

A
Sourcebook
in
Chinese
Longevity

Livia Kohn

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Introduction

People today live longer than in any time in history. In the 20th century, the average life expectancy in industrialized societies has almost doubled, increasing from about forty to close to eighty years of age. This is due to widespread efforts in public health—drastic improvements in sanitation and hygiene—coupled with enhanced nutrition, the conquest of infectious diseases through antibiotics and vaccinations, as well as the advances of medical technology that has made joint replacements, organ transplants, and genetic analysis commonplace.

Not only has life itself been extended, but the quality of life continues to improve, so that now centenarians are the fastest growing segment in industrialized populations. As this trend speeds up, more and more people are likely to grow considerably older without suffering the ill effects traditionally associated with aging. Research in gerontology and detailed studies of the aging process are leading to radical changes in our understanding of why and how we grow older, not only extending life expectancy—the culturally determined age people can be expected to reach at a certain time and place in history—but even placing life span—the biologically determined, species-specific limit of life—into question. Many scientists now believe that humans will soon live routinely beyond a hundred years, getting closer to the traditional life span of 120, and may even reach ages above this, pushing biological limits and altering the very nature of the species (e.g. Couzin 2005).

Modern efforts toward longevity (healthy old age) and prolongevity (radical life extension) that may lead eventually to immortality (freedom from death)¹ work in two main thrusts: personal lifestyle modifications and

¹ The understanding of human aging as an essentially curable disease in the modern age was proposed first by a group known as “the immortalists” (see Ettinger 1964; Harrington 1977). It is increasingly common among research scientists today

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advanced medical research. The former, as documented in numerous self-help books, works mainly with diet (especially calorie restriction), supplements (vitamins, growth hormones), exercise (aerobics, weight training, stretches), and stress reduction (relaxation, meditation).² The latter, described in more specialized literature, focuses on various forms of bioengineering, such as cloning, genetic modification, xenotransplants, cryonics, and more.³

Both are thoroughly rooted in the Western tradition and work with a model that inherits the Platonic, Biblical, and Cartesian understanding of the body as mere flesh, a material entity different from and opposed to the immortal soul, which alone belongs to God. Conceived as threatening and dangerous, full of unruly, ungovernable, and irrational passions, the body in this understanding has to be controlled in its locations, excretions, and reproduction.

Since the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, moreover, control of body and world has been a central issue: control of the flesh through conquering sexuality and passions; control of the mind through systematic training, education, and political propaganda; control of nature through agriculture and industry, doing away with wilderness and wild life, allowing them to persist only in parks and zoos; control of the outer world by conquest of alien societies and the establishment of colonies; and control of all otherness though the increasing unification of world culture, the McDonaldization of society (see Feher 1989; Foucault 1973).

In many ways, modern efforts at life extension are a continuation of this dominant trend which, in the late 20th century, merged with consumerism, an attitude of hedonistic enjoyment that proclaimed the body a vehicle of pleasure and rejected all “unnecessary” suffering and decline. The result is a volatile mix of rules and ascetic propositions of body control—manifest in health clubs, diet fads, low-calorie drinks, nonfat foods, vitamin supplements, and generally visions of athletic beauty—combined with the hedonistic pursuit of bodily desires—through nice meals, spa vacations, fancy clothes, electronic gadgets, sexual attractiveness, and so on.

(see Benecke 2002; Bova 1998; Hall 2003; Shostak 2002). For a study of the religious implications of these developments, see Maher and Mercer 2009.

² See, for example, Chopra 1993; Lan et al. 2002; Plasker 2007; Réquena 2010; Robbins 2006; Roizen and Oz 2007; Sawyer 2007; Weil 2005.

³ Works of this type include Bailey 2005; Klein and Sethe 2004; Olshansky and Sethe 2001.

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The body in Western society has thus become a battle ground between asceticism and hedonism, control and suppression versus letting go and unashamed display. It has become an ideal, a vision, a project that has to be pursued and made, refashioned by face-lifts, breast augmentations, diets, jogging, weight-lifting, massages, and so on. Yet despite its new image, the body has remained an object, a firm, solid, separate entity that needs to be shaped and molded. In that respect it has not changed despite social and doctrinal transformations. Life extension, as a result, is still dominantly a mechanical undertaking of manipulating different aspects and parts of the body. It is not, as yet, an integrated enterprise that transforms the entire person toward a new dimension of being. Chinese longevity practices, described in terms of “nourishing life” or “nurturing vitality” (*yangsheng* 養生), “nurturing inner nature” (*yangxing* 養性), “longevity” (*shou* 壽), “long life” (*changsheng* 長生), or “not dying” (*busi* 不死), are grounded in a process-oriented, energy-based worldview and have a history of several millennia. They go a long way toward realizing this new dimension and help expand the modern perspective of what can and should be done in the quest for longer, healthier, and happier lives.⁴

The Chinese Body

The body in traditional China is not separate from the cosmos, but forms an integral part of Dao, the underlying power of life and root of creation. There is only one Dao; all beings are part of it. It flows naturally along predisposed channels—in body, nature, society, and the universe. Like water, it is steady, fluid, easy, soft, and weak; it never pushes, fights, or controls. Like a mother, it brings forth and nurtures, cares and raises, supports and moves along: whatever people are and do, they are always part of Dao. One way of describing Dao is as “organic order”—organic in the sense that it is part of the world and not a transcendent other as in Western religion, order because it can be felt in the rhythms of the world, in the manifestation of organized patterns (see Schwartz 1985).

Another way to think of Dao is as two concentric circles, a smaller one in the center and a larger one on the periphery. The dense, smaller circle in the center is Dao at the root of creation—tight, concentrated, intense, and

⁴ A few modern voices on prolongevity come from the Chinese tradition, but tend to also subscribe to a more Western body system. See Liu 1990; Ni 2006.

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ultimately unknowable, ineffable, and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment. The looser, larger circle at the periphery is Dao as it appears in the world, the patterned cycle of life and visible nature. Here Dao is manifest: it comes and goes, rises and sets, rains and shines, lightens and darkens. It is, in fact, the ever changing yet ever lasting alteration of natural patterns, life and death, yin and yang (Kohn 2001, 20).

