



## A Classical Chinese Medicine Perspective on the Nature of Aging and Longevity

CHINESE THOUGHT PORTRAYS THE STAGES OF LIFE AS A process in which generating energy waxes and wanes in resonance with the phases of the macrocosm. Youth and growth are seen as manifestations of the expanding force, like sunrise and morning, or spring and summer, while maturity and aging mirror the contracting movement in nature, like afternoon and night time, or fall and winter. Ancient Chinese scholars described this cyclical pulse of expanding (life-begetting) and contracting (life-destructing) phases via a figurative dial comprised of twelve zodiacal positions. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E., the energetic quality and function of each point on this cosmological clock was firmly defined by a multi-layered system of symbolic representation, which included the twelve earthly branches, the twelve seasonal pitches, and the twelve tidal hexagrams.

One of the most common references in this system of symbolic representation of energetic forces, utilized specifically by the earthly branches, is the image of plant growth. When cosmic energy is in a state of hibernation, all plants hibernate

below the ground; when the energy begins to rise, the growing seedling pushes against the surface; when the energy pushes on, the sprout breaks through the ground; when the energy expands further, the plant rapidly spreads out its stems and leaves; when the energy stabilizes at its climax of expansion in summer, plant growth stops and all activity turns inward, creating flavor and blossoms and seeds; when the energy contracts, the leaves and the fruit begin to droop and fall to the ground; and when, finally, the energy withdraws to a state of complete storage again, all plant life retreats below the surface of the earth. The phenomenon of aging is likened to the contracting phase of the life force in nature--an inward ripening process resulting in a bountiful harvest, and the maturation and dissemination of the seeds of wisdom.

Against the backdrop of these cosmological considerations, the ancient Chinese story of aging and dying is without negative connotation, just as the seasons of fall and winter do not compare unfavorably to spring and summer. Since the

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ancient pictogram for winter represents the image of a bottled-up sun, a paraphrased interpretation of the Chinese term *dong* (winter) could be “where the movement of the sun comes to an end by going into storage, so that the cycle of life can continue once again.” The story of aging, therefore, is about the evolution toward a state of inner enlightenment and eventual rebirth, and the associated spiritual



journey of surrendering all attachment to material possessions, including the youthful predilection for the vigor and prowess of the physical body.

Certain sources have described the active yang phase of this universal movement as *shen* 伸 (stretching out) and the passive yin phase as *gui* 歸 (returning inward), definitions that later merged with the homophonic mythopoeia *shen* 神 (solar light spirits) and *gui* 鬼 (nocturnal lunar demons). While the connotations of the latter generally invite the common bias toward the dynamic aspects of youth on one hand and prejudice against the outward decline of old age on the other, its original message is clearly impartial: all existence in the universe remains equally balanced between the processes of light and dark, active and passive, spring(ing up) and fall(ing down), and male and female. From this perspective, aging is likened to the reflective quality of the moon and the distinctly feminine quality of “letting be,” as opposed to the withdrawal into the dimming lights of “hell” portending impotence and senility.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note in this context that the Chinese term for demon connotes an inappropriate attachment to the realm of the corporeal, describing the “ghost” of an overly attached ego that keeps hovering above the haunts of the physical body after death. If, by extension, someone in the letting-go phase of life stays farcically attached to the appearance of youth, s/he would take on the qualities of a ghost-like

existence.

