

CHINA'S PSYCHIC CHILDREN

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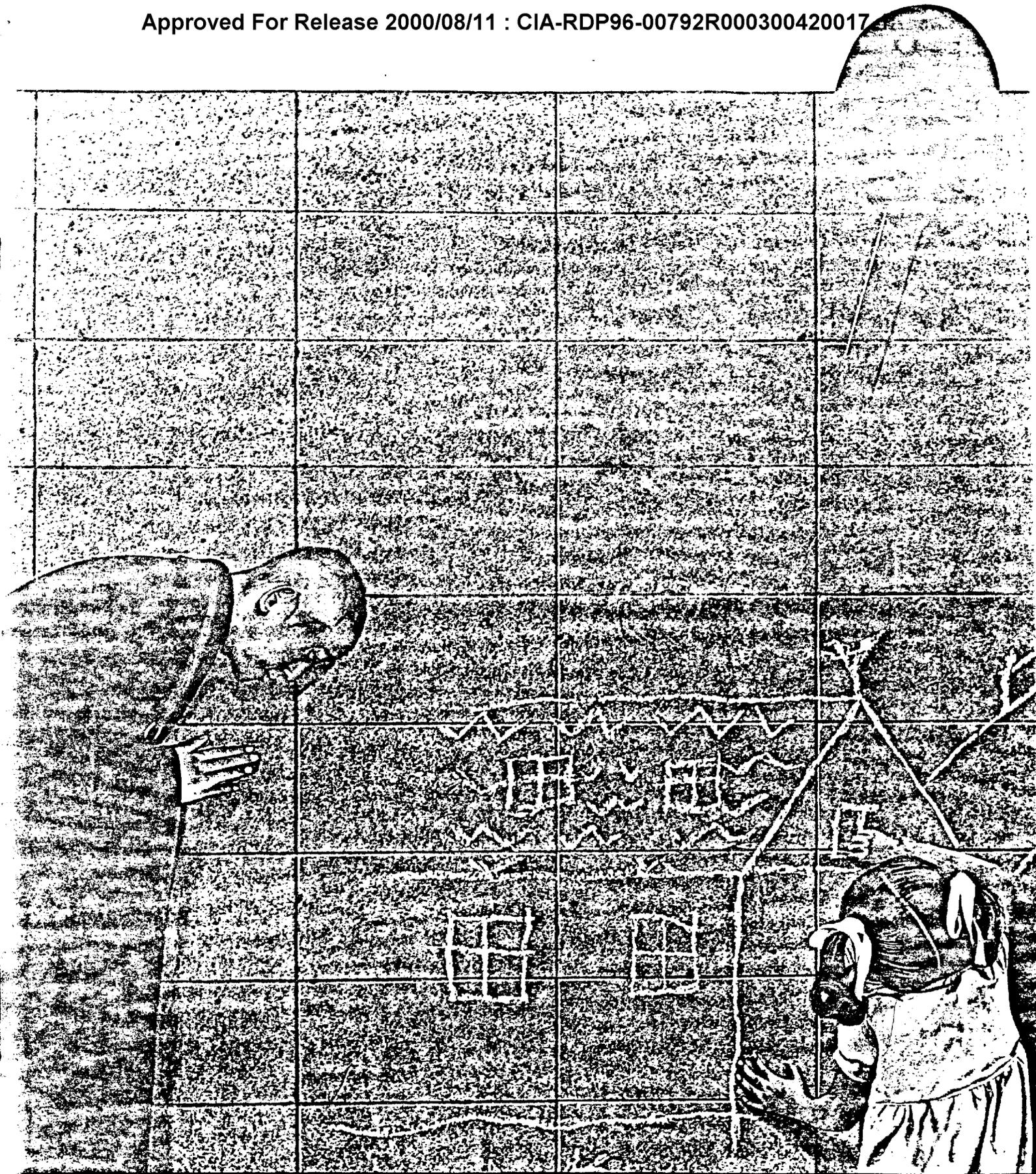
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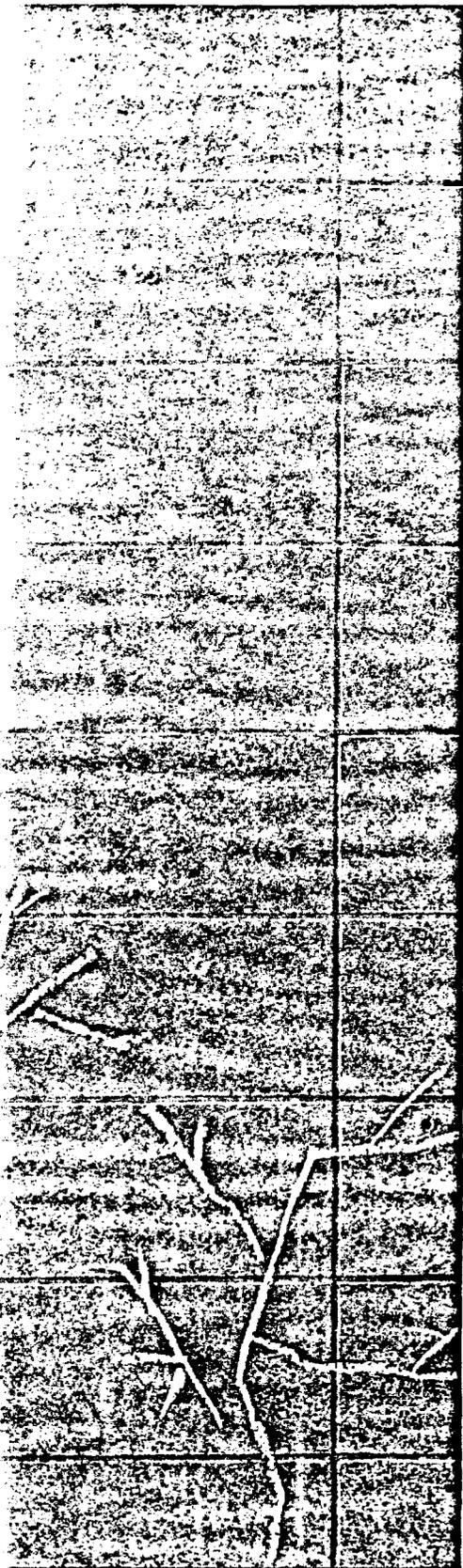
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CHINA'S PSYCHIC SAVANTS