In both forms, moreover, Dao manifests in a vital energy known as *qi* 氣, which can be described as a bioenergetic potency that causes things to live, grow, develop, and decline. The basic force of all existence, *qi* is the world, nature, society, and the human body—all of which are part of a dynamic cosmos that never stops or ends. This also means that there is no division of body, mind, and nature but that these are only different aspects of *qi*-flow, moving at various vibrational speeds and levels—an understanding that closely matches modern quantum physics.⁵

According to the Chinese vision, human life is the accumulation of *qi*; death is its dispersal. People as much as the planet consist first of all of primordial *qi* that connects them to the greater universe and is given to them at birth. They need to sustain it throughout life by drawing postnatal or external *qi* into the body from air and food as well as from other people through sexual, emotional, and social interaction.

But they also lose *qi* through breathing bad air, living in polluted conditions, overburdening or diminishing their bodies with food and drink, getting involved in negative emotions, engaging in excessive sexual or social interactions, and in general suffering from various forms of stress. Although life expectancy or “destiny” is thus a function of primordial *qi*, the way in which people nurture or dissipate it in their use of postnatal *qi* determines ultimately how well and how long they live. Since *qi* as part of Dao is everlasting, there is moreover no fundamental limit to the life one can attain.

As a result, health and long life in the Chinese vision are defined as the smooth alignment with Dao as it manifests in one’s personal physical and psychological characteristics and opens paths to full self-realization. It means the presence of a strong vital energy and of a harmonious, active *qi*-flow that moves in a steady alteration of yin and yang, two aspects of the continuous flow of creation: the rising and falling, growing and declining, warming and cooling, beginning and ending, expanding and contracting movements that pervade all life and nature. Yin and yang continuously alternate and change from one into the other. They do so in a steady rhythm of rising and falling,

⁵ See Bentov 1977; Bohm 1951; Gerber 1988; Gribbin 1984; Zukav 1979.

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visible in nature in the rising and setting of the sun, the warming and cooling of the seasons, the growth and decline of living beings.

This flow of *qi* in undulating waves is further systematized into a system of the so-called five phases (*wuxing* 五行) which are in turn symbolized by five material objects:

minor yang	major yang	yin-yang	minor yin	major yin
wood	fire	earth	metal	water

These five continue to produce each other in a harmonious cycle in the presented order. *Qi* that flows in this order and in the right amount is known as proper *qi* (*zhengqi* 正氣). In addition to personal health, this is also manifest by harmony in nature, i.e., regular weather patterns and the absence of disasters, and as health in society, the peaceful coexistence among families, clans, villages, and states. This harmony on all levels, the cosmic presence of a steady and pleasant flow of *qi*, is what the Chinese call the state of Great Peace (*taiping* 太平), venerated by Confucians and Daoists alike.

Qi, on the other hand, that has lost harmonious flow is called wayward (*xieqi* 邪氣). Disorderly and dysfunctional, it creates change that violates the normal order. When it becomes dominant, the *qi*-flow can turn upon itself and deplete the body's resources. Thus, any sick person, decimated forest, or intrusive construction no longer operates as part of a universal system and are not in tune with the basic life force.

Whether proper or wayward, *qi* constitutes all the different systems of the body, which are not classified according to skeletal, muscular, or hormonal, but in terms of yin organs (1) that store *qi* and center the body's functioning, yang organs (2) that move *qi* and take care of digestion and respiration, body fluids that moisturize the body including the lymph and sweat glands, parts that make the body come together, senses that connect it to the outside world, emotions that characterize negative reactions to the world, and virtues that enhance positive attitudes.

phase	organ1	organ2	fluid	body	sense	emotion	virtue
wood	liver	gall	tears	joints	seeing	anger	kindness
fire	heart	small int.	sweat	blood	touch	joy	propriety
earth	spleen	stomach	oral	muscles	taste	worry	honesty
metal	lungs	large int.	nasal	skin	smell	sadness	righteousness
water	kidney	bladder	saliva	bones	hear	fear	wisdom

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The same system of the five phases also connects the body to the outside world, to the seasons, directions, colors, and other aspects of nature, creating a complex network of energetic pathways that work closely together and are intimately interconnected.

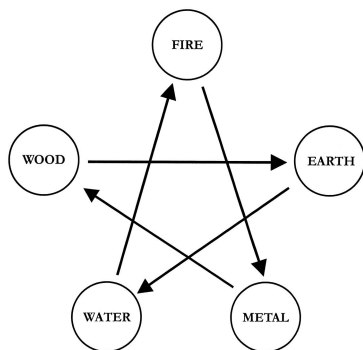


Fig. 1. The five phases

Within the body, moreover, the organs are the key storage and transformation centers of *qi*. They connect to the extremities through a network of energy channels called meridians (*mai* 脈). There are twelve main meridians that run on both sides of the body. They include ten channels centered on the five yin and yang organs, plus two added for symmetry: the triple heater (yang), a digestive organ that combines the *qi* from food and from air and transports it to the heart; and the pericardium (yin), supplementing the heart.

There are also eight extraordinary vessels which run only along one line in the body. They are considered primary and more elemental than the twelve meridians, carrying a deeper blueprint of the human being. They include four lines that run along the arms and legs, supporting the basic yin and yang structure of the body, plus two that create a cross inside the torso: the Belt Vessel (*daimai* 帶脈) which encircles the waist horizontally and the Penetrating Vessel (*chongmai* 沖脈) which runs vertically straight through the center from head to pelvic floor. The remaining two are the Governing (*dumai* 督脈; yang) and Conception Vessels (*renmai* 任脈; yin), which run along the back and front of the torso, both originating near the base of the spine and ending around the mouth. They form an essential energy circuit along the torso and are essential in all aspects of life cultivation.

Healing, Longevity, and Immortality

The body being an integrated organism of different forms, levels, and interactions of *qi*, healing, longevity, and immortality are also part of the same structure and form a closely knit continuum of practice. Most basic and best known is medical healing, which is usually administered by someone outside the person in the form of acupuncture, herbs, and massages, as well as dietary, exercise, and lifestyle recommendations. This part of the practice serves to replenish *qi* when people have lost their vitality due to bad habits, stress, infections, accidents, and the like.⁶

Having recovered health, many continue in their old ways and eventually get sick again. Some, and especially older people who have undergone repeated cycles of health and decline, realize just how much conscious lifestyle choices contribute to their well-being. Having attained good health and gained an increased awareness of *qi*-patterns, they may decide to increase their primordial *qi* to the level they had at birth or even above it.

