After this lecture you will be able to describe early Chinese self-cultivation culture, a range of its techniques, and its influence on early Chinese medicine.

Self-cultivation or 養生 *yangsheng* [nurturing life] embraces many practices aimed at strengthening the body and improving the spirit(s). At different times and different contexts the practices might include:

Basic hygiene and personal grooming  
Diet and drug-taking  
Sexual and breath cultivation  
Inner alchemy  
Exercise and martial arts  
Techniques aimed at **immortality**

Varying from the mundane to the bizarre, at its most extreme the cultivation of bodily essences lead certain cults to believe in the attainment of physical immortality - via dietary
means such as giving up grains, and the consumption of drugs – classically Cinnabar – the toxic red ore Mercury Sulfide. [see Lecture 7]. The 1st emperor of China, for example, was convinced that the magical herb of immortality grew in the mythical islands of Peng Lai. He dispatched several thousand young girls and boys on a naval expedition into the North China Sea, never to return. We might think of this as a schism between techniques designed to extend and enhance a healthy “normal” lifespan and those – notably in the early imperial period the xian 仙 immortality cults – who believed that life could indeed be extended to immortality.

Zhuangzi 莊子, however, mocks the followers of the legendary Ancestor Peng (彭祖 Peng Zu), reputed to have lived over 900 years through his mastery of sexual cultivation. Ancestor Peng was also a patron of those ‘huffers and puffers’ who practised Daoyin 導引, literally “guiding and pulling”, a tradition of therapeutic exercise and breath cultivation designed to condition the inner body and treat pain and other illnesses. On the other hand Zhuangzi apparently endorses some form of breath meditation and qi circulation in his idea that “the superior man” breathes through his heels. Wang Chong (AD27-100), the rationalist, is quite specific in his support for the exercise regimes and his scorn for the followers of the immortality cults. The search for immortality – literal and then spiritual – eventually was to evolve into the realms of outer and inner alchemy [see lecture 6].

Yangsheng and Medicine.

A good representation of the importance of ‘sexual cultivation’ and ‘immortality techniques’ is that they are rubrics given equal importance with ‘medical canons’ and ‘canonical remedies’ in the ‘Remedies and Techniques’ category in the bibliography of Hanshu 漢書 History of the Former Han comp. 58-76 CE] and are listed as having almost as many texts. Sadly we know little of the early immortality cults and their texts, but we do have texts that document more ordinary techniques of self-cultivation.

However the language and theory of self-cultivation had a critical influence on the formation of medical theory. Among the themes that passed from the former to the latter were:

(i) ideas about the circulation of qi, jing 精 and shen 神, and the inner body.
(ii) use of lyrical terminology to refer to anatomical locations in the body which pre-dates the Designation of acupuncture and moxibustion points.
(iii) A focus on preventative medicine/strengthening the body.
(iv) Techniques for strengthening Yin and generating shenming 神明 ‘spirit illumination’.

An important lesson that medicine learnt from self-cultivation was that enlightened physicians treated the body when it was not yet sick. While this maxim refers to the preventive medicine
of nourishing and strengthening the body, it came to mean the detection of patterns of illness before they manifested as gross pathology in the body.

The introduction to *Yinshu* 引書 [Pulling Book, ca 186 BCE] is a good example of the seasonal health regime with its prescriptions for both personal hygiene, diet, exercise and sexual regulation [entering the chamber is a euphemism for sexual intercourse].

“Spring days: After rising in the morning, eliminate water, scrub (the hands), rinse (the mouth), wash the teeth, and knock (the teeth), unfasten the hair, stroll to the lower end of the hall to meet the purest of dew and to receive the essence of heaven, and drink one cup of water - - these are the means to increase accord. Enter the palace from evening until greater midnight; increasing it injures qi”

The Pulling Book contains a manual of exercises that might treat various ailments, but in addition they were intended to tone the body, move *qi*, and protect against and help a person adjust to external environmental changes. Here is one example to try – do it for at least 3 minutes (stop if anything hurts!):

Wild Duck Bathing. Interlock the hands behind the back and shake the head.
Swivelling and Extending. With the hands interlocked, raise the hands shaking them behind.
The Mawangdui texts list 44 exercises such as "dragon rising" and "pulling knee pain".

