

Yangsheng and the Channels

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Abstract

The following article explores the traditional concept of *yǎngshēng* (養生), often translated as 'nourishing life', and discusses how this concept might be understood in the context of the early Hàn Chinese conception of the acupuncture channels and collaterals (經絡, *jīngluò*). The possible meanings of these foundational concepts are discussed in order to explore the physiological models underlying traditional Asian lifestyle advice. By considering how early Hàn practitioners may have understood the nature and function of the channels, modern practitioners can better educate patients about how to normalise their physiology and therefore improve their health and quality of life.

Introduction

*The three months of spring are called the [time of] releasing the stale. Heaven and Earth rise together and the ten thousand things thrive. It is a time to sleep in the evening and arise early. Walk in the courtyard; absorb the radiance and relax the [body] form. Enable the will/ aspiration to rise. Live and do not kill. Grant and do not deprive. Reward and do not punish. This is resonating with the qì of spring and the way (道, *dào*) of nourishing life (養生, *yǎngshēng*).*¹

Thus we find one of only three passages where the term *yǎngshēng* (養生) - often translated as 'nourishing life' - is found in the *Inner Classic* (內經, *Nèijīng*).² Despite being relatively scarce in this seminal text of Chinese medicine, the term abounds in later classical and modern discussions of health preservation. Today, entire academic symposia are convened to discuss the concept in both China and the West, while small storefront centres are opening up throughout Asia advertising therapies designed to 'nourish life/*yǎngshēng*'.³ The following paper briefly traces the historical understanding of the concept of *yǎngshēng*, followed by a discussion of how practitioners of Chinese medicine might integrate the concept into their current understanding of Chinese medical physiology. The goal is to propose a model by which we can use concepts from the *yǎngshēng* tradition to further understand the mechanisms of acupuncture (and other East-Asian health preservation techniques) in order to better treat, educate and motivate patients.

One of the earliest extant examples of the concept of

yǎngshēng can be found in the Daoist text attributed to Zhuāngzǐ ('*The Zhuangzi*', 莊子, 3rd century BCE). A chapter from that text titled 'Managing Life Nourishment' (養生主, *yǎngshēng zhǔ*) includes the famous story of Prince Wén Huì's (文惠) cook, in which the cook describes the means by which he has been able to use the same knife for nineteen years to butcher several thousand oxen without sharpening his blade once. Prince Wen Hui asks how might this be done, and in answering, the cook mentions that in recent years when using the knife he is able deal with the carcass 'in a spirit-like manner... [I] do not look at it with my eyes'. Instead he moves his knife by 'observing the natural lines, [my knife] slips through the great crevices and slides through the great cavities, taking advantage of the facilities thus presented. My art avoids the membranous ligatures, and much more the great bones'. Prince Wén Huì exclaims, 'Excellent! I have heard the words of my cook, and learned from them the nourishment of life'. Scholars describe this as advocating a way of following a path of least resistance - a means of living to one's fullest potential by being in line with the movements of nature.^{4, 5}

Caches of bamboo strips and silk scrolls dating from a century or more after the likely time of Zhuāngzǐ were found in China in the 1970s and 1980s. The so-called Zhāngjiāshān (張家山) and Mǎwángdūn (馬王堆) tombs contained some of the earliest texts describing the acupuncture channels.⁶ In addition to these channel/vessel texts, archeologists found other texts in the tombs which have come to be described as the 'nourishing life' texts. Although scholars suggest

that specific lifestyle techniques designed to extend life had existed in China since at least 400 BCE,⁷ the collection from these tombs is of particular interest because it comes from a time just before the likely compilation of the first versions of the Inner Classic to which modern acupuncture usually traces its roots. In fact, the scholar Vivienne Lo asserts that these *yǎngshēng* texts describe concepts and practices that were already very much in use before the arrival of the Inner Classic. Consequently, she describes an interesting process by which the anatomical and physiological concepts used to extend life exerted an important influence on the developing system of medicine that is still in use today.⁸ She summarises texts relating to *yǎngshēng* as focusing on the following four techniques:



Figure 1: Reproduction of the *Guiding and Pulling Scroll* (導引圖, *Dǎoyin Tú*) found in a tomb at Mawangdui in 1973, and dating from around 168 BCE

1. Breathing techniques
2. 'Therapeutic gymnastics' (movements to cultivate life)
3. Sexual techniques
4. Dietetics⁹

The presence of *yǎngshēng* techniques in texts from the centuries before the *Inner Classic* provides a likely clue as to why the term is found less often in that particular text. Simply put, these practices likely represented the way that many people strove to live - and therefore went without saying. This supposition is supported by the fact that major sections of the *Sùwèn* (素問, Basic Questions) do in fact cover lifestyle techniques (eg. diet, sleep and movement) but do not specifically use the term '*yǎngshēng*'.

