knowledge that was very scarce at the time. This is how Alegre remembers those initial moments of learning:

"Felicitas taught taijiquan, taught what she had learned, alongside all that she was able to enrich it with later. A technique that remained esoteric for many, because this boxing did not appear in those movies of actors who at the slightest blow vomited red ink. At most, when the series "Kung Fu," starring David Carradine, arrived on our television sets, we learned of a temple called Shaolin, of some bonzes who showed the strength of their meditations through warlike prowess, an insurmountable contradiction for the mentality of that time in Buenos Aires where "flower power" had been transformed into widespread advertising (fiber markers, stickers, "artistic" postures on Florida Street, etc.)."<sup>14</sup>

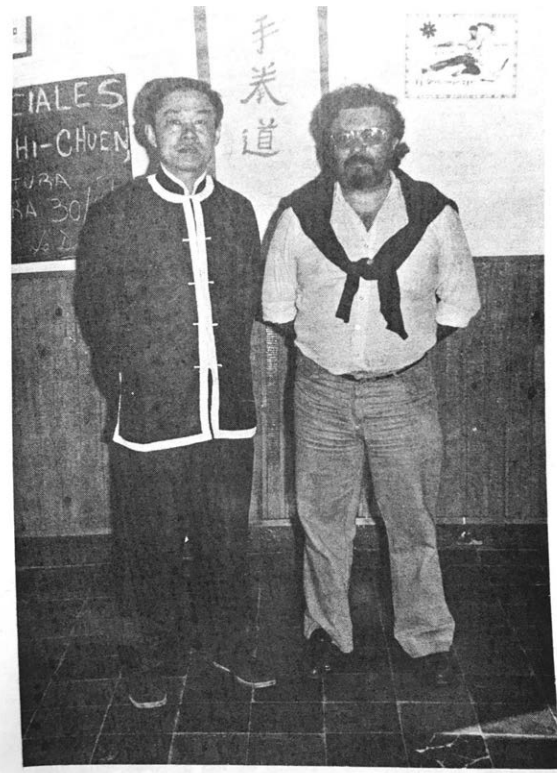
In this passage, Alegre underlines the still exotic character of these practices and reflects upon the commodification of counterculture and its becoming of a market product through television, cinema, and the cultural industry in general. A theme that is not alien to his reflections on political and cultural criticism during the early 1970s. At the same time, he points out how "false"

practices associated with stereotyped images of "the Oriental" emerged in this context. For example, Alegre recalls that during that period:

"Argentine sifus began to spring up in our beloved port city. Some learned the techniques from [some] mysterious Chinese, who did not let themselves be seen; others, more consistently, declared they had learned from a book. In general, all of them corresponded to the clothes adopted, some of them well copied from Chinese models, others horribly *chinoiserie*."<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to these spurious and commercialized uses of traditional Chinese practices and therapeutics, Alegre vindicates an authentically Chinese tradition of which he himself is a part. Thus, he reconstructs a centuries-old lineage that begins in China and gets consolidated in the Wu style of *taijiquan* (吴氏太极拳) during the 19th century, which Alegre cultivates. That tradition, legitimated by its ancestral character and by the authenticity of a strictly oriental source, reaches Alegre through Cai Guanwei, a master of Chinese origin who lived in Argentina for some years and from whom Alegre learned the "long form" of eighty-four positions. According to Alegre: "It is an exercise to get to know oneself."<sup>14</sup> This lineage is claimed by Alegre as a way of legitimizing his knowledge and authority in the field of *taijiquan* and traditional Chinese medicine in general, which was in the process of consolidation in Buenos Aires (Fig. 1).

*Taijiquan for Health-Manual of Therapeutic Functions* condenses all of Alegre's concerns and shows a refined



**Figure 1** Photograph of Alegre and Cai Guanwei (source from: the author).



analysis of the principles of traditional medicine (Fig. 2). It can be read as a manual of self-help, of physical-spiritual exercises, but also as one of the contemporary moral education. There we can find some of the basic principles of a whole cosmology that Alegre strives to translate into Western language and practice: the holistic character centered on the circulation of “qi” as an energetical realm and therapeutic practice as a change of lifestyle. At the same time, the book gives an account of the hybridization with psychology and biomedicine: on the one hand, as an aspect of the accommodation of a notion of the person and the cosmos proper to the traditional Chinese world to the culture of the Western urban middle classes; on the other hand, as an operation of legitimization based on studies considered “scientific”.

