

Report of a Chinese Psychic's Pill-Bottle Demonstration

Wu Xiaoping

What follows is a slightly edited version of a report of the testing of a Chinese psychic's claimed abilities. Zhang Baosheng, a middle-aged citizen of the People's Republic of China, has given many demonstrations of his power to remove pills (usually of vitamin C) from sealed bottles—without opening the bottles. These demonstrations have been viewed by many top officials of the government in China, and they have endorsed Zhang as having genuine psychokinetic power.

As a conjuror, it occurred to me that such a feat could be performed as a trick merely by having available a small supply of pills identical to those in the bottle. After a suitable period of time, it would be an easy matter to place a few loose pills under the bottle as it was held in the hand and allow them to fall as if they had penetrated the bottle. Indeed, a description of Zhang's usual performance given to me by several observers seemed to match such a possible modus operandi.

The following report was written by Wu Xiaoping, a science journalist who served as an observer and interpreter for the CSICOP team who visited China recently. Wu was initially quite unfamiliar with methods of investigating such claims, but by observing the CSICOP group she and Jian Ding, now a student at UCLA, soon developed the expertise to be able to design simple, definitive experiments.

Wu called in Ti Yueli, a magician from Beijing who performs an excellent and highly specialized conjuring act. Ti, as will be seen from this report, was a valuable observer who contributed to Wu's success in the investigation.

At Wu's request, I suggested by mail a few possibly useful precautions she might want to introduce into her tests, though I feel that she is an astute observer and quite capable of designing a test with proper controls. It turned out that she was unable to implement some of my suggestions. I had recommended, for example, that only a small group of observers be present for such a demonstration, to get around the distraction and confusion that might result from a larger number. Also, I suggested that only one bottle be used at a time and that careful surveillance should be applied to all other materials. These conditions were beyond Wu's control, since Zhang's "test" turned out to be more of a show than an experiment—very much like the "tests" of Uri

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Geller at the Stanford Research Institute in the 1970s.

Even lacking this control, Wu and Ti demonstrated convincingly that Zhang Baosheng's claims are highly doubtful. I believe that other members of the CSICOP team who visited China with me will be pleased that we planted seeds there that could lead to many similar inquiries by other diligent skeptics.

The demonstration took place May 13, 1988, in Beijing. The intent was to see if Zhang Baosheng could remove some of the pills from a sealed bottle without opening the bottle, and read a sealed written message.

—JAMES RANDI

CARRIED OUT before a crowd of more than 50 people, including high-ranking officials and scientists, Zhang Baosheng's five-hour-long demonstration was preceded by a two-hour introduction. Though the performer himself claimed to have "great paranormal power," and the newspapers supported that claim, his demonstration offered no evidence of that power. Moreover, this test of his abilities could not be considered a scientifically strict experiment because neither the subject nor the samples used in the demonstration were under any control during the entire period of the experiment. For example, Zhang left and reentered the room *11 times* without supervision!

A week before the demonstration, three kinds of samples were jointly prepared by Zhang's colleagues and myself, who had varied points of view regarding the paranormal. One sample involved a piece of spring steel, one had 20 pieces of square-marked plastic, and another consisted of a sealed paper with a message written inside. All the test bottles and tubes were sealed, some by melting. Of each kind of sample, there were ten from which Zhang could choose. These unique and tamper-detectable samples were admitted by participants as the only formal testing samples.



The Performance. Closely watched by author Wu (right), Zhang (center) produces pills from the bottom of the bottle. Zhang's fans are applauding this miracle. At extreme left, the wife of a Chinese magician, Luo, also observes. (Photo courtesy of Wu Xiaoping.)



The Moment of Truth. Over the objections of Zhang's followers, Wu (seated at lower right) reveals that all four seals on the pill bottle have been broken. (Photo courtesy Wu Xiaoping.)

Unfortunately, after repeatedly applying his "super powers" to the task with great diligence, Zhang failed to produce any effect (let alone a miracle) on the samples, though his colleagues tried hard to convince all those present that he had been successful with this sort of test many times in the past.

Zhang did apparently manage to remove some pills from two bottles (samples "A" and "B") that had been supplied by his colleagues. This demonstration, which was claimed to be "only a small example of his super power," left quite a bit to be desired. Examination of sample "A" showed that it had lost the adhesive tape that had been on the lid before the demonstration; "B" had only half of its marked label left, and the weight of the "removed" pills plus the weight of the "remaining" bottle-plus-pills was 12.2 grams heavier than sample "B" had been at the start.

Another test deemed "successful" by Zhang's colleagues involved a sample ("C") offered by me. This was a plastic bottle with 30 capsules sealed inside. Any attempt to open the bottle would irrevocably break the four points connecting the body to the lid. Zhang was cautioned not to break the points, and the connections were protected by tape against inadvertent damage. At the beginning of the demonstration, Zhang refused to attempt this test, complaining that the plastic had "a strange smell." However, after three hours—during which time that sample had been out of everyone's range of observation, and Zhang had left the room, unsupervised, several times—he asked to be able to use sample "C" in a demonstration. He then "moved out" of the bottle 17 capsules and one pill, the same kind as those in samples "A" and "B." He then said he had "moved in" a piece of chocolate wrapped in *torn*



The "Move." Zhang puts the substitute envelope into the hands of a sympathetic observer. The test envelope is now in his pocket. (Photo courtesy Wu Xiaoping.)

red paper, chosen from chocolates offered by his colleagues.

At the conclusion of this test, I checked the bottle and showed the results to all present. All four connecting points that sealed the bottle and lid together had been broken. Inside the bottle were 13 capsules and a chocolate—but this one had *untorn* red wrapping paper. Everyone there, including Zhang's colleagues, agreed with my observations.

It was interesting to note that Zhang lost his "magic powers" in the presence of a magician, Ti Yueli. It happened when Zhang was performing his stunt of reading Chinese characters sealed inside an envelope. This sample was prepared by Lin Zixin (editor of *Science & Technology Daily*, sponsor of the CSICOP team) and He Zuoxiu, a physicist who had attended the first CSICOP discussion in Beijing. This envelope had been secretly marked for identification on the outside. Zhang folded the envelope and handed it to one of the main experimenters. He told us that he would reveal the written contents when he returned in 15 minutes. When Zhang left the room, Ti informed the spectators that he had observed Zhang exchanging the envelope for another one that Ti had seen him secretly place under his seat when he had reentered the room previously. Ti had seen Zhang quickly placing the original, marked envelope into his pocket, unnoticed by everyone else. The experimenter who had been given the envelope by Zhang unfolded it at once and found that Ti was right in his observations.

When Zhang returned to the room, he decided not to proceed with his demonstration, which his colleagues had described as a "very simple" one, and he would not comment on our observations.

There is a saying that seems to apply to Zhang Baosheng's demonstration: "Sometimes he's wrong; sometimes he's not right." ●