*Is an ancient form
of energy providing China's children with the
miracle of second sight?*

BY MARCELLO TRUZZI



Eleven-year-old Tang Yu and his friend Chen Xiaoming were on their way home from school in the remote mountain village of Dazhu County when they began to wrestle. Tang brushed against Chen's coat pocket, the story goes, and had the sudden vision of two Chinese symbols. He described the vivid symbols to Chen, who pulled a package of Flying Wild Goose cigarettes from his pocket. The label on the side of the package, the boys reported, consisted of the two symbols Tang Yu had "seen."

Tang Yu was reluctant to share his discovery with Tang Keming, his fifty-year-old peasant father. He knew his claim would sound like a lie. Instead, he began to play guessing games with the villagers. He asked them to write random characters on pieces of paper, crumple the paper into balls, and let him hold each ball in turn next to his ear. Tang then guessed the message within; his guesses, it was said, always proved right. Word of the boy spread beyond his small town to all of the Sichuan province in central China.

Soon the region's science commission and its bureau of education and culture had asked to examine Tang, and researchers there confirmed his ability to identify words and colors on small wads of paper held to his ear. News reporters and awestruck officials of the Sichuan Provincial Party Committee quickly backed those results, and on March 11, 1979, this remarkable tale was published in the *Sichuan Daily*. Thus began what today is viewed—by both those in China and the West—as either a major breakthrough in parapsychology or a remarkable outbreak of fraud and pathological science.

Indeed, over the subsequent few months, as news of Tang's abilities spread throughout the People's Republic, more than ten other psychic children were supposedly discovered in Bei-

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Boasting a skill that Chinese researchers had by now named *extraordinary functions of the human body*, these children claimed to do far more than read with their ears. They could, they said, decipher hidden messages with their fingers, palms, scalps, abdomens, feet, armpits, and buttocks. One nine-year-old girl even claimed she could read messages by touching the crumpled paper with the end of her pigtail.

Reports began coming in about children with powers of telepathy, clairvoyance, X-ray vision, and psychokinesis. The typical child was between the ages of nine and fourteen, but a few were as young as four or as old as twenty-five; and it was estimated by Feng Hua, a traditional Chinese physician, that there were about 2,000 such gifted children within the Chinese population of 1 billion.

By early 1980 these remarkable children had made their way to the pages of China's prestigious *Nature Journal*. And that February the surge of interest prompted *Nature Journal* to sponsor a huge conference—the First Science Symposium on the Extraordinary Function of the Human Body—for participants from more than 20 colleges and medical schools. The proceedings were filmed by the Shanghai Science and Education Studio, and the film, called *Do You Believe It?*, was shown over national television to millions of Chinese.