The illustrated *daoyin* chart is on the same silk bolt as is written one of the texts about the *mai* channels and we can see that both manuscript and chart are substantially concerned with the treatment of pain. Daoyin has been popular in one form or another throughout Chinese history and is retained in modern times in various *qi gong* 氣功 and callisthenic exercises (see below).

![Illustrated *daoyin* chart](image)

Philosophy and Politics.

In Warring States (5th – 3rd Centuries BCE) philosophy the term *yangsheng* is often found as part of the debate about human nature. The Confucian philosopher *Mencius* (4th Century BCE) believed in nourishing the seeds of goodness that grew within the human heart. For him, cultivating courage and morality meant nourishing the "flood-like qi" with proper breath techniques. The night and morning qi was the finest and most refreshing for the good of your moral health.

At the highest political level, the Emperor, the practice of self-cultivation was vital to the stability of the body politic. The *Nei Yeh* “Inner Training” chapter of the Guanzi (a miscellany of political tracts about rulership from between 4th-2nd centuries BCE, named after a minister of the state of Qi) affirms that the more refined the king’s body, the more peaceful his kingdom. (see Needham and Sivin from Lecture 1)

At various points in imperial history self-cultivation culture provides individuals or groups with a way to express their desire for self-determination.
The Boxers, during the 1899-1900 nationalistic uprising against foreign pestilence, immorality and Christianity believed that their qi strengthening movements would help them fly and protect them against foreign bullets. In fact the Boxers tended to rely on popular magical beliefs, charms and talismans, more than any serious martial self-cultivation (see below) and in the face of heavily armed and disciplined western armies the results were predictably disastrous.

The latest wave of interest in qi gong began in the 1950s and became overtly political in the teachings and methods of Li Hongzhi's Falun Dafa in the years after the Tiananmen Square "incident" of 1989. The Chinese Communist Party [CCP] still labels Falun Gong as an "evil cult" and actively persecutes its followers. The Falun Gong has all the trademarks of a sect, and Li Hongzhi's pronouncements have often been "cultish" in the extreme (e.g. alien extra terrestrial interventions on the earth – see Penny 2002 p159). Nevertheless the root teaching for ordinary practitioners is a physical and moral self cultivation centred on Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance. Li's movement has been very active in using the internet to protest and defend its position: see http://www.faluninfo.net/. The Chinese government was equally vigorous in this propaganda war until quite recently, but now seems to wish to down play the issue. For a good summary of the overall situation see the website of one of the leading historians of Chinese religion, Barend ter Haar; http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/falun.htm
Sexual Cultivation

As a subset of yangsheng practice and as a distinct form in its own right we find a rich literary and archaeological record of a sexual culture enjoyed by sections of the Western Han elite. In their earliest incarnation these texts range from those recording simple directions as to the propitious times for engaging in procreative sex, in tune with the cycle of the seasons, to prescriptions for mutual satisfaction and harmony, generating qi and shenming [spirit illumination]. They are also allied to a recipe and remedy literature that is replete with aphrodisiacs and techniques for erotic stimulation, including charms for stealing other peoples’ wives.

“The coital muscle is the coital vessel inside the dark gate. When you are able to rub and stroke it, it causes both bodies to experience ecstatic excitation and to exude beauty that is joyful and lustrous” He Yin Yang. [tr. Harper. 1998, 415].

The key prohibition was the unnecessary loss of male essence, jing 精. Jing can refer to both semen and the most pure refined qi that nourishes the body. In a polygamous society excessive indulgence was seen as a serious threat to a man’s health. Many (male) patients have illnesses that are thought self-induced through careless or wanton sexual excess. Preventing the emission of semen via ejaculation – coitus reservatus - was the key practice for the male [this was achieved mainly through a combination of anal constriction and meditation see Wile 1992 pp.46-47]. The observation of enervation and weakness from sexual exhaustion, contrasted with the vigour of pre-pubescent children and the perceived female sexual superiority in the matter of multiple orgasm reinforced this doctrine. i.e. too much sex weakens the male. In contrast strengthening the male partner through the practice of absorbing female jing and through semen retention, achieved through anal constriction just at the point of orgasm could enhance the vital yin energy in the male, prolonging life.

Apart from intensifying pleasure, successful practice of the fang zhong shu 房中書 (the Art of the Bedchamber) allows stimulation, circulation and finally absorption of qi. Sexual longevity became a metaphor for physiological longevity. An important secondary aspect of sexual cultivation is that male health in particular can benefit from the absorption of the female essence released at orgasm. This strengthening or tonifying of Yin is important because it is the Yin organs of the body [heart, spleen, lung, kidney, liver] that are the seat of mortal disease.