To do so, they follow a variety of preventative medical or longevity techniques—including moderation, diet, exercise, self-massages, breathing, and meditations—to absorb their *qi*-exchange with the environment and cultivate its inner flow (see Kohn 1989). The practice ensures the full realization of people's natural life expectancy in health and vigor. It often leads to an increase in years, a youthful appearance, and continued strength and enjoyment of life. People enhance and empower the natural patterns of life, consciously following the patterns of yin and yang and creating harmony in themselves and their surroundings.

Immortality, third, raises the practices to a higher and transcendent level. Unlike medical healing and longevity, it means moving beyond the natural cycle and applying the techniques in a reverse manner. To attain it, people have to transform all their *qi* into primordial *qi* and proceed to refine it to subtler levels. This finer *qi* will eventually turn into pure spirit (*shen* 神), with which practitioners increasingly identify to become transcendent spirit-people.

The path that leads there involves intensive meditation and trance training as well as more radical forms of diet and other longevity practices. It results in a bypassing of death, so that the end of the body has no impact on

⁶ On Chinese medicine, see Kaptchuk 1983; Kendall 2002; Kohn 2005; Larre et al. 1986; Liu 1988; Porkert 1974; Sivin 1988.

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the continuation of the spirit-person. In addition, practitioners attain supersensory powers and eventually gain residence in otherworldly realms. Unlike medicine and longevity, immortality thus comes with an extensive, vibrant mythology that describes splendid heavens, fabulous creatures, and a host of divine beings.⁷

The very same kinds of practices may be used on all three levels, albeit in different ways and with caution. Certain practices that are useful in healing may be superfluous in the attainment of longevity, while some applicable for immortality may even be harmful when healing is the main focus. Take breathing as an example. When healing or extending life, natural deep breathing is emphasized, with the diaphragm expanding on the inhalation. When moving on to immortality, however, reversed breathing is advised, which means that the diaphragm contracts on the in-breath. Undertaking this kind of reversed breathing too early or at the wrong stage in one's practice can cause complications, from dizziness to disorientation or worse.⁸

This holds also true for sexual practices. In healing, sexual activity with a partner is encouraged in moderation, with both partners reaching regular climaxes. In longevity practice, sexual activity may still be performed with a partner, but ejaculation as a loss of *qi* is avoided and sexual stimulation is used to increase the positive flow of *qi* in the body. In immortality, finally, sexual practices are undertaken internally and without a partner. They serve the creation of an immortal embryo through the refinement of sexual energy into primordial *qi* and cosmic spirit. Going beyond nature, immortality practitioners are not interested in creating harmony and balance, but strive to overcome the natural tendencies of the body-mind and actively lessen or even relinquish earthly existence in favor of cosmic and heavenly states.⁹

Diets are another case in point. Chinese medical diets use ordinary ingredients and recipes, focusing strongly on rice, beans, and vegetables as well as meats, tofu, and other forms of protein. They require the more conscious adaptation to seasonal patterns and the application of warming or

⁷ On the cosmology and mythology of immortality, see Campany 2002; Despeux and Kohn 2003; Miller 2008.

⁸ There is as yet no good book on Chinese breathing. For a historical study of the Six Healing Breaths or Sounds, see Despeux 2006.

⁹ There are numerous works on Chinese sexual practices, as any Google search will reveal. A good survey of the different kinds and comprehensive translation of texts, most relevant to the longevity tradition, is found in Wile 1992.

cooling foods, spices, herbs, depending on the patient's condition. Eating for long life uses the same principles and is still grain-based, but involves the abstention from heavy meats and fats as well as from strong substances such as alcohol, garlic, and onions. Practitioners are encouraged to eat lightly and in small portions, matching the seasons and always conscious of their internal *qi*. Contrary to this, immortality practice is to “avoid grain” (*bigu* 辟穀). They eliminate main staples, eat mainly raw food, and increasingly rely on herbal and mineral supplements. Their goal is the refinement of *qi* to a level where food intake is completely replaced by the conscious absorption of *qi* through breath, leading to extended periods of fasting.¹⁰

The Longevity Tradition

Longevity techniques occupy the middle ground between healing and immortality, medicine and religion. The culmination of healing, they form the ultimate of medical practice; serving as the path to perfect health, they are the foundation of Daoist immortality. Placed between two completely different dimensions yet connected to both, they represent a separate tradition that from its very beginning appears as both preventative and anti-aging medicine and also as a way of personal and spiritual self-cultivation. Only a few dedicated scholars have contributed significantly to its understanding.¹¹

As outlined in detail in *Chinese Healing Exercises* (Kohn 2008), longevity practices appear first in manuscripts uncovered at Mawangdui, contained in six of a total of forty-five texts known collectively as the “Chinese medical manuscripts” (trl. Harper 1998). The tomb was closed in 168 BCE, dating the texts to the early Han dynasty (206–6 BCE). Before this time, however, traces of longevity methods appear in inscriptions and philosophical works, such as the “Inner Training” chapter of the *Guanzi*, indicating that awareness of *qi* and methods of its internal circulation and meditational enhancement already formed part of the spiritual and self-cultivation culture of ancient China (see Roth 1999).

¹⁰ On dietary practices of the three levels, see Arthur 2006; Craze and Jay 2001; Lu 1986; Kohn 2010a. For a more comprehensive presentation of various longevity methods, on a popular level and from a medical background, see Reid 1989 and 2003.

¹¹ See Despeux 1987; 1988; Engelhardt 1987; Kohn 1989; 2006; Sakade 1988; 2007a; Stein 1999.

Both physicians and philosophers continued to develop the tradition, as documented in the early 3rd century CE in Hua Tuo's Five Animals Frolic as well as in Xi Kang's *Yangsheng lun* (On Nourishing Life). More elaborate sources that also show the increasing interaction between the two dimensions appear in the 4th century. In 317, the imperial court fled from the invading Huns and moved south, replacing southern aristocrats in government offices. With time at hand and no careers to pursue, they turned to various other endeavors, including the pursuit of health and spiritual advancement. The result was not only the first comprehensive book on longevity practices but also the founding of the Daoist school of Highest Clarity. Based on a combination of traditional cosmology, early Daoist ritual, and operative alchemy, its followers focused on connecting to the gods and starry palaces above and practiced elaborate visualizations and ecstatic excursions as well as the concoction of elixirs that would instantaneously transport them to the otherworld. In preparation for these endeavors, they applied longevity techniques, using them to strengthen their senses, extend their life expectancy, and clear their energy channels. Longevity practices thus formed an active part of both aristocratic and religious culture.