It is worth pointing out here that the scholar Michael Stanley-Baker notes a distinct difference between the focus of some early Daoist works - which use the term *yǎngshēng*

but seem more concerned with cultivation of the spirit (神 *shén*) - and later uses of the term which focus on nurturing the body to prolong life. He thus contrasts '*yǎngshēng*' (nourishing life) with '*yǎngxíng*' (養形, nourishing the body form). In fact, he reminds us that modern scholars discern a further more refined form of cultivation popular in cults whose members were attempting to achieve an even more lofty goal of *chéngxiān* (成仙, becoming an immortal).¹⁰ In the modern era, all of these aspects tend to fall under the broad concept of *yǎngshēng*.

Scholar Sabine Wilms describes another broadening of the concept of *yǎngshēng* in later dynasties, as exemplified by the 7th century physician Sūn Sīmiǎo (孫思邈). In his *Essential Prescriptions for Every Emergency Worth a Thousand in Gold*, Sūn Sīmiǎo asserts that 'specialists in nourishing life' should pay particular attention to the illnesses of women and children.¹¹ Pointing out that the capacity of any community to thrive depends firstly on the reproductive health of women and then on the survival of children, he pointedly dedicates the first section of this famous work to 'prescriptions for women' and later chapters to paediatrics. As for *yǎngshēng*, it is arguable that Sūn Sīmiǎo extends the concept by incorporating Buddhist teachings, which had entered China in the centuries preceding his birth. In fact, he dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of 'nourishing one's nature' (養性, *yǎngxìng*). This terminological choice may be an intentional contrast with the received tradition of *yǎngshēng*, in that Sūn emphasises the necessity of combining spiritual and physical cultivation. In keeping with his admonition to nourish the life of the family, he encourages those striving to become a 'great physician' (大醫, *dà yī*) to cultivate compassion and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of society. Thus nourishing life might mean more than simply carrying out practices for lengthening the years of one's own life - it would also include compassionate support of all patients, irrespective of their social class or disease.

How might we as modern practitioners of Chinese medicine reasonably interact with the *yǎngshēng* tradition in ways that are clinically useful? How much should we educate patients regarding these techniques, and what approaches are most effective for describing them to a modern Western audience? Of course, it should be said that answers to these questions are likely to vary widely, as evidenced by the abundance of texts in the West advocating a variety of different concepts and practices which we might broadly categorise as '*yǎngshēng*'. For this article, I propose to narrow the focus to consideration of the 'physiology' of *yǎngshēng*. Specifically, this means looking for an integration of the concept of *yǎngshēng* with the physiological role of the acupuncture channels and collaterals (經絡, *jīngluò* - henceforth translated simply as 'channels').¹² By understanding what the early architects and proponents of Chinese medicine (and the *yǎngshēng*

tradition) may have meant by the term ‘channels’, we may be able to more closely proximate how they understood the body in terms of health and illness. By learning to see the body from this perspective, we may become more effective practitioners and educators and become better at helping our patients improve their health and quality of life. Any lifestyle regimen brought forward from classical medical sources might thus benefit from the description below of exactly how the regimen may have been thought to work within the body.

The function and location of the channels

One of the major advances of Han dynasty medical practitioners compared to their predecessors is represented in the *Inner Classic* assertion that disease and healthy physiology involve natural processes. In contrast to earlier Chinese history, where disease was attributed to malevolent external forces,¹³ illness began to be seen as a process involving external pathogens associated with climatic excesses entering and transforming within the body, internally generated emotions disrupting the healthy function of the body, or ‘neutral’ non-internal/non-external causes.¹⁴ Thus the early Han dynasty (206 BCE- 220 CE) witnessed the growth of what is sometimes called the ‘medicine of systematic correspondence’.¹⁵ In the approach advocated by seminal Chinese medical texts, the practitioner is charged with looking for patterns of disease (癘候 *zhènghòu*) through a careful process of symptom differentiation (辨徵, *biànzhēng*).¹⁶ In the medical models described in this era, the channel system was an important part of both physiology and pathology. However, Beijing Professor Wáng Jūyì (王居易) points out that many modern practitioners fail to consider the role of the channels when developing diagnoses and treatment strategies.¹⁷ The following section outlines some aspects of Dr. Wáng’s synthesis of channel function and location, before returning later to the question of how the channels might inform and expand our use of *yǎngshēng* concepts in the clinic.¹⁸

The importance of the channels is succinctly summarised by the *Inner Classic* when it asserts that, ‘the channels and vessels are the determiners of life and death. [They] manage the 100 types of disease [by] regulating excess and deficiency - they must not become blocked.’¹⁹ Thus the text asserts that all disease somehow involves the channels, and when we describe common TCM diagnoses such as ‘Spleen *qì* deficiency’ we must remember that the organs and channels are both participating in any given pathomechanism.²⁰ In fact, the organs and channels are simply two parts of an interwoven whole. We are familiar with the assertion that Chinese medicine is a ‘holistic’ system but sometimes fail to consider exactly how early physicians may have perceived that unity. One major aspect of the original Han conception of a unified body involved the role of the channels not only as facilitators

of communication amongst internal structures but also as mediators of our interactions with the world at large.