As publicity mounted, interest spread beyond the mainland to Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan. And it didn't take long for the news to pique the interest of parapsychologists throughout the West. Because Western researchers are less inclined to associate such abilities with the body, though, they relabeled the supposed phenomenon *exceptional human functions* (EHF).

I first learned of EHF from a *Los Angeles Times* article. Chinese scientists were "baffled by studies of children who can 'see' objects hidden in boxes, read Chinese characters tucked under their armpits, and identify colors without using their eyes." As a sociologist of science at Eastern Michigan University and director of the independent Center for Scientific Anomalies Research, I was anxious to investigate further. Through my center's many informants, I was able to obtain a steady stream of Chinese articles translated by the American government. This documentation, often terribly vague in its detail and usually opaquely translated by computers, demonstrated that Chinese scientists were serious about something that seemed quite preposterous.

Before beginning an active investigation of my own, I decided to try to glean a bit of understanding from the past. Paranormal incidents, I soon learned, were a significant part of China's mythology. In one ancient parable, for instance, a mystic named Kang Gang-Zi was reputed to have seen and heard without using his eyes or ears. In another legend, two mediums were called upon to identify the grave of a princess; they are said to have given an accurate, clairvoyant description of her burial garment before the

These ancient myths, derived from the first few centuries of the millennium, have set the tone for Chinese folklore and beliefs ever since. But despite this rich tradition, the Marxist takeover in 1949 put a clamp on belief in the supernatural. China's official critics, in fact, denounced parapsychology as superstitious and mystical nonsense, labeling it "religion without the cross." They even accused the United States and the Soviet Union of vigorously promoting psychic phenomena to distract their citizens from the world's true crises.

A softer line didn't emerge until early 1980, around the time of the *Nature Journal* conference. In a story on "sorcery, witchcraft, and fortune-telling," *The Beijing Review* conceded that "so long as these activities do not affect the political and productive activities of the collective, the government will not prevent them by administrative means." In other words, according to astute China watcher Martin Ebon, the government was

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admitting that perhaps *some* of the phenomena could be "scientifically observed, traced, controlled, recorded, manipulated, or provoked." Chinese scientists would be allowed to prove what was superstition and what was not.

Given the go-ahead, a number of Chinese scientists leapt to action. Researchers Chen Shouliang and He Muyan, of Beijing University, studied two sisters—Wang Qiang, thirteen, and Wang Bin, eleven. In a series of eight tests, the girls placed paper with Chinese symbols under their armpits; in 109 subsequent tests, the messages were sealed in special envelopes. According to scientists testing the girls, the subjects scored correctly about 85 percent of the time—and they did *not* cheat.

In another experiment, conducted by Xu Xinfang and his group at Anhui Normal University, a boy and a girl said to have EHF reportedly guessed not only hidden messages but also the color of the pencil used to write each message. The scientists said the children scored correctly 91 percent of the time, but the subjects could not identify their targets in total darkness.

These experiments and a slew of others

successful in China. The result, in May 1981, was the Second Science Symposium on the Extraordinary Function of the Human Body. According to reports arriving at my Michigan office, that conference was spectacular. A special physics research team from the High Energy Institute announced that children with EHF could expose film in lightproof containers. When engaged in such activity, moreover, the children seemed to emit light quanta and electrical waves that could be picked up with special biodelectors. A group from the Beijing Teacher Training Institute announced that their young charges could cause an operating radio transmitter to disappear from one room and show up in another. Yet another group claimed that a twelve-year-old girl could use psychokinesis to move the hands of a watch.

The stories seemed to go on forever. But the most remarkable news to come from that meeting was the deep involvement of Qian Xue Sen, known in China as the Father of the Missile. Before returning to China in 1955, Qian had been the Goddard Professor of Jet Propulsion at Caltech and the director of the rocket section of the U.S. National Defense Scientific Board. Thanks to Qian, by 1980 China had successfully launched 12 satellites and fired an intercontinental ballistic missile 10,000 kilometers. His work, in fact, would soon make China the third nation to send men into space.

Qian, however, had recently become a passionate leader in the field of EHF. And to enthralled scientists, his support made a tremendous difference. "Every day we have new discoveries," he told his followers. "This reminds us of the atmosphere when Einstein's theories of relativity and quantum mechanics were introduced onto the stage of modern science."