This in turn led to a proliferation of texts in the course of the Six Dynasties (420-589) that outline a plethora of different methods involving ways of internal *qi* manipulation, physical exercises, and dietary control—contained in the Daoist canon as well as recouped in medical literature. The longevity tradition was finding its unique expression while continuing to straddle both realms of medicine and religion.

The Tang dynasty (618-907) was the heyday of Daoism as well as the longevity tradition. It established the first stable rule after many centuries of division, and much of its culture was dedicated to unification and integration. This was obvious not only in the political realm but also in the world of thought and religion, creating integrated organizational structures and worldview systems. In terms of the longevity tradition, it led to three major systematizations: the texts by the physician and Daoist Sun Simiao, a prolific author especially of medical works who was active in the 7th century and is still revered as a master and even god of medicine; the *Yangxing yanming lu* (Record on Nourishing Inner Nature and Extending Life), a comprehensive collection of all sorts of different methods that also includes a collection of references to longevity methods in previous literature; and the medically based outline of *qi*-absorption methods by the Highest Clarity patriarch Sima Chengzhen, court Daoist of the 8th century and best known for his work on Daoist meditation, “Sitting in Oblivion” (trl. Kohn 2010b).

In the wake of this explosion of techniques, which were also transmitted to Japan and recorded systematically in the *Ishinpō* (Essential Medical Methods; trl. Hsia et al. 1986) of 974, the longevity tradition its active presence in both medical and religious sources, including Daoist texts as well as technical compendia from the Song (960-1260), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

A major medical source is the *Chifeng sui* (Marrow of the Red Phoenix; trl. Despeux 1988), a collection of longevity methods by Zhou Lüjing, dated to 1578. Reflecting the typical career of a longevity master, Zhou was the son of an aristocratic family, trained for office and married. Then, however, he contracted tuberculosis and could not find help among the medical establishment. Concerned with his health, he made survival his first priority and left the family to reside in a Daoist temple. He got well, but found the world of long life and spiritual cultivation so enticing that he remained a recluse, developing numerous skills, such as sword fighting, paper making, painting, calligraphy, and long life techniques.¹² He collected prescriptions for healing, including herbs, talismans, rituals, exorcisms, and spells, which he wrote up variously (Despeux 1988, 12-13). Integrating many earlier methods, his book consists of three sections: techniques of breathing and guiding *qi*, exercise sequences including the Five Animals Frolic, and meditative exercises based on internal alchemy. It is comprehensive and has remained a key resource for practitioners today.

Within the Daoist tradition, longevity techniques have continued to be initiatory and supplementary, ensuring that practitioners are energetically open for the more advanced spiritual transformations of *qi*. Works on internal alchemy, as a result, mention the methods only in passing, taking them for granted as a prerequisite. However, their take on the human body and its internal powers is different enough to have made an impact on the longevity tradition, especially when it comes to practices specifically geared

¹² Sun Simiao has a similar background story (Sivin 1967; Kohn 2008, 129-31); Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維橋(1872-1955), the author of the *Yinshizi jingzuo fa* 因是子靜坐法 (Quiet Sitting with Master Yinshi) and major forerunner of qigong in modern China, too, was stricken by tuberculosis and dedicated himself to healing full-time (Kohn 2002; Liu Guizhen 劉貴珍 (1920-1983), the initiator of qigong in the Communist Party, suffered from numerous ailments that medicine could not heal but Daoist-preserved longevity techniques could (Palmer 2007); and Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛 (b. 1945), a Western-trained pharmacologist, came to longevity fasting in the 1990 after being diagnosed with multiple serious diseases (Arthur 2006b, 113).

toward women. Known as women's alchemy, they are recorded from the late 18th century onward, reflecting an increase in women's literacy as well as a greater awareness of the unique features of the female body.

Today longevity pervades Chinese culture in the form of qigong and taiji quan, practiced widely among the general populace and a mainstay of Daoist cultivation (see Cohen 1997). The exercises described in the literature over the millennia are still actively used, recreated, enhanced, and transformed. They are also increasingly brought into a Western scientific context, notably in energy medicine and psychology (see Feinstein et al. 2005; Gallo 2004; Oschman 2000; Shealy 2011; Carlson and Kohn 2012). However, to date there are only few translations of relevant texts, preventing the proper appreciation of the tradition.¹³

This volume hopes to remedy this lack. It presents translations of numerous sources on longevity practice from a variety of periods, including comprehensive guidelines on lifestyle moderation as well as the major compendia of the Tang. It offers materials on specific practices, such as diets, exercise, self-massages, breathing, and the guiding of *qi*, in each case selecting the most representative and most widely cited works. It does not repeat translations already available, such as of the Han-dynasty manuscripts (Harper 1998) and texts on sexual (Ishihara and Levy 1970) and women's practices (Wile 1992). It does, however, cover the main periods of the longevity tradition, beginning with the 4th century BCE, when the earliest materials appear, and systematically moves through Chinese history, all the way to late Qing period and its development of special techniques for women.

Opening the traditional Chinese texts, their worldview, body vision, and concrete methods, to a wider Western audience, the book hopes to contribute not only to the better understanding of Chinese culture but also to aid the contemporary search for a way to enable more people to live longer and healthier lives.

¹³ Translations in French and German include Despeux 1988; Engelhardt 1987; Stein 1999. In English there are only four: Harper 1998 translates the manuscripts found in the Mawangdui tomb of the Han dynasty; Hsia et al. 1986 has the longevity chapters of the Japanese collection *Ishinpō* (dat. 984); Huang and Wurmbrand 1987 offers a collection of texts on breathing from the Daoist canon, albeit with no annotation; and Berk 1986 presents an illustrated Qing-dynasty work on healing exercises.