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This is of course a complex concept. One way to enter the world-view of these early practitioners is to consider the concept of ‘resonance’ (應, *yìng*), wherein one aspect of the natural world has a special affinity for and response to another. For example, the Liver is associated with spring/wood/the East/anger/the eyes/blue-green/the Juéyīn channel etc. To describe the connection between all of these things, one might use the single Chinese term translated above as ‘resonance’ or ‘resonates with’. In fact, the *Inner Classic* quote that begins this article uses this term in the phrase translated as ‘resonating with the *qì* of spring’, which provides a means of ‘nourishing life’. The *Inner Classic* also states that ‘Those who are able to resonate with the four seasons have heaven and earth as father and mother’.²¹ Simply put, this means that when the various parts of the body are functioning normally, they are able to resonate properly with their associated aspects in the internal and external environments. Both ‘things’ and ‘movements’ - nouns and verbs - resonate together. Much as a musical tone might affect structures in the surrounding room through vibration, the structures of our body respond to the life in the world around us. This concept is at the heart of both channel theory and the *yǎngshēng* tradition. If one is resonating properly - due to having healthy channels - then it is easier to live in a harmonious way and avoid being out-of-sync with the symphony of *qì* which surrounds us all.

If there is excessive turbidity (increased viscosity) in the channels, then there might be a lack of clarity or even an inability to transfer resonance. In the body, this leads to organic dysfunction and what might be thought of as an inability of *qì* to ‘move through’ the system. Whether arising from excess or deficiency, the net result is a lack of communication within the body and/or an inability to properly ‘metabolise’ the external environment. In the classical model of Chinese medicine, this communication is seen to take place through the medium of the channels.

Where exactly are the channels located? Expanding upon the assertion in the *Inner Classic* that the channels are ‘subsumed in the spaces around the flesh - deep and not visible’²², Professor Wáng Jūyì proposes that we should conceive of the channels as being found in the spaces surrounding all



Figure 2: Professor Wang in his clinic (note scrolls on wall behind)

of the structures of the body (not just in the areas where acupuncture points are found but even within and around the organs). When reviewing modern research into possible anatomical correspondences to the channels, we see promising leads by those considering the physiological role of fascia and connective tissue.²³ Nevertheless, strictly

describes the general nature of all of the nodes/points/separations (節, *jié*) which can be found along the channels of the body:

‘[Amongst] the intersections of [these] separations, there are 365 meetings [points]. The knowledge of their importance can be spoken in [just] a few words. [Nevertheless,] to be ignorant of their [true] importance is to invite endless confusion. The divisions are where the spirit *qi* moves, exits and enters. They are not [the same as] skin, flesh, sinews and bones.’²⁵

The Inner Classic specifically points away from concrete/solid structures and instead towards the spaces between them when describing the location of acupuncture channels and points.

speaking we might say that it is not the fascia to which the *Inner Classic* is referring above, but instead to the quality of the fluids moving within and around these connective tissues. The *Inner Classic* abounds in metaphors likening *qi* circulation to water systems. Thus as acupuncturists looking to find the channels, our attention should focus more on the nature of fluids within the connective tissues and less on the surrounding solid structures.

The *Inner Classic* specifically points away from concrete/solid structures and instead towards the spaces between them when describing the location of acupuncture channels and points. In the first chapter of the *Divine Pivot*, after the description of the natures of the five distal ‘transport’ points below the elbows and knees,²⁴ the text