In *Traditional Chinese Therapy*, says Alegre, there is a substantive aspect that maintains the impossibility of separating bodily movement from its spiritual and moral dimension; that is to say, the practice cannot be separated from the Taoist tradition, where the principle of the “great unity in movement” prevails. A central aspect has to do with breathing, the vehicle for the circulation of energy (qi). Conscious breathing and meditative movement would produce physical transformations in the person that would help obtain the energetic balance. According to this criterion, Alegre maintains that *taijiquan* provide a way to relearn certain basic structures

that the hectic life of contemporary culture itself alters, causing various dysfunctions and illnesses. These disturbances are associated, above all, with circulation and tissues, and affect the respiratory, metabolic, and nervous systems. The latter connects moral life with the neurophysiological process and promotes dialog with psychological and psychiatric knowledge.

As he had anticipated in his essay “El psiquismo en la medicina tradicional china y su tratamiento con el taijiquan”,<sup>13</sup> published some years before *Taijiquan for Health*, Alegre’s intention was to elaborate on the concept of “psychism” for traditional Chinese medicine, an aspect that according to him had been sidelined in the usual manuals and treatments of the phenomenon. This relationship between psychology and Chinese medicine is particularly significant insofar as it shows a process of hybridization that Alegre deploys in his writings and in his practice, putting in dialogue a traditional oriental technique with technologies of self-knowledge that, in principle, would be foreign to him. The place of publication of the essay – a magazine related to the Buenos Aires psychoanalytic field called *Topía* – is also indicative of this approach.

Alegre also enlists the therapeutic benefits of the practice of taijiquan for women’s health, especially in relation to pregnancy and childbirth. Among the several benefits, he suggests that it improves the psychomotor and psychoemotional fitness of pregnant women:

“Some twenty years ago, when taijiquan was practically unknown still, so too, at the behest of obstetricians, groups of couple’s birth preparation were just beginning to be formed, whose courses were intended to teach women to breathe and men to be serene. Frankly horrified by the scenes witnessed in two of these classes, where the panting reached paroxysm, together with the neurotic implosion of the husbands, we could not but be astonished [by the fact] that the practice of taijiquan, serene, balanced, where breathing was never an obligation but served as a basis of preparation for a happy childbirth.”<sup>14</sup>

As can be seen, Alegre claims that the technique serves as a resource that is of use as much for the pregnant woman as it is for the couple; in both cases, balanced breathing and good “qi” circulation guarantee an adaptation to critical physical and emotional situations.

Another interesting aspect introduced in his volume popularizing taijiquan has to do with the ways in which the therapeutic resources of traditional Chinese medicine are legitimized. He draws, on the one hand, on experiential criteria, on his own practice, which makes the efficacy plausible and, on the other hand, on scientific studies of biomedicine.

Alegre’s first-person narration, with detailed accounts of his family and personal experience, is a crucial resource of alternative therapies and the field of practices linked to the New Age-style spiritual circuit. By making the



**Figure 2** The front cover of *Taijiquan for Health-Manual of Therapeutic Functions* (source from: the author).

personal account the guarantee of efficacy and basing legitimacy on himself, this resource synthesizes a whole sensibility that also appears in self-help literature, in personal growth workshops, and in spiritual practices that encourage “testimony” as a rite of passage, as a vehicle of knowledge, and as a narrative genre.

The therapeutic function of traditional Chinese therapy, according to Alegre, is guaranteed not only by the validity of the ancestral tradition in itself and by personal experience, but also by scientific resources endorsed by Western medicine itself. Huge numbers of studies are cited, authored by physicians and endorsed by recognized medical associations that constitute a whole system of “modern” legitimization of the technique. This is another recurrent feature of the alternative therapeutic sensibility and of the circuit of practices identified with New-Age spirituality, paradigmatically linked to spiritualities of an Oriental matrix: although some of their foundations are based on holistic logics and on notions of causality (for discomfort or for cure) that transcend naturalistic origins, at the same time the biomedical system is used as a space of legitimization and therapeutic complementarity as a criterion of tolerance and coexistence. Likewise, Alegre lay a claim to scientificity, in the sense that if scientific knowledge does not acknowledge or recognize these practices it is simply because it has not reached the stage of development that these techniques can claim for themselves. Thus, for example, Alegre makes reference to a large number of studies carried out in France, Canada, the United States, Argentina, and China itself that show the virtues of the implementation of traditional Chinese medicinal techniques in the area of psychiatry, especially with patients with schizophrenia, and in cardiology, since, as he indicates, Chinese medicine is particularly relevant for circulation and body flow problems.