Invoking the name of Einstein was oddly appropriate, for those in China likened Qian's influence to Einstein's influence in backing the atom bomb during World War II. The great space-scientist-turned-EHF-enthusiast, in fact, had reportedly secured the private support of Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang and the public approval of the renowned Chairman Hu Yao Bang.

The reports, coming mostly from Defense Department translations and the journal *Psi Research*, seemed to get more incredible by the day. So early in 1981, I was thrilled to get a call from my friend Stanley Krippner, dean of the graduate school at the Saybrook Institute, in San Francisco.

Krippner, best known for his work on telepathy during dreams, is one of the most respected—and skeptical—parapsychologists in the United States. His trips to the Soviet bloc have produced a fount of information on psychic research there; so it was no wonder that in light of recent reports, he was planning a trip to China.

As it turned out, Krippner had planned his two-week tour with the help of an effervescent Chinese woman named Shuyin L. Mar, of the Savant Association, in Arlington, Virginia. Mar was firmly convinced that EHF was

legitimate. Her connections would enable Krippner's group to meet with China's most committed EHF researchers and their treasured child savants.

Krippner told me that he had already invited physicist Harold Puthoff, of SRI International, physicians J. Tashof, Bernlon and Kenneth Zirinsky, Los Angeles psychologist Thelma Moss, some graduate students from Saybrook, and others. But he was still in need of someone like me, an utter skeptic trained as a magician—a professional who knew just how slight of hand could be used to simulate ESP. I accepted his invitation gratefully, delighted by the chance to get a firsthand look at China's newest craze.

We left that October, arriving in Beijing on the eighteenth. The thing that struck me most was the looseness of things. The airport was nearly empty, practically a mausoleum. And our lodgings, named the Friendship Hotel in honor of the once-great bond between China and the Soviet Union, was a strange amalgam of the two cultures. It was a monstrous, Soviet-like structure, something you might find in the middle of Moscow, but with a Chinese roof. The elaborate inner lobby had a carpet patterned with little peace doves, and the rooms had large mattresses atop massive Russian beds. In deference to the Chinese, there was an impressive Oriental garden out back.

It was in the conference room of the Friendship that we had our first series of meetings with the Chinese. The resident luminaries, mostly from Beijing Medical College, Beijing University, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences, first explained the relationship between EHF and *qi* (chee).

According to the researchers, *qi* is psychic energy that runs through the body, just as blood runs through the arteries and veins. The pathways through which *qi* travels are essentially points of high electrical conductivity; when the pathways are in repair and the *qi* is flowing smoothly, an individual stays healthy and strong. Acupuncture needles, the scientists said, stimulate the main *qi* channels. And a breathing exercise called *qigong* (chee-gong) prevents the channels from getting clogged.

As for EHF, why, children reading messages with their armpits are simply tapping a little-explored tactile sense: They are gleaning messages through the skin, which is laced with channels and energized by the power of *qi*.

I told the researchers that as far as I could see, *qi* might not exist and *qigong* might be nothing more than a Chinese version of ordinary aerobics.

But the Chinese persisted. People known as *qigong* masters, I was told, were capable of extraordinary physical feats, including the ability to emerge unscathed when struck on the bare chest with a huge stone slab or the blade of a sword. Moreover, I was told, out of 3,100 chronically ill patients practicing *qigong* from three to five years, 25 percent recovered completely, 44 percent showed marked improvement, and 22 percent showed moderate improvement. One

woman even claimed she had imprinted a machine that produced the *qi* energy artificially. she had, she said, already used it to cure her patients of cancer, paralysis, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

After three days of such discussion, we were allowed to meet the savants. The children—four young girls—entered the hotel, kicking off what seemed like a three-ring circus. Fifty researchers were milling around, and we were all so excited that we started our tests right there in the lobby. First the Chinese researchers gave the girls folded pieces of paper marked with symbols. Then they were given canisters that we had filled and sealed in the United States. In both instances, they were to guess the contents within. But our experiments were foiled by the chaos. Even Mar, our translator, seemed to complicate the situation. She was so set on seeing the girls succeed that it was hard to trust what she did. And while we were trying to impose tighter controls, she was jabbering away in Chinese. For all we knew,

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she may have been revealing the answers.

When we finally did move into the conference room for a formal demonstration, it hardly mattered. The children were so fidgety and restless, they couldn't help but manipulate the wads of paper; any skilled conjurer would have been able to use that technique to take a peek.