While many in the West might be tempted to focus on the assertion that there is something called ‘spirit *qi*’ (神氣, *shénqì*) moving within the channels and points, it is easy to miss the significance of the final assertion in the quotation above. As readers may have noted, classical Chinese texts have a tendency to point out what things ‘are not’ without letting the reader know what they actually are. While sometimes frustrating, this dialectical approach leaves a freedom of meaning that is often helpful. By not assigning a particular Chinese character to define the structural nature of the acupuncture channels, the *Inner Classic* leaves us to perceive and define for ourselves the best place in the body to produce physiological effects with a needle. So where might that be? To begin with, the *Inner Classic* phrase ‘skin, flesh, tendons and bones’ might be understood to describe all of the palpable physical structures of the body.²⁶ The assertion that points

are not to be found in any of these major structures seems challenging at first. However, if as acupuncture practitioners we stop to consider those moments when we feel a sensation of *qi* whilst needling, a sensation of 'emptiness' around the needle might also be noted. This seems to be the point being made here by the *Inner Classic*. Namely, that the acupuncture points are not found in the solid physical structures of the body, but are instead found in the spaces in between. This of course corresponds with the space within and around the connective tissues, where fluids reign. If, as the *Inner Classic* asserts, the channels are involved in all disease, then we might consider that these empty spaces in the body are the places where any effective techniques for nourishing life nourishing/ *yǎngshēng* might have their salubrious effects.

Channel health and *yǎngshēng*

For modern practitioners of Chinese medicine, the conceptual overlap between what might be called 'channel health' and *yǎngshēng* thus begins to emerge. This confluence of ideas can be used to inform not only clinical strategies, but also the rhetorical means by which we motivate patients to make healthy lifestyle changes. In order to effectively integrate these two fundamental concepts, it is helpful to delve more deeply into channel function, as a more nuanced view of the mechanisms of channel function can help to develop a more intuitive understanding about how to maintain channel health. In other words, an understanding of physiology allows practitioners to move beyond protocols in terms of both treatment and patient counseling. A clinical perspective which begins with physiology/pathology and only later considers treatment strategy is a characteristic of many great physicians of the past, and can also be seen in the approach of Professor Wáng Jūyì when teaching students and advising patients who attend his clinic. Indeed, in his Beijing clinic Professor Wáng works every day with a pair of calligraphy scrolls across the room - often within his line of sight while interviewing patients. Beautifully written by a famous modern calligrapher, these scrolls display two phrases created by Professor Wáng that distill his understanding of the role of the channels. Specifically, the first scroll describes the role of the organs, while the second summarises the role of the channels:²⁷

'The five zàng organs preserve essence and thus rule destiny.'
(五臟育精而主命, *wú zàng yù jīng ér zhǔ mìng*)

This first phrase describes the basic fact that the organs are responsible for the fundamental substances that come from the processes of life. In Chinese medicine, the *qi*, blood and body fluids which result from life processes are thought to be the post-natal expressions of pre-natal essence (精, *jīng*). Growth, maturation and eventually decline and ageing, are all thought to be manifestations of the essence

that comes to us from our ancestors – and thus represents a kind of destiny. This is similar to the fundamental role of genetics in the modern scientific model of physiology. In one sense, the degree to which we fully express the life-bringing potential of our genes is the degree to which we realise our destiny. According to Chinese medicine theory, our ability to live a long and healthy life is defined by the health and function of the organs (and in particular the five *yīn* organs). The organs 'preserve' essence in the sense that they carefully manage the distinct functions which we see listed in TCM textbooks [i.e. the building of blood, the transformation and transportation of nutrition, etc]. However, the potential represented by each organ cannot be fully expressed and integrated with the system as a whole without the connections which we call 'the channels'. Without this communication and connection the organs remain separate masses of great potential, disengaged from the processes of life.

'The channels irrigate and thus rule life.' (經絡灌滲而主生, *jīng luò guàn shèn ér zhǔ shēng*)

This second phrase describes the key prerequisite for realising the potential pointed to by the first phrase. In Professor Wáng's estimation, the ability to manifest essence is the very definition of 'life' (生, *shēng*). In order for life to be nourished, circulation in the channels must be optimised. Regarding the assertion that the primary role of the channels is to irrigate living tissue, it should be emphasised that such irrigation not only nourishes the organs, but also maintains inter-organ balance and communication. It is important to take note of the choice of terms here. 'Irrigation' (灌滲, *guànshèn*) describes a slow, gradual process in the body, not unlike the measured provision of water to plant roots, which insures healthy growth. In a modern physiological sense we might say that the circulation of fluids in the extracellular matrix is the very medium through which homeostasis is maintained. In a more mundane sense, proper irrigation of the internal spaces keeps the organs functioning, the muscles strong and the joints moistened - all obvious prerequisites for life.

Of course not only does nourishment come to the structures of the body via the matrix of spaces that make up our channel system, but waste is also removed. In Chinese medical terms, we describe pathology of such processes as situations of excess (實, *shí*) and deficiency (虛, *xū*). When the channel system is open and irrigating at the proper rhythm, then nourishment is provided without deficiency and waste is removed without excess. In all cases of disease, the ultimate physical location for the removal of excess and supplementation of deficiency is in the channels. This is likely what the *Inner Classic* is asserting when it says that the channels are 'determiners of life and death ... [which] manage the 100 types of disease by regulating excess and deficiency'.