In the most general terms, the Chinese notion of aging can be summarized as the spiritual evolution toward a state of consciousness that exchanges a strongly guarded sense of self for the age related values of community, humility, and tradition. By no means, therefore, is the ancient Chinese quest for immortality limited to the predictable mechanical techniques aimed at keeping the physical body alive. “Who stays attached to the status quo may live long,” stated the *Daodejing* 2,500 years ago, “but who practices dying without vanishing lives forever.”<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese science of longevity thus entails a set of guiding principles for the cultivation of harmony at a time when the animal part of the human being undergoes a gradual drop in physical vitality. The nature of these principles can be understood best by examining the microcosmic organ networks associated with those positions on the macrocosmic dial that are situated at and beyond the high point of the movement—the positions where the momentum of the life force begins to move downward and inward. They are comprised of the following: the point of the summer solstice during the 5<sup>th</sup> lunar month (approximately the domain of Cancer), or high noon, associated with the heart; the point of the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month (approximately the domain of Leo), or 1-3 pm, associated with the small intestine; the point of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month (approximately the domain of Virgo), or 3-5 pm, associated with the bladder; and the point of the autumnal equinox during the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month (approximately the domain of Libra), or sunset time (5-7 pm), associated with the kidney.<sup>3</sup> The following discussion examines the concept of aging through the multi-layered symbolism associated with these four networks of classical Chinese medicine, and the correlated ritual states of turning inward, sacrificing, bowing, and prostrating.

### Turning Point: The Heart

The Chinese term for heart also means center. The 5<sup>th</sup> lunar month represents the center of the year, where the flux of expanding and contracting energy has reached a turning point.

Both the number five (*wu* 五) and the relevant earthly branch (*wu* 午), therefore, are not only homophonous by design, but express the image of a crossroad. It is here that the rising phase of the sun's journey culminates and "dies on the cross."

The theme of death and return is further developed in the mythic lore surrounding one of the stellar constellations that was visible in the sky over China around the summer solstice in the second century B.C.E. The stellar constellation Gui 鬼 (ghost/demon), containing the milky star cluster Praesepe in Cancer, is traditionally described as a graveyard in the sky to which the souls of the dead return. Along with the other icons marking this position in space-time, it heralds the point of the midlife crisis—the beginning demise of the material bounties of the earth, which had been allowed to thrive until this moment. At the same time, since many ancient civilizations regarded this area of the sky as an image of "millions of souls waiting to be incarnated,"<sup>4</sup> the demise of the physical seemed to promise the deliverance of the soul into Heaven. It is important to note that Chinese medicine references the preceding four organ networks (associated with the position of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> lunar months) as Earth networks, entrusted with the workings of the physical body, while those associated with the position of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> lunar months are associated with the realm of Heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Far from describing the moment of coming of age with only foreboding, downward spiraling images, the ancient Chinese record quite literally characterizes this point as the opportunity of advancing into the realm of Heaven. In the ancient science of spiritual alchemy, Heaven was generally regarded as a state of consciousness associated with the cultivation of the human heart. Turning inward (*gui* 歸) meant evolving toward the sage heart; failing to progress in this way meant becoming a ghost (*gui* 鬼). This is the central function which gave name to the well-known Chinese herb Danggui 當歸 (Angelica sinensis)—"Returning (the spirit) to where it belongs (inside)." This herb is commonly prescribed for anxiety, hormonal insufficiencies and other symptoms accompanying the *climacterium*. Danggui, notably, is the prototypical female herb of the Chinese

materia medica, benefiting the microcosmic moon path on the levels of body, mind, and spirit. The red color and bitter-sweet flavor of the famous root underlie its common affiliation with the heart, the blood, and the gender primarily associated with the metabolism of blood and hormones. The classical record prescribes that conscious aging initiates heart cultivation, which in turn nurtures the sacred female inside, the holy grail of yin blood that contains yang spirit. Continuing in this vein, the hexagram that captures the energetic state of the summer solstice (hexagram 44) identifies the heart as Gou 姤 (The Queen), a reflection of Mother Nature herself.

While Danggui is known to help ease many of the physical and emotional symptoms of growing old, its main purpose is clearly described as the facilitation of the spiritual process of conscious aging designed to occur at the climax of life. This process is characterized by the switch from outside to inside, from upward mobility to downward munificence, and from solar action to lunar containment. Against the backdrop of this ancient wisdom, the merits of modern menopause treatments such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) appear questionable. Rather than facilitating the smooth progression into a more inward state of consciousness with natural, core-consolidating substances, HRT seeks to artificially sustain the chemical substances needed to stave off the demons of old age, and maintain the dynamic of youth by continuing to lead an outwardly and materially oriented life.