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17. Shennong, the Divine Farmer. Source: *Tuxiang bencao mengquan*
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19. Stretching the arms. Source: *Chifeng sui*
20. Sitting steady and immobile. Source: *Zhuxian daoyin tu*
21. The organs in the body. Source: *Leijing*
22. The Eight Brocades. Source: *Xiuzhen shishu*
23. He Xiang, the inspiring immortal. Source: *Liexian quanzhuan*

Introduction

People today live longer than in any time in history. In the 20th century, the average life expectancy in industrialized societies has almost doubled, increasing from about forty to close to eighty years of age. This is due to widespread efforts in public health—drastic improvements in sanitation and hygiene—coupled with enhanced nutrition, the conquest of infectious diseases through antibiotics and vaccinations, as well as the advances of medical technology that has made joint replacements, organ transplants, and genetic analysis commonplace.

Not only has life itself been extended, but the quality of life continues to improve, so that now centenarians are the fastest growing segment in industrialized populations. As this trend speeds up, more and more people are likely to grow considerably older without suffering the ill effects traditionally associated with aging. Research in gerontology and detailed studies of the aging process are leading to radical changes in our understanding of why and how we grow older, not only extending life expectancy—the culturally determined age people can be expected to reach at a certain time and place in history—but even placing life span—the biologically determined, species-specific limit of life—into question. Many scientists now believe that humans will soon live routinely beyond a hundred years, getting closer to the traditional life span of 120, and may even reach ages above this, pushing biological limits and altering the very nature of the species (e.g. Couzin 2005).

Modern efforts toward longevity (healthy old age) and prolongevity (radical life extension) that may lead eventually to immortality (freedom from death)¹ work in two main thrusts: personal lifestyle modifications and

¹ The understanding of human aging as an essentially curable disease in the modern age was proposed first by a group known as “the immortalists” (see Ettinger 1964; Harrington 1977). It is increasingly common among research scientists today

advanced medical research. The former, as documented in numerous self-help books, works mainly with diet (especially calorie restriction), supplements (vitamins, growth hormones), exercise (aerobics, weight training, stretches), and stress reduction (relaxation, meditation).² The latter, described in more specialized literature, focuses on various forms of bioengineering, such as cloning, genetic modification, xenotransplants, cryonics, and more.³

Both are thoroughly rooted in the Western tradition and work with a model that inherits the Platonic, Biblical, and Cartesian understanding of the body as mere flesh, a material entity different from and opposed to the immortal soul, which alone belongs to God. Conceived as threatening and dangerous, full of unruly, ungovernable, and irrational passions, the body in this understanding has to be controlled in its locations, excretions, and reproduction.

Since the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, moreover, control of body and world has been a central issue: control of the flesh through conquering sexuality and passions; control of the mind through systematic training, education, and political propaganda; control of nature through agriculture and industry, doing away with wilderness and wild life, allowing them to persist only in parks and zoos; control of the outer world by conquest of alien societies and the establishment of colonies; and control of all otherness though the increasing unification of world culture, the McDonaldization of society (see Feher 1989; Foucault 1973).

In many ways, modern efforts at life extension are a continuation of this dominant trend which, in the late 20th century, merged with consumerism, an attitude of hedonistic enjoyment that proclaimed the body a vehicle of pleasure and rejected all “unnecessary” suffering and decline. The result is a volatile mix of rules and ascetic propositions of body control—manifest in health clubs, diet fads, low-calorie drinks, nonfat foods, vitamin supplements, and generally visions of athletic beauty—combined with the hedonistic pursuit of bodily desires—through nice meals, spa vacations, fancy clothes, electronic gadgets, sexual attractiveness, and so on.

(see Benecke 2002; Bova 1998; Hall 2003; Shostak 2002). For a study of the religious implications of these developments, see Maher and Mercer 2009.

² See, for example, Chopra 1993; Lan et al. 2002; Plasker 2007; Réquena 2010; Robbins 2006; Roizen and Oz 2007; Sawyer 2007; Weil 2005.

³ Works of this type include Bailey 2005; Klein and Sethe 2004; Olshansky and Sethe 2001.

The body in Western society has thus become a battle ground between asceticism and hedonism, control and suppression versus letting go and unashamed display. It has become an ideal, a vision, a project that has to be pursued and made, refashioned by face-lifts, breast augmentations, diets, jogging, weight-lifting, massages, and so on. Yet despite its new image, the body has remained an object, a firm, solid, separate entity that needs to be shaped and molded. In that respect it has not changed despite social and doctrinal transformations. Life extension, as a result, is still dominantly a mechanical undertaking of manipulating different aspects and parts of the body. It is not, as yet, an integrated enterprise that transforms the entire person toward a new dimension of being. Chinese longevity practices, described in terms of “nourishing life” or “nurturing vitality” (*yangsheng* 養生), “nurturing inner nature” (*yangxing* 養性), “longevity” (*shou* 壽), “long life” (*changsheng* 長生), or “not dying” (*busi* 不死), are grounded in a process-oriented, energy-based worldview and have a history of several millennia. They go a long way toward realizing this new dimension and help expand the modern perspective of what can and should be done in the quest for longer, healthier, and happier lives.⁴

The Chinese Body

The body in traditional China is not separate from the cosmos, but forms an integral part of Dao, the underlying power of life and root of creation. There is only one Dao; all beings are part of it. It flows naturally along predisposed channels—in body, nature, society, and the universe. Like water, it is steady, fluid, easy, soft, and weak; it never pushes, fights, or controls. Like a mother, it brings forth and nurtures, cares and raises, supports and moves along: whatever people are and do, they are always part of Dao. One way of describing Dao is as “organic order”—organic in the sense that it is part of the world and not a transcendent other as in Western religion, order because it can be felt in the rhythms of the world, in the manifestation of organized patterns (see Schwartz 1985).

Another way to think of Dao is as two concentric circles, a smaller one in the center and a larger one on the periphery. The dense, smaller circle in the center is Dao at the root of creation—tight, concentrated, intense, and

⁴ A few modern voices on prolongevity come from the Chinese tradition, but tend to also subscribe to a more Western body system. See Liu 1990; Ni 2006.

ultimately unknowable, ineffable, and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment. The looser, larger circle at the periphery is Dao as it appears in the world, the patterned cycle of life and visible nature. Here Dao is manifest: it comes and goes, rises and sets, rains and shines, lightens and darkens. It is, in fact, the ever changing yet ever lasting alteration of natural patterns, life and death, yin and yang (Kohn 2001, 20).