The channels and *yǎngshēng* - a question of appropriateness and periodicity

Having clarified the relationship between the concepts of the channels and organs above, we now return to a discussion of how these concepts might inform our understanding of *yǎngshēng*. One implication of the previous section is that the proper functioning of the channels as providers of nourishment and communication within and around the organ systems is at the heart of expansion and growth. Expansion and growth are summarised in Chinese by the term 生 (*shēng*) - which of course we find in the term *yǎngshēng*. Thus when we talk of 'nourishing life', we are nourishing an upward, expansive, spring-like renewal which must happen continually. Nevertheless, with the inexorable process of ageing, the potential represented by the essence stored in the organs is slowly used up. One major aspect of this decline is a slowing of the yang-natured process of renewal and growth due to a lack of 'resonance' (應, *yīng*) within the channels (see above). Specifically, the Chinese medical model posits that organic dysfunction might be thought to arise from pollution or obstruction of the channels arising from difficulties metabolising the externally-generated 'six pernicious influences' (六淫, *liùyín*), the internally-generated 'seven emotions' (七情, *qīqíng*) or the other 'neutral' causes of disease (see footnote xiv). In large part, *yǎngshēng* traditions focus on managing these very aspects. Therefore, if we take the system of Chinese medicine seriously, we must carefully nourish life not only by preserving our own and our patients' channels through appropriate clinical interventions, but also by encouraging intelligent lifestyle choices. Proper daily choices help to ensure that the channels continue to have that crucial function which the *Inner Classic* describes as, 'moving blood and qi to nourish yīnyáng, moisten the tendons and bones and benefit the joints'.²⁸

What insights can we glean from the classical model to improve channel health? To put a finer point on the question: How might a practitioner or patient confronted with the ever-increasing abundance of protocols, diets, exercise and qìgōng regimens from both within and without the sphere of Asian medicine decide which regimens are appropriate? I would propose that before focusing on 'what' to do to improve health and quality of life, it should be a pre-requisite that both practitioner and patient first strive to get closer to the 'way of seeing' represented by the early practitioners of Chinese medicine. In this way, each person can cultivate an ability to perceive what is good for them in each moment, so as to more easily negotiate the thousands of choices brought by each day.

Insight into this classical way of seeing might be gleaned from considering the various meanings of a common term found throughout the *Inner Classic* and other foundational Chinese medicine texts. This is the term - 節 (*jié*) - translated above in reference to the 'joints' of the body.

The seemingly innocuous character 節 is actually much more complex and interesting than at first appears. In fact, looking at the various possible meanings of the character in the *Inner Classic* provides new insights into how early practitioners may have conceived the function and role of the channels (and therefore the usefulness of *yǎngshēng*).²⁹ The character 節 (*jié*), translated above as 'joint', is much like the character 氣 (*qì*) in that its various meanings are determined by context. Most often we see this character translated into English as 'joint'. Thus the phrase, 'locate Dàdū (大都, SP-2) behind the joint in the centre of the depression'.³⁰ These are not just bony joints however. Other places in the body where physical structures divide or separate can be thought of as 'joints'. Thus we see 'skin joints' (皮節, *píjié*) described in the *Inner Classic* as places where fluids irrigate.³¹ The original meaning of 節 (*jié*) lies closest to the concept of joints along a piece of bamboo.³² In other sections of the *Inner Classic*, the character takes on the meaning of regulated rhythm, as seen in a description of the Lung as being responsible for 'management and regulation' of the basic rhythms of metabolism.³³ In other sections of the *Inner Classic* (and many other texts from this era), the character refers to what we might call 'nodes in time' which delineate the beginning of each of the 24 solar 'months'.³⁴ In modern Chinese, the term has a similar temporal meaning when it is used to denote a 'holiday'. In other sections of the *Inner Classic*, this same term seems to indicate a kind of appropriateness of action, which perhaps reminds us of *yǎngshēng* practice. For example we see 節 (*jié*) in the assertion that not 'being appropriate (*jié*) in food and drink can cause disease to arise in the intestines and stomach'.³⁵ Finally, and quite significantly, this character is often found in phrases where it likely means an acupuncture 'point' - a node along the channels. For example in the clinically useful phrase cited above asserting that points are not 'skin, flesh, sinews and bones', the original Chinese term translated as 'point' is 節 (*jié*) and not the more familiar term 穴 (*xué*) seen in most modern Chinese texts.

