Daoyin: Chinese Healing Exercises

Livia Kohn

Abstract
Daoyin, the traditional Chinese practice of guiding (dao) the qi and stretching (yin) the body is the forerunner of qigong. Like other Asian forms of body cultivation, it uses a combination of mental awareness, controlled breathing, and slow physical movements to engage the person, develop health, and open ways to spiritual attainment. Unlike Yoga or Magical Movements, its worldview focuses on the concept of qi or vital energy, the material aspect of the dao and foundation of human life, and its patterning according to Yin-Yang and the five phases. The practice of daoyin is first documented in medical manuscripts of about 200 BCE, where simple movements and close correlation to symptoms are the norm. Later Daoist developments involve movement sequences, subtler breathing instructions, and spiritual connections through visualisations and prayers. Daoists also created an integrated system, where daoyin in combination with general rules of moderation and guidelines for healthy living forms the foundation of advanced immortality practice. They moreover systematised the breathing practices into various levels of holding, guiding, and enhancing qi as breath. Overall, the differences from other Asian practices dominate, and the way daoyin envisions and transforms the body is uniquely Chinese.

Keywords
daoyin, qigong, yoga, Asian body practices, Chinese Medicine, Daoism.

Daoyin, the traditional Chinese practice of guiding (dao) the qi and stretching (yin) the body is the forerunner of qigong, the modern form of exercise that has swept through China and, like Indian Yoga and Tibetan Magical Movements, is making increasing inroads into the West, both in spiritual and health contexts. Like other Asian body practices, daoyin focuses on the body as the main vehicle of attainment; sees health and spiritual transformation

---

1 The following article is adapted from my book Chinese Healing Exercises: Coming Home to the Body, currently under review by University of Hawaii Press. For a more specific discussion of daoyin in relation to Indian Yoga, see Kohn 2006.

2 Another form of Chinese exercise popular today is Taijiquan 太極拳. It, too, inherited a certain amount from daoyin, but originated much later (in the nineteenth century) in a quasi-military and self-defence environment and is essentially a martial art. While adopted into the health and self-cultivation scene in the West and often conflated or merged with qigong, in China today Taijiquan plays a completely different role. Whereas qigong is highly suspect and to a large degree prohibited due to its connection with alleged cults, such as Falun gong 法輪功,
as one continuum leading to perfection or self-realisation; and works intensely and consciously with the breath. In its traditional form, moreover—more so than in its modern qigong adaptation—daoyin uses physical stretches and movements in all the different positions of the body, proposes systematic sequences of postures, and names them descriptively or after various animals.

*Daoyin* is also similar to other forms of body cultivation in that it proposes basic ethical rules and guidelines for daily living that serve to create an environment best suited to personal transformation. Practitioners learn the exact way to execute postures and movements, gain awareness and control of their respiration, and work to adjust the breath in accordance with the body postures. Adepts further use the strengthening of the muscles, loosening of the joints, and awareness of internal energies to enter into states of absorption and deeper meditation, relating actively to spiritual powers and seeking higher levels of self-realisation.

How, then, is *daoyin* unique in relation to other Asian body cultivation systems? Does it pursue the same goal, use the same methods, and reach similar stages, just formulated in a different language and terminology? What is the underlying philosophical and cosmological foundation of the practice? How did it begin? What are some of its key historical developments and sociological settings? How are its practices the same as or different from those of Yoga and Magical Movements? To begin, let us look at the philosophical and cosmological underpinnings of the practice, the worldview of Chinese medicine and Daoist cultivation.

*Dao* and *qi*

The body in *daoyin* forms an integral part of a body-mind-cosmos continuum that cannot be separated and is seen as one. The underlying potency at the root of this continuum is the *dao* 道. Literally 'the way', the term indicates how things develop naturally, how nature moves along in its regular patterns, and how living beings continuously grow and decline. *Dao* is the one power underlying all. The fundamental ground of being, it makes things what they are and causes the world to develop. Mysterious and ineffable, it cannot be known but only intuited in tranquil introspection. As the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Dao and its Virtue), the ancient classic that goes back to about 300 BCE, says:

Taijiquan is being built up into a formal sport, not unlike Japanese Judo, with set routines, degrees, and stages, and may even become an Olympic discipline.
Look at it and do not see it: we call it invisible.
Listen to it and do not hear it: we call it inaudible.
Touch it and do not feel it: we call it subtle...
Infinite and boundless, it cannot be named;...
Vague and obscure,
Meet it, yet you cannot see its head,
Follow it, yet you cannot see its back.¹

Although dao is essentially beyond human perception and cognition, it yet manifests actively in the material, natural world and is clearly visible in rhythmic changes and patterned processes. On this phenomenal level it is predictable in its developments and can be characterised as the give and take of various pairs of complementary opposites, such as the natural ebb and flow of things as they rise and fall, come and go, grow and decline, emerge and die.⁴

Within this dual-layered universe of the dao, ineffable at the centre and manifest in natural rhythms at the periphery, the second most essential concept of daoyin is qi 甲. Qi is the concrete aspect of the dao, the material energy of the universe, the basic stuff of nature. In ancient sources it is associated with mist, fog, and moving clouds, qi is contained in the foods we eat and the air we breathe. But more subtly it is also the life force in the human body and as such forms the basis of all physical vitality.

There is only one qi, just as there is only one dao. But it, too, appears on different levels of subtlety and in different modes. At the centre, there is primordial qi, prenatal qi, or true, perfect qi; at the periphery, there is postnatal qi or earthly qi—like the measurable dao, it is in constant motion and divided according to categories such as temperature, density, speed of flow, and impact on human life.

Qi is the basic material of all that exists. It animates life and furnishes the functional power of events. Qi is the root of the human body; its quality and movement determine human health. Qi can be discussed in terms of quantity, since having more means stronger metabolic function. This, however, does not mean that health is a by-product of storing large quantities of qi. Rather, there is a normal or healthy amount of qi in every person, and health manifests in its balance and harmony, its moderation and smoothness of flow. This flow is envisioned in the texts as a complex system of waterways with the ‘Ocean of Qi’ in the abdomen; rivers of qi flowing through the upper torso, arms, and legs; springs of qi reaching to the wrists and ankles; and wells of qi found in the fingers and toes. Even a small spot in this complex system can thus influence the whole, so that overall balance and smoothness are the general goal.

---

¹ Translation is my own, based on Chan 1963, p. 146.
⁴ Kohn 2005, p. 10.
Human life is the accumulation of \textit{qi}; death is its dispersal. After receiving a core potential of primordial \textit{qi} at birth, people need to sustain it throughout life. They do so by drawing postnatal \textit{qi} into the body from air and food, as well as from other people through sexual, emotional, and social interaction. But they also lose \textit{qi} through breathing bad air, overburdening their bodies with food and drink, and getting involved in negative emotions and excessive sexual or social interactions.

It is thus best to breathe deeply and to eat moderately in accordance with the seasons, to move smoothly, exercise without exertion, and match activities to the body's needs. This is how one keeps balance and creates health. In this system, health, unlike in the modern West, is not just the absence of symptoms and ailments. It is the presence of a strong vital energy and of a smooth, harmonious, and active flow of \textit{qi}. This is known as the state of \textit{zhengqi} 正氣 or 'proper qi', also translated as 'upright qi'. The ideal is to have \textit{qi} flow freely, thereby creating harmony in the body and a balanced state of being in the person. This personal health is further matched by health in nature, defined as regular weather patterns and the absence of disasters. It is also present as health in society in the peaceful coexistence among families, clans, villages, and states. This harmony on all levels, the cosmic presence of a steady and pleasant flow of \textit{qi}, is what the Chinese call the state of Great Peace, venerated by Confucians and Daoists alike.

The opposite of health is \textit{xieqi} 邪氣 or 'wayward qi', also called 'deviant' or 'pathogenic qi'. It is \textit{qi} that has lost the harmonious pattern of flow and no longer supports the dynamic forces of change. Whereas \textit{zhengqi} moves in a steady, harmonious rhythm and effects daily renewal, helping health and long life, \textit{xieqi}, disorderly and dysfunctional, creates change that violates the normal order. When it becomes dominant, the \textit{qi}-flow can turn upon itself and deplete the body's resources. The person no longer operates as part of a universal system and is not in tune with the basic life force around him or her. \textit{Xieqi} appears when \textit{qi} begins to move either too fast or too slowly, is excessive or depleted, or creates rushes or obstructions. It disturbs the regular flow and causes ailments.