Despite the chance for cheating, though, the girls didn't score a single hit. Finally, Krippner stood a few yards away from them and drew a big red star, perhaps the most pervasive symbol in all of China. Then he folded his paper, handed it over, and one girl got the answer right.

Later on, I took him aside. "Stan, why did you do that?" I asked. "The girls probably saw your red pen. And it would have been simple for them to trace the movement of your hand."

"Of course I realized the problems," Krippner said. "But the girls and our hosts seemed so embarrassed. I was just trying to end the session on a friendly note."

It was on that friendly note that we left for Xian, the Chinese city best known for the life-size terra-cotta army now being unearthed by archaeologists. But our destination was

there we found ourselves in the meager three-room apartment of three children said to possess EHF. They claimed they could psychically break a match or needle sealed in a small container. And of course they could intuit messages on crumpled paper through the channels of their skin.

With 25 of us sitting in the small front room, the mother conducted the test herself, using a method that was amazingly crude. She merely held up playing cards and asked the children to identify them. Now, any cheating child could have scored hit after hit, but to my surprise, these children got every answer wrong, and that included the youngest girl, who at one point actually left the room and took the target card with her.

Our next target was Shanghai. We left on a shuddering turboprop filled with a convention of Americans from the Midwest, and en route we prayed for survival. We did, of course, touch down, only to find that our troubles had barely begun.

We had planned a series of meetings with the *Nature Journal* staff, Shanghai University professors interested in EHF, and faculty at the Science and Technology Association. But when we got to our hotel, we learned that the meetings had been canceled.

While we were in Xian, it seems, Yu Guang Yuan, vice-chairman of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and vice-director of the Institute of Marxism, Leninism, and Thoughts of Mao Tse-tung, had attacked parapsychology in the press. Writing in the *People's Daily*, he denounced EHF research as "nonsense and superstition." His article specifically criticized He Chongyan, publisher of *Nature Journal* and one of Mar's main contacts in China. Moreover, he organized a committee called the EHF Investigation and Liaison Unit. Its purpose: to expose deception in claims of the paranormal.

With the purge of the Cultural Revolution fresh in everyone's mind, EHF researchers felt compelled to fade into the woodwork. Nonetheless, some of the more enthusiastic made quiet visits to our hotel. Of specific interest were the claims of a husband-and-wife team named Zhu Romlong and Zhu Yiyi, both of *Nature Journal*. They said that children with EHF emitted infrared radiation, unusual brain waves, and magnetic signals. These same children reported a flashing of the target image on the forehead before it hit. The Zhus also told us about a four-and-a-half-year-old who could solve complex math problems but only when his father was in the room. And they mentioned another young boy who "peered" inside the womb of a pregnant woman, only to announce that the fetus had no head. According to the Zhus, that diagnosis proved correct.

These incredible tales went on and on, until I realized that the Zhus had little scientific or conceptual sophistication. That evening, nonetheless, we all went to the Zhus EHF demonstration. There I found four young savants, three girls and one boy, primly seated on a sofa. Once again, their goal was to read folded messages with their armpits. For the

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first time in two weeks. I saw these children score several hits. But with Mrs. Zhu sometimes blocking our view of them, these fidgeting youngsters had ample opportunity to cheat. Moreover, one girl given a specially sealed container prepared by us returned it with the seal undone.

As the trip drew to an end, those in our group agreed that we had seen no convincing evidence of EHF. When we confronted our Chinese colleagues with these findings, they insisted that we were basing our judgment on mere demonstrations as opposed to valid laboratory experiments. Of course, children under pressure could cheat sometimes, they claimed. But that did not mean that all children cheated all the time. "Our new research aborts the possibility of trickery," He Chongyan told us. "It concentrates on mechanisms and explanations."

We replied that until we could replicate these experiments in the West, we would have to give them low evidential weight. Though much has happened since we left China, that is still where we stand.

On February 24, 1982, China's Academy of Sciences sponsored a public hearing on EHF. Reported cases were analyzed, and in an extensive review, experts concluded that the great majority of them were unfounded. The following day, *People's Daily* summarized the criticisms and reviewed the past several years of reports. It too concluded that there was no evidence for the claims.

Though the attempt to discredit EHF has been partially successful, matters remain far from resolved. As China's official English-language publication, *China Reconstructs*, put it, "The debate goes on, and experimentation continues regarding what has become a highly emotional issue."

