

From ridicule to recognition. Image of yoga in public media in communist Poland. A case study of Malina Michalska.

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Yoga and yogis were present in Polish media from the beginning of the 20th century. After 1945, the popular image of yoga transformed to reflect the change of general perception of yoga in Poland. There was a shift from understanding yoga as something esoteric, exotic or sensational towards yoga being viewed through the lens of science and medicine, as well as a new lifestyle to counteract stress and to promote health and longevity. Post-war Poland was a communist country where official media were controlled by the state. Some publications on yoga were released in the unofficial circulation (e.g. the publishing series of Polish-Indian Library). But starting from mid-1950s, yoga was also present in the official media. Malina Michalska (1916-1973), an autodidact yoga teacher, was among those who influenced how yoga was understood and practiced in Poland as a popular activity. Images showing this former acrobat dancer wearing a black leotard were found in numerous press releases, her book “Hatha Yoga for All” (1972) and newsreels (Polish Film Chronicle). A review of several examples shows how yoga was gaining increasing public recognition and acceptance, and ultimately also popularity. Michalska’s understanding of yoga as a healing system was based on her personal experience. It fitted well in the secular milieu of communist Poland, where some research was focused on health promotion, and physical and mental well-being. This shift from ridiculing to recognition of yoga influenced by how it was presented in mass media laid foundation for yoga reception in Poland in the future, when new yoga trends and adaptations appeared.

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