Thus we see a single term in the *Inner Classic* that manages to convey the multiple meanings of: joints/body separations, rhythm, appropriate action, periods of time and acupuncture 'points'. The common theme that emerges is that these are places of potential where one thing changes to another - the places 'in-between' in terms of both time and space. A joint marks the change from one bone to the next. Changes in months involve obvious changes in weather patterns and daylight. In terms of rhythm, a beat requires a pause of separation in order to exist - to all intents and purposes, the length of the pause is the rhythm. Appropriate actions, and the moment of pause one takes when choosing those actions, affect changes toward health (and away from disease). Finally, acupuncture points are places in the *qì* dynamic of the channels where we can affect change by inserting needles,

and where the needles end up in the places in-between.

Much of the lifestyle advice that makes up significant portions of the *Inner Classic* emphasises the importance of a measured, gradual and constant approach to life. Daily practice of such an approach requires decisions between 'this' and 'that'. To help make these decisions, we should attempt to cultivate our ability to perceive processes within and without and to learn to understand what is good for us. In daily life, the spaces between our choices are the places where there is potential for both change and harm, just as the times between seasons are when we are more likely to get sick. Qi is less crystallised in these intervals. When nourishing life, much like when gardening, there is an accumulation of small, measured decisions, actions and transformations which give rise to abundance. Many of these ideas are conveyed by the various meanings of 節 (jié).

In a very material sense within the healthy body, the channels are constantly irrigating all of the separations or 'joints' where tissues divide. There is constant movement in these spaces, which we call the 'channels and collaterals', which is characterised by both rhythm and appropriateness (i.e. providing what is needed and taking away what is not). Thus we might say that *yǎngshēng*, in whatever way we choose to define the term, manifests in the proper functioning of the channels. Conversely, the validity of any *yǎngshēng* regime might be evaluated by considering how it affects the channels and their functions as described above. When educating our patients, if we can convey to them our role as 'facilitators of channel function' through acupuncture, herbs, *qìgōng* and dietary therapies, we may have greater long-term success because they will be more likely to take our advice. Of course we may also lose these patients as they themselves begin to 'see' the road to nourishing life without us. On the other hand, this may have been part of what Sūn Sīmiǎo meant when he described the role of the 'great physician' who nourishes life in family and society.

Returning to the image of Prince Wén's cook described above, we see that Zhuāngzǐ may have been providing more than a metaphorical lesson about the importance of following a lifestyle that avoids extremes. We often see this story cited as a kind of fable evoking the spirit of the Daoist lifestyle, but the image of a knife passing without hindrance through the spaces in between joints, muscle and tendons may be pointing to both lifestyle and the importance of cultivating an awareness of the spaces inside our own bodies. Thus Prince Wén's assertion that he has 'heard the words of my cook, and learned from them the nourishment of life' may include an assertion that we should pay attention to the spaces that surround the solid structures in our physiology. These are the divisions 節 (jié) in both space and time where life can be nourished (or not).

In the modern Chinese medicine clinic, we can improve

clinical results by facilitating an appreciation of where the points lie (in the spaces) and developing our perception of the nature of the 'points' and how best to stimulate them (with attunement to rhythm and timing).³⁶ By finding ways to describe these concepts in words that our patients can understand, we are more likely to initiate the crucial changes in perception which are at the heart of true transformation in health. A patient who can see for him/herself the transformations happening all around (and within) will no longer need to follow programmes or protocols, but will respond appropriately to the moment at hand. This has likely never been easy. On the other hand, without attempting to open these doors we may miss out on a few good years of well-nourished life.

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Endnotes

- 1 春三月，此謂發陳，天地俱生，萬物以榮，夜臥早起，廣步於庭，被發緩形，以使志生，生而勿殺，予而勿奪，賞而勿罰，此春氣之應，養生之道也。(Sūwèn, 2• 四气调神大论).
- 2 This section comes from Sūwèn chapter 2, while the other two examples can be found in Lingsū chapter 8 and Sūwèn chapter 8. It is interesting to note that, in this chapter at least, *yǎngshēng* is associated with the proper activities of the spring season. The chapter goes on, of course, to describe appropriate lifestyle considerations for other seasons of the year and finishes each of these discussions by explaining what is being nourished by that season. Thus while spring activities give rise to 'nourishing life', proper lifestyle in summer 'nourishes lengthening' (養長 *yǎngcháng*), proper action in the autumn 'nourishes reception/gathering' (養收 *yǎngshōu*) and proper action in winter 'nourishes storage' (養藏 *yǎngcáng*). Although modern usage seems to aggregate

all of these ideas under the broad category of '*yǎngshēng*', the *Inner Classic* was more specific about what is being nourished by proper lifestyle in each season.