We can list the objectives of sexual cultivation as:

to enhance pleasure

to conserve male essence
to sexually satisfy the female for domestic harmony

to benefit male health through tonifying Yin

to use coitus reservatus to return jingqi up the spine to the brain there by inducing a state of

shenming [spirit illumination]

This is a description of cultivating Yin from the Mawangdui Shiwen 十問- “The Ten Questions”;

‘The Lord Pangeng asked the Wizened Old Man: I have heard that you practice “receiving Yin” to fortify yourself and breathe the essence of Heaven to increase your longevity. What should I grasp to enable me to practice the way?

You must value that which is born together with you yet ages before you do (i.e. your sexual ability). The weak it makes them strong; the short, it makes them tall; the poor, it guarantees them abundant provision. The regimen involves both emptying and filling, and there is a precise procedure for cultivating it:

1. Let the limbs fall, straighten the back and flex the buttocks.
2. Spread the thighs, move the Yin (penis) and contract the anus.
3. Close the eyelashes, do not listen and breath in the qi to fill the inner womb.
4. Hold to the five flavours and drink the spring blossom.
5. The mass of essence all rises up, breathe in the great illumination. When you arrive at five stop and the essence and spirit become daily blessed.’

The He Yin Yang gives the following description of the female orgasm:

“The signs of the great completion: the nose sweats and the lips are white: the hands and feet all twitch; the buttocks do not adhere to the bedmat, but rise up and away. When she becomes corpse-like there is spreading. Precisely at this time the vapor (qi) expands in the central bourne (uterus). Essence and spirit enter and are deposited, then engendering

shenming [spirit illumination].”

We also find, in the way that sexual cultivation texts describe the body, a foreshadowing of the lyrical names of the acupuncture points such as ‘Greater Mountain Stream’, or ‘Kun Lun Mountains’. Here is a description of pre-coital massage in the He Yin Yang合陰陽 [Conjoining Yin and Yang]:

Clasp her hands and cross over to the outside of her wrists,
Stroke the ‘elbow chambers’
Go beside the armpits
Move up to the ‘Stove Frame’
Go to the ‘neck region’
Stroke the ‘Receiving Basket’
Among the anatomical locations in this 2nd C BCE massage text we find terms later used in the description of the acupuncture points.

It is in sexual cultivation that we first find records that demonstrate the possibility of directly manipulating *qi* in others, a model fully exploited in later medical literature. By taking the inner realm of the body as its focus for improvement, self-cultivation culture naturally generated concepts of physiological process. This was a kind of alchemy where the gross material of the body was invigorated and rejuvenated by the movement and passage of *qi*, where cultivation refined *qi* and concentrated its essence so that the body could receive the in-dwelling spirit and the physical and mental illumination that it brought. This, in sum, was the cultivation of Yin.

“Through subjective descriptions of sex, of breathing and of other health-related activities, classical Chinese medicinal thought gained a language and cosmology based on the attainment of a radiant *sense* of well-being rather than merely a state of health defined by the absence of the symptoms of sickness.”

Lo. 2001. p47.

Subsequently Sexual Self-Cultivation became marginalised from mainstream medicine: in the *Songshi* (History of the Song comp.1343-45 CE) sexual cultivation is classified as Daoist literature, while religion becomes the natural home of the techniques of inner alchemy, both sexual and meditative.

Gymnastic postures to protect
Against illness and demons
Martial Arts

Ideas of self-cultivation are also at the root of the martial arts traditions. The Shaolin Temple was founded in 495 CE, and was one of the early centres for the translation of Buddhist texts, developing into a large and rich monastery. Around 530, it may also have been the temporary home of Bodhidharma, or Damo, revered as the founder of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. He is also credited in legend with establishing the practice of martial arts there, though this is extremely unlikely.

A main hall in the Shaolin temple, Henan

The first mention of “fighting monks” from the temple is from the early years of the seventh century, when the founder of the Tang Dynasty 618-907 CE, Li Shimin 李世民, was aided by thirteen of its monks. It is difficult to gauge from sources to what extent and in what form martial arts were practised there, but by the Ming Dynasty it was a renowned centre, especially famous for the use of the staff. In 1553, a troupe of monks helped defend against Japanese pirate incursions in Fujian Province. In the late Ming and Qing Dynasties, Shaolin fighting techniques spread throughout China, as did legends about it, most especially of a secret branch of the Temple in southern China.