### Retreat: The Small Intestine

The mythological markers surrounding the organ system associated with the 6<sup>th</sup> lunar month and the after-noon time segment of 1-3 pm resume the theme of drawing inward. The associated tidal hexagram Dun (hexagram 33) is most often translated as Retreat, and the term *xiaochang* 小腸 (small intestine) itself can be interpreted as "the organ that functions like the sun's withdrawal into the earth." The earthly branch marking this position, Wei 未 represents the image of a tree with a double layer of foliage, signifying the gradual darkening of the retreating light in late summer

or early afternoon. In China, this is the time of the monsoon season and the after-lunch nap, and, in the context of our investigation, the place where the afternoon of life fully begins.

A deeper analysis of this place can best be initiated by a closer look at hexagram 33. The essence of this hexagram was cast into the following verses by the *Yijing* master Jiao Yanshou during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.: “The Three Treacherous Passages and the Five Sacred Peaks, the City of the Sun and the Ancestral Hall—this is the home of spirit, and the only place that knows peace.”<sup>6</sup> The Five Sacred Peaks refer to the five mountains in the ancient model of China’s sacred geography, featuring one mountain for each direction. The other terms are place names in the vicinity of Mt. Song; the central one of the Five Peaks, nowadays located in Henan Province, is best known in the West as the location of the Shaolin Monastery. Appropriately, Master Jiao’s interpretation of hexagram 33 chooses the central world mound as a landmark to describe the energetic attributes of this spot in space-time. The ancient name of Mt. Song, Chonggao (Lofty and High), reflects its association with the growing influence of yin forces in nature. As the *Huangdi neijing* (Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Chinese Medicine) comments: “When things are lofty and high, the *yin qi* begins to govern them.”<sup>7</sup> This statement clearly reflects the energetic situation in question—the activity reaches its highest peak in the heart position and now, at the following and closely associated position of the small intestine, embarks on its downward descent.

The central theme evoked by the archetypal image of Mt. Song, however, is the phenomenon of ancestor worship and sacrifice. An older version of the mountain range’s name can be translated as Mt. Ancestor Sanctuary. Furthermore, its peak Taishi (Ancestral Hall) shares its name with the ceremonial center of the ancestral temple at the dynastic court. Recent archeological excavations have unearthed evidence that for over 7,000 years, Mt. Song has been a major sacrificial site viewed as the “belly button” center of the Chinese world where the umbilical connection to the ancestral realm could be ritually maintained. The natural setting of Mt. Song and other sites of ancestral worship was later institutionalized at the dynastic

court of the Zhou Dynasty in the establishment of the Ancestral Temple, a conception often attributed to the legendary King Wen. The primary function of the temple’s Ancestral Hall was the execution of the ancestral rites, as well as the containment of the sacred books mandating and detailing those rites, notably the *Yueling* (Lunar Mandates) chapter of the *Liji* (Book of Rites).<sup>8</sup>

The Ancestral Hall was thus the designated location for the ritual transmission of the central teaching of Chinese socio-cultural identity—surrender to the seasonal cycles of the universe. These teachings were passed on from the high position of the king or his ministers to the lower position of following generations and inferiors, such as the vassals and retainers. The Chinese term for teaching, *jiao* 教, literally means to make somebody filial, *xiao* 孝. In its broadest sense, the virtue of filiality is perhaps the central concept of both Daoist and Confucian tradition—honoring the Above as a source of the Below, beginning with the universal source and the ancestors, and ending with the king and the community’s elders. Note that the traditional concept of unconditional respect for one’s elders is also reflected in the name of the acupuncture point SI 6, Yanglao (Nourishing the Elders). Typically, the older generation was in charge of conducting rituals and teachings in the Ancestral Hall, because from the perspective of this discussion they were naturally positioned for transmitting the circularity of existence. A core concept in this discussion is that of *li* (propriety, ritual, sacrifice)—the central insight that all human beings are but a tooth in the wheel of universal flux, that smaller cycles always follow larger ones, that Earth follows Heaven, and that in ritual emulation of this law retainers follow the king and children follow their parents.