- 3 For example the September 2014 Tao Congress in Graz, Austria was entirely dedicated to *yǎngshēng*, while a busy morning in Beijing Professor Wáng Jūyì's (王居易) clinic was interrupted in the same year by a visit from an Indonesian investor in Shanghai *yǎngshēng* 'spas' to elicit advice and request the use of Professor Wáng's name in marketing material.
- 4 Translation of Zhuāngzǐ in this paragraph by James Legge. Original text: '方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。依乎天理，批大郤，導大窾，因其固然。技經肯綮之未嘗，而況大軀乎...善哉！吾聞庖丁之言，得養生焉。'
- 5 Stanley-Baker, M. (2006). "Cultivating Body, Cultivating Self: A critical translation and history of the Tang dynasty Yangxingyanming lu 養生延命錄 (Records of Cultivating Nature

- and Extending Life”, M.A. thesis, Indiana University, p.30. In this excellent thesis, Stanley-Baker points out that early instances of *yangsheng* such as that found in *Zhuāngzǐ* did not describe specific techniques and strategies but instead a general approach to life.
- 6 Lo, V. (1998). “The influence of yangsheng culture on early Chinese medical theory”, PhD thesis, University of London.
- 7 Stanley-Baker, M. (2006). “Cultivating Body, Cultivating Self: A critical translation and history of the Tang dynasty *Yangxingyanming lu* 養性延命錄 (Records of Cultivating Nature and Extending Life)”, M.A. thesis, Indiana University, p. 31
- 8 Lo, V. (1998). “The influence of yangsheng culture on early Chinese medical theory”, PhD thesis, University of London.
- 9 Lo, V. (2000). “Crossing the ‘Inner Pass’: An ‘Inner/Outer’ Distinction in Early Chinese Medicine?”, *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine*, 17, 15-65.
- 10 Stanley-Baker, M. (2006). “Cultivating Body, Cultivating Self: A critical translation and history of the Tang dynasty *Yangxingyanming lu* 養性延命錄 (Records of Cultivating Nature and Extending Life)”, M.A. thesis, Indiana University, pp.33-35
- 11 See 備急千金要方 (*Bèijīqiān jīn yào fāng*); Volume Two, Chapter One - Seeking Children 求子第一. Thanks to Dr. Wilms for pointing out this and the following citation, and for helping to elucidate her reading of *SfoS*orp. Much more can be found regarding her work and upcoming publications at www.happygoatproductions.com.
- 12 Although sometimes less common, I prefer to use the term ‘channel’ instead of ‘meridian’ as a translation of 經絡 (*jīngluò*). Given the abundance of water metaphor in the classical discussion of acupuncture mechanisms, it seems more fitting to use a more ‘aqueous’ English term.
- 13 Lo, V. (2000). “Crossing the ‘Inner Pass’: An ‘Inner/Outer’ Distinction in Early Chinese Medicine?”, *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine*, 17, 15-65.”. For example, footnote 22: “The contrast between demonological and physiological views of illness have been called ontological and physiological/functional, and this is a useful distinction when the views are polarised in this way ... For further discussion of the ontological/physiological dialectic, see Hudson 1993:45-52; and Unschuld 1993: 20-27.”
- 14 The so-called ‘neutral’ causes (literally non-external-internal) are listed by Wiseman & Ye (Wiseman, N., Ye, F. (1998) *A Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine*. Paradigm Press: Brookline.) as: eating too much or too little, taxation fatigue, knocks and falls, crushing, drowning, and animal, insect, and reptile injuries.
- 15 A term attributed to the scholar Paul Unschuld.
- 16 The concept of ‘patterns of disease’ and ‘symptom differentiation’ was most famously expounded and expanded in the *Discussion of Cold Damage* (傷寒論, *Shāng hán lùn*) written by Zhāng Zhōngjīng (張仲景) around 220 CE.
- 17 For an exploration of the theories of Wáng Jūyì please see: Wang, Juyi & Robertson, J.D. (2008). *Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine*. Eastland Press: Seattle
- 18 For a complete exposition of the role of the channels in Professor Wáng’s own words, please see: Wang, Juyi. (2012). “On the Nature of Channels (J. Robertson trans.)”, *The Lantern*, 7(3), pp. 4-14.
- 19 經脈者，所以能決死生，處百病，調虛實，不可不通。 (*Língshū* 10 • 經脈篇)