Many styles of martial arts which emerged during the late Qing, often among secret societies, purport to trace their lineage back to the Temple or its monks. The Temple was comprehensively destroyed three times in its long history, the last being during warlord struggles in 1928. Fortunately, two main halls survived, containing murals depicting the monks at martial arts practice. Today, with the on-going craze for martial arts both in the West
and in China, schools for learning Shaolin Gongfu have sprung up in and around the Temple, and it is thriving - though not perhaps in the way its original founders intended.

There is a thriving popular martial arts press in Asia

Taijiquan 太極拳 has been attributed to a mythical “inner” school of martial arts on account of its deceptively slow pace and yielding form.

As a strategy for combat, the idea of stillness overcoming movement can be traced to a 17th century manual by Huang Baijia 黃百家 which sets itself up in opposition to the Shaolin tradition. But most of the individual movements that make up its sequences “ward off, press, push, pull-down,” etc. are evidence that it shares a common history with other, more visually combative, wushu 武術 “Chinese martial arts”.

As distinctive form and named sequences the history of Taijiquan begins with the Ming general, Qi Jiguang’s 戚繼光 (1528 - 87) Quan jing 拳經 “Classic of the Fist". [http://www.atarn.org/chinese/chin_arc.htm](http://www.atarn.org/chinese/chin_arc.htm) Rather than simply training the muscles and physical fitness adepts concentrate on a practice which builds an inner strength and develops a heightened awareness of qi and its dynamic between two opponents.

General Qi reputedly borrowed twenty-nine postures from the Chen family community in Henan. But reliable evidence of those individuals and what they were teaching at that time is scanty. It isn’t until the mid to late nineteenth century that we can see theory, postures and sequences of Taijiquan defined and flourishing in a number of different teaching lineages, such as the Yang, Wu and Sun styles. This was undoubtedly a part of local response to the breakdown of imperial authority exacerbated by regular famines and over-population towards the end of the Qing dynasty.
Douglas Wile in his “Lost Tai Chi Classics from the Late Ch’ing Dynasty” shows how in the mid 19th century the gentry family of the Wu brothers from Yongnian sponsored Yang Luchan, an illiterate former bondman of the Chen clan. Yang, known as “the invincible”, developed the style that was to become the widely practiced form of Taijiquan to this day. In the writings of the Wu brothers we see how the practice of Yang’s art was married to a philosophy that strongly echoes contemporary “Daoist” interpretations of the Dao De Jing 道德經 [the Way and the Power] and ideas about self-cultivation and qi that are clearly aligned to those of alchemy and sexual cultivation, respectively (see Wile 1996. pp.45-47, 55-56, 73-75). The immediate practical use for the Wu brothers was to create a local martial arts civil defence unit in the face of the warfare and turbulence created by the Taiping Rebellion of the mid 19th century and the subsequent Nian bandit revolts.
http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taiping.html

Since 1949 the government have been keen to de-politicise the martial arts, stressing the health-giving and restorative qualities for the benefit of the elderly, a gentle daily set of callisthenic exercises. In the aftermath of the CCP take over many of the masters teaching the traditional forms which seek consciously and unconsciously to cultivate qi for both health and self defence fled to Taiwan and these teachings have subsequently become popularised in the West, and in particular the USA. As Western Medicine and bio-medical thinking came to supersede Chinese Medicine during the course of the 20th century the Martial Arts became the repository of the concepts of traditional medico-self-cultivation.
A medico-self-cultivatory discourse re-entered mainland popular culture with the Reform Era “Qi Gong Boom” in the 1980’s and 1990’s. As the free market reforms spread through post Mao China many small independent practitioners of qi healing sprang up to meet a local demand for affordable and readily available treatments. (Farquhar 1996; Hsu 1999)
It is worth making a final note that self-cultivation is an essential part of the physician’s training in Chinese Medicine; attaining a greater understanding of the art and increased sensitivity to the patients condition both require conscious ongoing effort from the physician.

Revision and Reference Reading [pre-exam reading in bold]


Wile, Douglas. 1996. The Lost Tai-chi Classics from the Late Ch’ing Dynasty. Albany: SUNY.