In both forms, moreover, Dao manifests in a vital energy known as *qi* 氣, which can be described as a bioenergetic potency that causes things to live, grow, develop, and decline. The basic force of all existence, *qi* is the world, nature, society, and the human body—all of which are part of a dynamic cosmos that never stops or ends. This also means that there is no division of body, mind, and nature but that these are only different aspects of *qi*-flow, moving at various vibrational speeds and levels—an understanding that closely matches modern quantum physics.⁵

According to the Chinese vision, human life is the accumulation of *qi*; death is its dispersal. People as much as the planet consist first of all of primordial *qi* that connects them to the greater universe and is given to them at birth. They need to sustain it throughout life by drawing postnatal or external *qi* into the body from air and food as well as from other people through sexual, emotional, and social interaction.

But they also lose *qi* through breathing bad air, living in polluted conditions, overburdening or diminishing their bodies with food and drink, getting involved in negative emotions, engaging in excessive sexual or social interactions, and in general suffering from various forms of stress. Although life expectancy or “destiny” is thus a function of primordial *qi*, the way in which people nurture or dissipate it in their use of postnatal *qi* determines ultimately how well and how long they live. Since *qi* as part of Dao is everlasting, there is moreover no fundamental limit to the life one can attain.

As a result, health and long life in the Chinese vision are defined as the smooth alignment with Dao as it manifests in one’s personal physical and psychological characteristics and opens paths to full self-realization. It means the presence of a strong vital energy and of a harmonious, active *qi*-flow that moves in a steady alteration of yin and yang, two aspects of the continuous flow of creation: the rising and falling, growing and declining, warming and cooling, beginning and ending, expanding and contracting movements that pervade all life and nature. Yin and yang continuously alternate and change from one into the other. They do so in a steady rhythm of rising and falling,

⁵ See Bentov 1977; Bohm 1951; Gerber 1988; Gribbin 1984; Zukav 1979.

visible in nature in the rising and setting of the sun, the warming and cooling of the seasons, the growth and decline of living beings.

This flow of *qi* in undulating waves is further systematized into a system of the so-called five phases (*wuxing* 五行) which are in turn symbolized by five material objects:

minor yang	major yang	yin-yang	minor yin	major yin
wood	fire	earth	metal	water

These five continue to produce each other in a harmonious cycle in the presented order. *Qi* that flows in this order and in the right amount is known as proper *qi* (*zhengqi* 正氣). In addition to personal health, this is also manifest by harmony in nature, i.e., regular weather patterns and the absence of disasters, and as health in society, the peaceful coexistence among families, clans, villages, and states. This harmony on all levels, the cosmic presence of a steady and pleasant flow of *qi*, is what the Chinese call the state of Great Peace (*taiping* 太平), venerated by Confucians and Daoists alike.

Qi, on the other hand, that has lost harmonious flow is called wayward (*xieqi* 邪氣). Disorderly and dysfunctional, it creates change that violates the normal order. When it becomes dominant, the *qi*-flow can turn upon itself and deplete the body's resources. Thus, any sick person, decimated forest, or intrusive construction no longer operates as part of a universal system and are not in tune with the basic life force.

Whether proper or wayward, *qi* constitutes all the different systems of the body, which are not classified according to skeletal, muscular, or hormonal, but in terms of yin organs (1) that store *qi* and center the body's functioning, yang organs (2) that move *qi* and take care of digestion and respiration, body fluids that moisturize the body including the lymph and sweat glands, parts that make the body come together, senses that connect it to the outside world, emotions that characterize negative reactions to the world, and virtues that enhance positive attitudes.

phase	organ1	organ2	fluid	body	sense	emotion	virtue
wood	liver	gall	tears	joints	seeing	anger	kindness
fire	heart	small int.	sweat	blood	touch	joy	propriety
earth	spleen	stomach	oral	muscles	taste	worry	honesty
metal	lungs	large int.	nasal	skin	smell	sadness	righteousness
water	kidney	bladder	saliva	bones	hear	fear	wisdom

The same system of the five phases also connects the body to the outside world, to the seasons, directions, colors, and other aspects of nature, creating a complex network of energetic pathways that work closely together and are intimately interconnected.

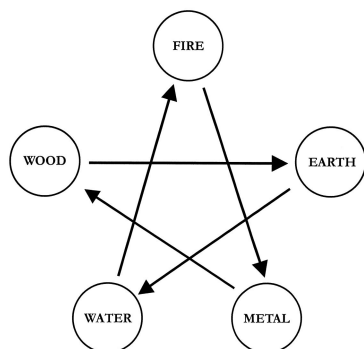


Fig. 1. The five phases

Within the body, moreover, the organs are the key storage and transformation centers of *qi*. They connect to the extremities through a network of energy channels called meridians (*mai* 脈). There are twelve main meridians that run on both sides of the body. They include ten channels centered on the five yin and yang organs, plus two added for symmetry: the triple heater (yang), a digestive organ that combines the *qi* from food and from air and transports it to the heart; and the pericardium (yin), supplementing the heart.

There are also eight extraordinary vessels which run only along one line in the body. They are considered primary and more elemental than the twelve meridians, carrying a deeper blueprint of the human being. They include four lines that run along the arms and legs, supporting the basic yin and yang structure of the body, plus two that create a cross inside the torso: the Belt Vessel (*daimai* 帶脈) which encircles the waist horizontally and the Penetrating Vessel (*chongmai* 沖脈) which runs vertically straight through the center from head to pelvic floor. The remaining two are the Governing (*dumai* 督脈; yang) and Conception Vessels (*renmai* 任脈; yin), which run along the back and front of the torso, both originating near the base of the spine and ending around the mouth. They form an essential energy circuit along the torso and are essential in all aspects of life cultivation.

Healing, Longevity, and Immortality

The body being an integrated organism of different forms, levels, and interactions of *qi*, healing, longevity, and immortality are also part of the same structure and form a closely knit continuum of practice. Most basic and best known is medical healing, which is usually administered by someone outside the person in the form of acupuncture, herbs, and massages, as well as dietary, exercise, and lifestyle recommendations. This part of the practice serves to replenish *qi* when people have lost their vitality due to bad habits, stress, infections, accidents, and the like.⁶

Having recovered health, many continue in their old ways and eventually get sick again. Some, and especially older people who have undergone repeated cycles of health and decline, realize just how much conscious lifestyle choices contribute to their well-being. Having attained good health and gained an increased awareness of *qi*-patterns, they may decide to increase their primordial *qi* to the level they had at birth or even above it.