The Five Sacred Peaks were traditional places of hermitage where cultivating adepts sought inner peace. Chinese cultural etiquette used to encourage a voluntary withdrawal into such places at the height of one’s career. Just at the moment of temptation to reach higher and higher levels of rank, fame, and fortune, traditional wisdom deemed it appropriate for the successful official to retreat for a lengthy sabbatical. Mt. Song, specifically, became the prototypical emblem for

this sacrificial retreat in the afternoon of life. Chinese mythological sources report, for instance, that this is the place where the humble emperor Yu retreated to avoid the rath of Shun's son, and where an extensive network of caves forms the legendary entrance to a dusky underworld.<sup>9</sup>

On a microcosmic scale, the story of the small intestine mirrors the themes of humility, retreat, sacrifice, and universal knowing. As the “government” (fu) of the heart, and associated with the constellation Leo above and the City of the Sun below, the functional atmosphere of the small intestine resembles the fire of late summer—radiant, yet acutely aware of its waning momentum. The cave passages of Mt. Song mirror the anatomical manifestation of the small intestine system, which lies beneath the belly button and snakes itself toward the underworld of the human body. Furthermore, chapter eight of the medical classic states that “the small intestine is the official who knows to fully receive and then sacrifice.”<sup>10</sup>

The small intestine, in sum, relates its part in the story of aging as an internal awakening to the conscious unfolding of macrocosmic patterns. It reveals that what might otherwise be seen as the “hell” of old age is actually an opportunity to let the light glow on an inward plane. It also provides the insight that the passing of time does everything without anything needing to be done, and that time can heal all wounds. The classic form of this posture is modeled by a variety of archetypes: King Wen, China's legendary love king and co-creator of the *Yijing*; the Heavenly Man (*daren*) of the *Yijing*; and finally the sheep (*yang* 羊), the animal symbol for this position in the cycle, which the Chinese language uses as a general marker for sacrifice and positive human qualities such as goodness (*shan* 善), beauty (*mei* 美), and egolessness (*yi* 義). If the spiritual aspects of a human being's small intestine function are intact, therefore, the *wuwei* mode of non-attachment and letting go—to be adopted most pertinently by a person past the prime of his/her life--will bring about the states of true peace, joy, and wisdom.

### Fall: The Bladder

In the domain of the bladder, we are

encountering the theme of the autumn of life. The 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month marks the beginning of fall, and the withdrawal of the light in nature is beginning to manifest in temperature changes. The *Yueling's* descriptions of this time include “arrival of cool wind,” “descending of white frost,” and “heaven and earth begin to bow their heads.” The top-heaviness of the ripe plants is indeed resulting in a general “bowing of heads” at this time, proclaiming a state of humility in the natural world. For the ancient observer, it was a reminder that when the crisp air of fall starts to become biting, a thorough disappearance of arrogance and egocentric judgment constitutes the correct state of being. While the image of a hunched back is a typical marker for the pathology of old age, a spine that is voluntarily bowed down is a prime indicator for the proper posture of aging. The bladder channel, appropriately, envelops and governs the spine.

The cool breath of nature brings death--while the 1<sup>st</sup> month marked the beginning of plant growth, the 7<sup>th</sup> month, directly opposite on the circle of life, indicates the end of it. The seasonal pitch of this time is Yize (Equalizing Rule), executing the metal punishment of fall by “beginning to disintegrate the 10,000 things.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the cooling temperatures and the crisp light of fall have a coagulating effect on the material world, making the outlines and shapes of all things more visible than ever, and causing nature to explode in a last burst of color and radiance at the uppermost and outermost reaches of the plant world. In parallel fashion, it is the task of the bladder system in Chinese medicine to keep the spine straight and supple, to keep invading pathogens at bay by maximizing surface circulation, and to keep the process of *jing-qi-shen* transformation along the spinal passageway intact, resulting in bright vision, clarity of thought, and a radiant appearance in the head region of the body.

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