- 20 To be more precise - organ pathologies always involve the channels. One might ask, ‘what about so-called “channel pathologies” which are distinguished from ‘organ pathologies’ in TCM textbooks?’ It seems to me that when most modern clinicians use the term ‘channel pathology’, they are referring to a situation more precisely termed a ‘channel-sinew pathology’ - a musculoskeletal condition in the modern clinic (經筋病, *jīngjīn bìng*. See *Língshū* 12 • 經筋). On the other hand, there are indeed detailed descriptions of the precise location of disease throughout the *Inner Classic*, which include descriptions of the progression of disease from the channels on the ‘outside’ to the organs on the ‘inside’ (e.g. *Língshū* 4 • 邪氣臟腑病形). The point here is to emphasise function (in which both channels and organs are interconnected) over location (where pathology may be located in one or the other).
- 21 人能應四時者，天地為之父母。 (*Sūwèn* 25 • 寶命全形論篇)
- 22 It goes on to say that the aspects of the channels which we can actually see are the collaterals: ‘經脈十二者，伏行分肉之間，深而不見；其常見者，……皆絡脈也。’ (*Língshū* 10 • 經脈篇)
- 23 For example: Langevin, H.M., & Yandow, J.A. (2002). “Relationship of acupuncture points and meridians to connective tissue planes”, *The Anatomical Record (New Anatomy)*, 269, 257-265
- 24 Occasionally, this category of points is somewhat mysteriously referred to in English as the ‘antique’ points. I have been unable to find a Chinese analogue to this English term. More often they are referred to as the ‘Five Transport Points’ (五輸穴, *wǔshūxié*). The well points at the fingernails/toenails are where the qi is said to ‘emerge’ (出, *chū*), the qi is said to begin to ‘flow’ (溜, *liū*) at the spring points, it begins to ‘pour’ (注, *zhù*) at the stream points, it begins to ‘constantly move’ (行, *xíng*) at the river points and finally it ‘enters’ (入, *rù*) deeper into the body at the sea points near the elbows and knees.
- 25 節之交三百六十五會。知其要者，一言而終。不知其要，流散無窮。所言節者，神氣之所遊行出入也。非皮肉筋骨也” (*Língshū* 1 • 九針十二原)
- 26 Professor Wáng describes the tissues that surround all of the points in the body using these classical structural terms. He describes points as being found within ‘skin separations’ (皮節, *píjié*), ‘flesh separations’ (肉節, *ròujié*), ‘tendon separations’ (筋節, *jīnjié*) and ‘bone separations’ (骨節, *gǔjié*). Significantly, Professor Wáng adds one more structural category when talking about the ‘structure of the points’ (論穴結構 *shù xué jié gòu*): he describes certain points as being found within ‘blood vessel separations’ (脈節, *mài jié*).
- 27 Most of the next few paragraphs is borrowed from: Wang, Juyi (2012). “On the Nature of Channels (J. Robertson trans.)”, *The Lantern*, 7(3), pp. 4-14
- 28 ‘經脈者，所以行血氣而營陰陽，濡筋骨，利關節者也。’ (*Língshū* 47 • 本臟篇)
- 29 In addition, this character provides an instructive example of the fact that multiple meanings are often conveyed by a single Chinese term. Multiple meanings in the original text can have clinical implications - a fact that often becomes lost in translation when rendering Chinese characters into single English words.
- 30 大都，本節之後下陷者之中也。 (*Língshū* 2 • 本輸)
- 31 For example, in *Língshū* 10 (經脈篇): ‘皮毛焦則津液去皮節’。 Although considerably beyond the scope of this article, future articles are in development that will expand upon this concept in an exploration of the various tissue ‘nodes/separations’ in the body (as described above in note xxiv). This concept of tissue separation is at the heart of Prof. Wáng Jūyì’s understanding of precision in point location. In short, all points are found in places where tissues have significant separations/nodes/節, *jié*, places which can be palpated.
- 32 See 說文解字 (*Shuō wén jiě zì*) - Han Dynasty: ‘竹約也。从竹即聲’。 Further explained in the Qing dynasty in 說文解字注 (*Shuō wén jiě zì zhù*) as indicating a ‘tying up’ or ‘binding’ (纏束, *chán shù*) in knots like the bindings along a bamboo pole.
- 33 肺者相傳之官治節出焉 (*Sūwèn* 8 • 靈蘭秘典論)
- 34 See for example *Língshū* 12 (經水) which talks of ‘resonating’ the *fū* organs with the external nodes of time: ‘外有六腑，以應六律，六律建陰陽諸經而合之十二月、十二辰、十二節、十二經水、十二時’
- 35 ‘飲食不節，而病生於腸胃’。 (*Língshū* 3 • 小針解)
- 36 The question as to what is meant here by ‘rhythm and timing’ is unfortunately beyond the scope of the current article. The curious reader is referred to the excellent chapter ‘An Axis of Efficacy- The range of meaning in chapter one of the *Lingshu*’ written by Dan Bensky and Chip Chase in: Birch, S., Mir, M., Cuadras, M. eds. (2014). *Restoring Order in Health and Chinese Medicine*. Barcelona: La Liebre de Marzo.