To do so, they follow a variety of preventative medical or longevity techniques—including moderation, diet, exercise, self-massages, breathing, and meditations—to absorb their *qi*-exchange with the environment and cultivate its inner flow (see Kohn 1989). The practice ensures the full realization of people's natural life expectancy in health and vigor. It often leads to an increase in years, a youthful appearance, and continued strength and enjoyment of life. People enhance and empower the natural patterns of life, consciously following the patterns of yin and yang and creating harmony in themselves and their surroundings.

Immortality, third, raises the practices to a higher and transcendent level. Unlike medical healing and longevity, it means moving beyond the natural cycle and applying the techniques in a reverse manner. To attain it, people have to transform all their *qi* into primordial *qi* and proceed to refine it to subtler levels. This finer *qi* will eventually turn into pure spirit (*shen* 神), with which practitioners increasingly identify to become transcendent spirit-people.

The path that leads there involves intensive meditation and trance training as well as more radical forms of diet and other longevity practices. It results in a bypassing of death, so that the end of the body has no impact on

⁶ On Chinese medicine, see Kaptchuk 1983; Kendall 2002; Kohn 2005; Larre et al. 1986; Liu 1988; Porkert 1974; Sivin 1988.

the continuation of the spirit-person. In addition, practitioners attain supersensory powers and eventually gain residence in otherworldly realms. Unlike medicine and longevity, immortality thus comes with an extensive, vibrant mythology that describes splendid heavens, fabulous creatures, and a host of divine beings.⁷

The very same kinds of practices may be used on all three levels, albeit in different ways and with caution. Certain practices that are useful in healing may be superfluous in the attainment of longevity, while some applicable for immortality may even be harmful when healing is the main focus. Take breathing as an example. When healing or extending life, natural deep breathing is emphasized, with the diaphragm expanding on the inhalation. When moving on to immortality, however, reversed breathing is advised, which means that the diaphragm contracts on the in-breath. Undertaking this kind of reversed breathing too early or at the wrong stage in one's practice can cause complications, from dizziness to disorientation or worse.⁸

This holds also true for sexual practices. In healing, sexual activity with a partner is encouraged in moderation, with both partners reaching regular climaxes. In longevity practice, sexual activity may still be performed with a partner, but ejaculation as a loss of *qi* is avoided and sexual stimulation is used to increase the positive flow of *qi* in the body. In immortality, finally, sexual practices are undertaken internally and without a partner. They serve the creation of an immortal embryo through the refinement of sexual energy into primordial *qi* and cosmic spirit. Going beyond nature, immortality practitioners are not interested in creating harmony and balance, but strive to overcome the natural tendencies of the body-mind and actively lessen or even relinquish earthly existence in favor of cosmic and heavenly states.⁹

Diets are another case in point. Chinese medical diets use ordinary ingredients and recipes, focusing strongly on rice, beans, and vegetables as well as meats, tofu, and other forms of protein. They require the more conscious adaptation to seasonal patterns and the application of warming or

⁷ On the cosmology and mythology of immortality, see Campany 2002; Despeux and Kohn 2003; Miller 2008.

⁸ There is as yet no good book on Chinese breathing. For a historical study of the Six Healing Breaths or Sounds, see Despeux 2006.

⁹ There are numerous works on Chinese sexual practices, as any Google search will reveal. A good survey of the different kinds and comprehensive translation of texts, most relevant to the longevity tradition, is found in Wile 1992.

cooling foods, spices, herbs, depending on the patient's condition. Eating for long life uses the same principles and is still grain-based, but involves the abstention from heavy meats and fats as well as from strong substances such as alcohol, garlic, and onions. Practitioners are encouraged to eat lightly and in small portions, matching the seasons and always conscious of their internal *qi*. Contrary to this, immortality practice is to "avoid grain" (*bigu* 辟穀). They eliminate main staples, eat mainly raw food, and increasingly rely on herbal and mineral supplements. Their goal is the refinement of *qi* to a level where food intake is completely replaced by the conscious absorption of *qi* through breath, leading to extended periods of fasting.¹⁰

The Longevity Tradition

Longevity techniques occupy the middle ground between healing and immortality, medicine and religion. The culmination of healing, they form the ultimate of medical practice; serving as the path to perfect health, they are the foundation of Daoist immortality. Placed between two completely different dimensions yet connected to both, they represent a separate tradition that from its very beginning appears as both preventative and anti-aging medicine and also as a way of personal and spiritual self-cultivation. Only a few dedicated scholars have contributed significantly to its understanding.¹¹

As outlined in detail in *Chinese Healing Exercises* (Kohn 2008), longevity practices appear first in manuscripts uncovered at Mawangdui, contained in six of a total of forty-five texts known collectively as the "Chinese medical manuscripts" (trl. Harper 1998). The tomb was closed in 168 BCE, dating the texts to the early Han dynasty (206–6 BCE). Before this time, however, traces of longevity methods appear in inscriptions and philosophical works, such as the "Inner Training" chapter of the *Guanzi*, indicating that awareness of *qi* and methods of its internal circulation and meditational enhancement already formed part of the spiritual and self-cultivation culture of ancient China (see Roth 1999).

¹⁰ On dietary practices of the three levels, see Arthur 2006; Craze and Jay 2001; Lu 1986; Kohn 2010a. For a more comprehensive presentation of various longevity methods, on a popular level and from a medical background, see Reid 1989 and 2003.

¹¹ See Despeux 1987; 1988; Engelhardt 1987; Kohn 1989; 2006; Sakade 1988; 2007a; Stein 1999.