Alegre highlights two significant aspects of traditional Chinese therapy. If, on the one hand, it is the scientific legitimacy of the medical studies themselves, carried out in research centers and at universities, which allows Chinese medicinal practices to be considered effective, then their therapeutic target is not limited to sick people, but includes a broader field that has to do with Western way of life. In this sense, in addition to psychiatric and cardiac problems, Alegre refers to the benefits of traditional Oriental techniques as a resource to combat the ills of urban and civilized life: it is useful against “neurosis” as well as for “the common man who lives in a tense, abnormal way, under constant pressure” to find a way to manage his well-being in modern life. This aspect is fundamental because it evidences a holistic conception that does not overlook the psychological dimension (it uses the term “neurosis”), but rather points to an idea of the therapeutic as a Life change. Thus, *taijiquan* is both a complementary resource for care – legitimized by official medical knowledge and, therefore, part of a hybrid system of care that allows circulation between

conventional medical knowledge and alternative therapies – and a resource for life change, a therapy for the healthy, a holistic technique that integrates body, mind, and spirit in an alternative way of life.

In 1994, Alegre published a book dedicated to food and body care: *The Chinese Diet* (Fig. 3). *Qigong*, with a suggestive subtitle, evidently to promote the book: *The Revolutionary Chinese Method to Lose Weight and Live Better*.<sup>16</sup> This volume, co-authored with physician Samuel Aisemberg, can be read in continuity with the first one: *Taijiquan for Health*. In this case, the co-author endows the work with a professional legitimacy that the first one lacks. On the other hand, *The Chinese Diet* describes the ideas of health and disease in traditional China, showing the non-dualistic character of the conceptions of the body, energy, and the mind. This work focuses on three aspects: breathing, self-massage, and diet. Problems and dysfunctions related to nutrition, such as overweight, are obviously not strictly biological, but have to do with a Western way of life that neutralizes the individual needs and uniqueness of each human being. The therapeutic function of traditional Chinese medicine therefore focuses on “frugality”, which allows the circulation of “qi” to balance bodily functions. This requires a fasting diet with different stages, which Alegre describes in the form of a practical manual, complemented by physical

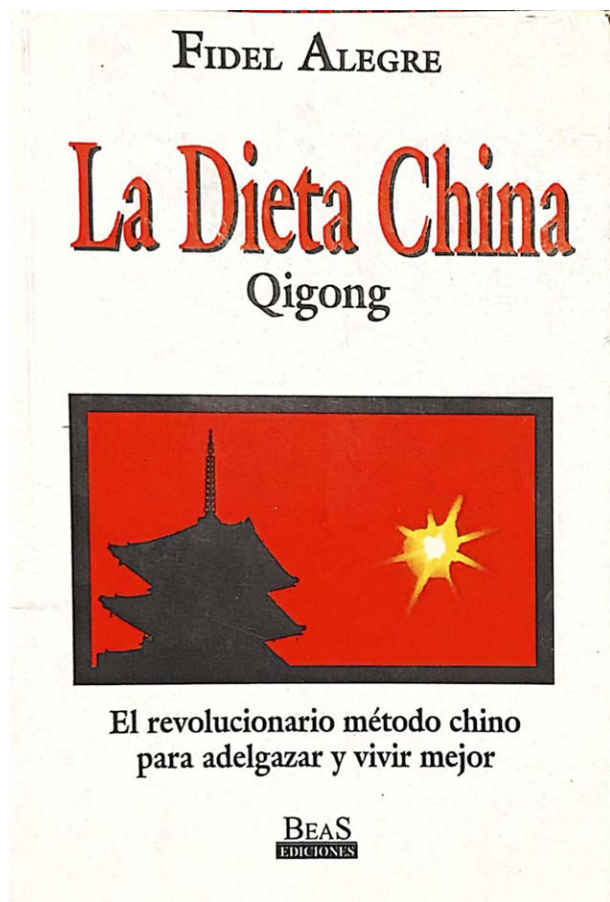


Figure 3 The front cover of *The Chinese Diet* (source from: the author).



and respiratory exercises aimed at balancing the circulation of energy.

The “Chinese diet” is described as “complementary” to Western medicine, and its notions of illness and health include and hybridize biological conceptions and definitions. Overweight is, in part, a consequence of caloric imbalance and metabolic problems, phenomena undoubtedly identified with natural physical processes of the organism. However, it is also the result of an imbalance in the flow of energy that includes the biological itself. For this reason, although the medical dimension focused on the physical, typical of the Western approach, is fundamental to the definition of illness and health, it is not enough: there is a holistic and expanded dimension that includes other emotional, environmental, and energetic factors that must be considered. The body in Alegre’s description is understood in a plot greater than a strictly physical-naturalistic order. Ailments, illnesses and discomfort are conceived and practiced as a function of a lack of circulation (and balance) of the energy that is a non-corporeal element (even more than human). It is possibly this “holistic” element of traditional Chinese therapy, re-signified for a Western public already familiar with the traditions of “therapeutic holism” typical of the therapeutic resources of the so-called alternative therapies and the models of the romantic tradition of the 19th century, which allows for an understandable and appreciable translation.