Soon after the Chinese Academy of Sciences issued its decree, for instance, Chen Hsin, vice-director of the Institute of Aerospace Medico-Engineering, and Mei Lei, vice-director of the Space Life-Science Commission, attended a joint meeting of the Parapsychological Association and the Society for Psychical Research, in Cambridge, England. There they described their interest in using EHF for communication in space and told us that *qigong* was now part of their astronauts' training program. They also outlined the current state of Chinese parapsychological experimentation, claiming extraordinary controls against fraud.

"Under strictly controlled experimental conditions," they said, "the authenticity of recognizing characters with the ears was verified. The rate of absolutely correct identifications was greater than eighty percent."

These claims so far exceed those of most Western parapsychologists that even those who have little doubt about the existence of ESP and psychokinesis say the reports seem too good to be true. Psychologist John Beloff, a past president of the Parapsychological Association, even urged the Chinese to

send one of their prize children to the West for testing.

Thus far, that has not happened. According to Paul Dong, author of *The Four Major Mysteries of Mainland China*, the Communist party, angered by the constant wrangles, ordered parapsychologists to conduct their research quietly. They wanted no papers, no TV shows, and no more fights.

Still, the rumors persist. Dong's sources say that thousands of psychic children have recently come out of the woodwork. And these newly discovered children, no longer content just to read messages with their armpits, now congregate in groups, where leaders help them use *qi* to break boards.

According to a newspaper report from late 1984, Dr. Lin Hosheng, of Shanghai's Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine, can allegedly use *qi* energy to move a ball and make a man whirl back and forth.

Whether EHF is real or whether we are witnessing an extraordinary episode in collective error, sociologists of science have much to learn from these remarkable events.

If EHF turns out to be a reality, the obvious question will be why it took so long for scientists to become convinced. One answer might come from my colleague Ron Westrum, a sociologist of science at Eastern Michigan University. Westrum has spent years studying what he calls hidden events—phenomena once denied by orthodox science but today accepted as real. As late as the nineteenth century, for instance, scientists vehemently declared that meteorites *could not* have originated in space. Today we know that they do. It is possible that EHF falls into a similar category.

It is, of course, far more likely that EHF will be rejected, forcing us to ask why so many scientists currently accept it as valid. One reason may be that Chinese science is a relatively closed system, isolated from the rest of the world by a language barrier and ideological pressures. As psychologist Irving Janis points out in *Victims of Groupthink: The Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, closed systems and strong ties between people tend to produce and to maintain conformity. Given China's insulation from the West, its ancient intellectual traditions, and its dependence on key scientific leaders like Qian, the EHF phenomenon seems understandable. But as interaction between China and the West increases, more critical appraisal may be given to the EHF studies now available.

Most philosophers of science would agree that there is no sharp line separating science from pseudoscience. The reality of EHF may be highly improbable, but science cannot tell us that it is absolutely impossible. As Carl Sagan says, the best antidote for pseudoscience is more and better science. Only further controlled demonstrations will demonstrate whether EHF is real or nonsense. If EHF is valid after all, the payoff would be immense. As professor Dong Taihe, of Zhejiang University, observes, "A whole new branch of science could just be waiting to be discovered."

from many laboratories steady. Margulis's ideas, she began vindication, receiving plaudits trading scientists as Lewis evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould. Thomas calls her 1981 book *and Cell Evolution* "an indisputable literature of science, a volume to turn out, one day hence, to be a form."

cell-symbiosis theory seems to ward acceptance. And in 1983, elected to the National Academy of the research "establishment." It's Margulis is tempering her views. It's scientific community seems to closer to her notion that in evolution may be as important as She's concerned, because her sometimes misinterpreted.

at it gets Pollyannaish," she says. on versus cooperation—these social meaning. But it's not really s either red in tooth and claw or for the good of groups. These inadequate to describe the genetic, and behavioral interactions enisms."

and son Dorion have written a ed *The Expanding Microcosm* books). "By survival of the fittest," "Darwin referred not to large predatory habits but to the proleave more offspring. The fat door who pops a new baby every this is more "fit," more adapted, by than the childless aunt, no matter otherwise socially powerful the be. Whether each indulges in als and wins or loses is irrelevant. fecund in evolution, and compealways the name of the game." e can lead in strange directions. is composed of only 10 billion s but 100 billion bacterial cells. Margulis regards as "fittest" is per-

imals and plants, and the planet," she says. "But kill off microbes ks the earth will be just as sterile on."

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