Both physicians and philosophers continued to develop the tradition, as documented in the early 3rd century CE in Hua Tuo's Five Animals Frolic as well as in Xi Kang's *Yangsheng lun* (On Nourishing Life). More elaborate sources that also show the increasing interaction between the two dimensions appear in the 4th century. In 317, the imperial court fled from the invading Huns and moved south, replacing southern aristocrats in government offices. With time at hand and no careers to pursue, they turned to various other endeavors, including the pursuit of health and spiritual advancement. The result was not only the first comprehensive book on longevity practices but also the founding of the Daoist school of Highest Clarity. Based on a combination of traditional cosmology, early Daoist ritual, and operative alchemy, its followers focused on connecting to the gods and starry palaces above and practiced elaborate visualizations and ecstatic excursions as well as the concoction of elixirs that would instantaneously transport them to the otherworld. In preparation for these endeavors, they applied longevity techniques, using them to strengthen their senses, extend their life expectancy, and clear their energy channels. Longevity practices thus formed an active part of both aristocratic and religious culture.

This in turn led to a proliferation of texts in the course of the Six Dynasties (420-589) that outline a plethora of different methods involving ways of internal *qi* manipulation, physical exercises, and dietary control—contained in the Daoist canon as well as recouped in medical literature. The longevity tradition was finding its unique expression while continuing to straddle both realms of medicine and religion.

The Tang dynasty (618-907) was the heyday of Daoism as well as the longevity tradition. It established the first stable rule after many centuries of division, and much of its culture was dedicated to unification and integration. This was obvious not only in the political realm but also in the world of thought and religion, creating integrated organizational structures and worldview systems. In terms of the longevity tradition, it led to three major systematizations: the texts by the physician and Daoist Sun Simiao, a prolific author especially of medical works who was active in the 7th century and is still revered as a master and even god of medicine; the *Yangxing yanming lu* (Record on Nourishing Inner Nature and Extending Life), a comprehensive collection of all sorts of different methods that also includes a collection of references to longevity methods in previous literature; and the medically based outline of *qi*-absorption methods by the Highest Clarity patriarch Sima Chengzhen, court Daoist of the 8th century and best known for his work on Daoist meditation, "Sitting in Oblivion" (trl. Kohn 2010b).

In the wake of this explosion of techniques, which were also transmitted to Japan and recorded systematically in the *Ishinpō* (Essential Medical Methods; trl. Hsia et al. 1986) of 974, the longevity tradition its active presence in both medical and religious sources, including Daoist texts as well as technical compendia from the Song (960-1260), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

A major medical source is the *Chifeng sui* (Marrow of the Red Phoenix; trl. Despeux 1988), a collection of longevity methods by Zhou Lüjing, dated to 1578. Reflecting the typical career of a longevity master, Zhou was the son of an aristocratic family, trained for office and married. Then, however, he contracted tuberculosis and could not find help among the medical establishment. Concerned with his health, he made survival his first priority and left the family to reside in a Daoist temple. He got well, but found the world of long life and spiritual cultivation so enticing that he remained a recluse, developing numerous skills, such as sword fighting, paper making, painting, calligraphy, and long life techniques.¹² He collected prescriptions for healing, including herbs, talismans, rituals, exorcisms, and spells, which he wrote up variously (Despeux 1988, 12-13). Integrating many earlier methods, his book consists of three sections: techniques of breathing and guiding *qi*, exercise sequences including the Five Animals Frolic, and meditative exercises based on internal alchemy. It is comprehensive and has remained a key resource for practitioners today.

Within the Daoist tradition, longevity techniques have continued to be initiatory and supplementary, ensuring that practitioners are energetically open for the more advanced spiritual transformations of *qi*. Works on internal alchemy, as a result, mention the methods only in passing, taking them for granted as a prerequisite. However, their take on the human body and its internal powers is different enough to have made an impact on the longevity tradition, especially when it comes to practices specifically geared

¹² Sun Simiao has a similar background story (Sivin 1967; Kohn 2008, 129-31); Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維橋(1872-1955), the author of the *Yinshizi jingzuo fa* 因是子靜坐法 (Quiet Sitting with Master Yinshi) and major forerunner of qigong in modern China, too, was stricken by tuberculosis and dedicated himself to healing full-time (Kohn 2002; Liu Guizhen 劉貴珍 (1920-1983), the initiator of qigong in the Communist Party, suffered from numerous ailments that medicine could not heal but Daoist-preserved longevity techniques could (Palmer 2007); and Hu Fuchen 胡孚琛 (b. 1945), a Western-trained pharmacologist, came to longevity fasting in the 1990 after being diagnosed with multiple serious diseases (Arthur 2006b, 113).

toward women. Known as women's alchemy, they are recorded from the late 18th century onward, reflecting an increase in women's literacy as well as a greater awareness of the unique features of the female body.

Today longevity pervades Chinese culture in the form of qigong and taiji quan, practiced widely among the general populace and a mainstay of Daoist cultivation (see Cohen 1997). The exercises described in the literature over the millennia are still actively used, recreated, enhanced, and transformed. They are also increasingly brought into a Western scientific context, notably in energy medicine and psychology (see Feinstein et al. 2005; Gallo 2004; Oschman 2000; Shealy 2011; Carlson and Kohn 2012). However, to date there are only few translations of relevant texts, preventing the proper appreciation of the tradition.¹³

This volume hopes to remedy this lack. It presents translations of numerous sources on longevity practice from a variety of periods, including comprehensive guidelines on lifestyle moderation as well as the major compendia of the Tang. It offers materials on specific practices, such as diets, exercise, self-massages, breathing, and the guiding of *qi*, in each case selecting the most representative and most widely cited works. It does not repeat translations already available, such as of the Han-dynasty manuscripts (Harper 1998) and texts on sexual (Ishihara and Levy 1970) and women's practices (Wile 1992). It does, however, cover the main periods of the longevity tradition, beginning with the 4th century BCE, when the earliest materials appear, and systematically moves through Chinese history, all the way to late Qing period and its development of special techniques for women.

Opening the traditional Chinese texts, their worldview, body vision, and concrete methods, to a wider Western audience, the book hopes to contribute not only to the better understanding of Chinese culture but also to aid the contemporary search for a way to enable more people to live longer and healthier lives.

¹³ Translations in French and German include Despeux 1988; Engelhardt 1987; Stein 1999. In English there are only four: Harper 1998 translates the manuscripts found in the Mawangdui tomb of the Han dynasty; Hsia et al. 1986 has the longevity chapters of the Japanese collection *Ishinpō* (dat. 984); Huang and Wurmbrand 1987 offers a collection of texts on breathing from the Daoist canon, albeit with no annotation; and Berk 1986 presents an illustrated Qing-dynasty work on healing exercises.