Both works on traditional Chinese therapy vindicate a central aspect in Fidel Alegre’s therapeutic proposal: the idea that *taijiquan* involves a mode of “mental adequacy”, that is, the construction of a whole lifestyle based on a practice that cultivates a certain mode of health and spiritual well-being. In this aspect, we find there a series of ideas and practices that stress personal autonomy and the improvement of the self as a vehicle for transformation that, although they had taken root in the preceding decades, were strongly consolidated from the 1980s onward in different social spaces: aesthetic, therapeutic, and even political, driving movements of personal transformation as the axis of a broader political change.<sup>3,17</sup>

## 4 Conclusions

Daniel (Fidel) Alegre’s public interventions and heterodox production in the 1980s are part of the consolidation of a diverse and plural therapeutic horizon that coexists with biomedical resources based on traditional scientific models. In this sense, Alegre’s trajectory serves as an example of how traditional Chinese therapies are strongly related to a broader cultural field. Alegre play a relevant role in the conformation of traditional Chinese therapy as a therapeutic resource and as a practice linked to a holistic way of life. His trajectory also allows us to understand in detail and from a singular case to what extent the emergence of traditional Chinese therapy in Argentina is associated to resignification

processes typical of Argentine society or, at least, of the ways of managing suffering in the urban middle sectors. In those settings, hybridization processes between traditional Chinese therapy and dominant and legitimized medical and psychological knowledge are particularly significant. Although the diffusion of this type of therapeutic resources and wellness building techniques has been described for the Argentine case, especially for the urban middle class world, similar phenomena took place in Latin America in urban contexts receptive to transnationalized cultural goods and ways of life at the same time, following a flow from China to Latin America.

The insertion of traditional Chinese therapies within the field of “alternative expertise” shows a process of hybridization between the medical, the psychological, and the alternative that is not new in urban Argentine culture, but which acquires specific features after the 1980s that are based on the idea of holism, the management of emotions, the exploration of self-inquiry techniques, and personal improvement. The centrality of the medical discourse and scientific legitimacy could be interpreted as a strategy of public negotiation of the traditional Chinese therapies that Alegre promotes. However, we understand that this articulation with scientific knowledge consists of much more than a mere strategy, it is part of the very synthesis of the alternative techniques that find in the scientific rhetoric a constitutive element. The same happens with the psychological elements, which appear as a central feature of the traditional Chinese treatment. For Alegre, there is an articulation between Chinese therapy – which in the Western context is considered an alternative therapy – and the psychological tradition, which leads him to place energy manipulation techniques (qi) on the horizon of self-management. This aspect is the most novel in Alegre’s particular elaboration since it allows him to make Chinese medicine dialogue with other therapeutic offers in the psychological field, especially with those based on psychoanalysis, strongly consolidated in urban contexts in Argentina.

Alegre’s trajectory also acts as a mediator between two epochs. Since the 1960s, and despite the authoritarian governments, a movement of cultural change altered family models, religious practices, the uses of the expanding cultural industry, modes of affectivity, and sexuality. This process enabled new ways of establishing relationships with others and with one’s self, based on resources of self-knowledge paradigmatic of the counterculture ideas and practices of body and self. Although it is possible that the networks of sociability around these experimental practices may have had a subordinate and almost marginal place compared to other much more popular resources – such as psychoanalysis and more conventional left-wing political activism – this experience contributed to fostering the foundations of a movement that would soon have a much greater social impact, consolidating a space linked

to the so-called alternative therapies and to a sensibility for which personal change is an axis with a strong legitimacy.

The arrival of democracy in the 1980s consolidated, on a political and cultural level, a process of democratization around the principles of “freedom” and “autonomy”. The legitimacy of these values enabled new scenarios for features that already existed in the countercultural model of the previous decade. Daniel Alegre’s trajectory is significant not only for his interventions within the Buenos Aires counterculture of the 1970s or incorporation and diffusion of traditional Chinese Therapies, but also for being part of a broader and more systematic plot that shows both continuities and discontinuities between the cultural experimentation of the 1960s and 1970s and the more recent alternative therapeutic searches. His trajectory helps to understand how the emergence of a new constellation of therapeutic offers and practices that hybridize the medical, the psychological, and the spiritual-alternative constitutes not only a process of transnationalization or naive appropriation, but one embodied in very concrete actors, who acts as translators, promoters, and mediators of knowledge, cultural climates, and social worlds.

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This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

### Author contributions

Nicolás Viotti participated in the research design, data analysis, and the writing of the article.

### Conflicts of interest

The author declares no financial or other conflicts of interest.

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