\textbf{Yin-Yang and the Five Phases}

Like everything else in the Chinese universe, \textit{qi} therefore divides into the two categories Yin and Yang 阴陽, terms that originally described geographical features and were first used to indicate the shady and sunny sides of a hill. From there they acquired a series of associations: dark and bright, heavy and light, weak and strong, below and above, earth and heaven, minister and ruler,
female and male, and so on. In concrete application, moreover, they came to indicate different kinds of action:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yang</th>
<th>active</th>
<th>birth</th>
<th>impulse</th>
<th>move</th>
<th>change</th>
<th>expand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yin</td>
<td>structive</td>
<td>completion</td>
<td>response</td>
<td>rest</td>
<td>nurture</td>
<td>contract</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the ongoing flux and interchange of Yin and Yang was understood to occur in a series of five phases, which were symbolised by five materials or concrete entities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>minor Yang</th>
<th>major Yang</th>
<th>Yin-Yang</th>
<th>minor Yin</th>
<th>major Yin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wood</td>
<td>fire</td>
<td>earth</td>
<td>metal</td>
<td>water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These five energetic phases and their material symbols were then associated with a variety of entities in the concrete world, creating a complex system of correspondences. They were linked with colours, directions, seasons, musical tones, and with various functions in the human body, such as energy-storing (Yin) organs, digestive (Yang) organs, senses, emotions, and flavours. The basic chart at the root of Chinese and Daoist cosmology is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yin/Yang phase</th>
<th>direction</th>
<th>season</th>
<th>colour</th>
<th>organ1</th>
<th>organ2</th>
<th>sense</th>
<th>emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>minor Yang</td>
<td>wood</td>
<td>east</td>
<td>spring</td>
<td>green</td>
<td>liver</td>
<td>gall</td>
<td>eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>major Yang</td>
<td>fire</td>
<td>south</td>
<td>summer</td>
<td>red</td>
<td>heart</td>
<td>small</td>
<td>tongue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yin-Yang</td>
<td>earth</td>
<td>centre</td>
<td>yellow</td>
<td>spleen</td>
<td>stomach</td>
<td>lips</td>
<td>worry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minor Yin</td>
<td>metal</td>
<td>west</td>
<td>autumn</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>lungs</td>
<td>large</td>
<td>nose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>major Yin</td>
<td>water</td>
<td>north</td>
<td>winter</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>kidneys</td>
<td>bladder</td>
<td>ears</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Daoyin_ practice accordingly aims to create perfect harmony among these various forces and patterns, which guarantees health and long life. To do so, adepts use breath, awareness and movement to open the meridians, lines of _qi_-flow that criss-cross the entire body, connecting the inner organs with the extremities. All the various body movements in the practice, therefore, work with the organic patterns of _qi_ in the body and serve to open meridians and enhance the functioning of organs, leading to increased transformative
activity in the Yang-organs (organ 2) and to a greater ability for the storage of qi in the Yin-organs (organ 1).

As practitioners become adepts at this, their health improves, they recover youthful vitality, and they reach extended longevity. Going even beyond this already quite desirable state, adepts further practise intense meditative states in the hope of entering a deeper awareness of and oneness with the dao at the centre of creation, finding perfection through resting in and flowing along with the root of all being.

Early practice

Unlike Yoga which, for the most part, grew from the ancient Indian hermit tradition, and Tibetan Magical Movements which are firmly part of monastic culture, daoyin arose as part of Han-dynasty medicine which encouraged people to relish the world in all its aspects, to find greater health, and to enjoy their physical and social pleasures. As a result, the earliest works on daoyin are immensely practical in nature and can be precisely dated. Found among manuscripts unearthed from southern China, they include the silk manuscript Daoyin tu (Exercise Chart) and the bamboo tablets of the Yinshu (Stretch Book).

The Daoyin tu was found at Mawangdui, in the tomb of the Marchioness of Dai, the wife of a local lord who died in 168 BCE. The text consists of 44 colour illustrations of human figures performing therapeutic exercises, which are explained in brief captions (see Fig. 1). The figures are of both sexes and various ages, variously clothed or bare-chested, and shown in different postures (mostly standing) from a variety of angles. In many cases, they have one arm reaching up while the other stretches down, or one arm moving forward while the other extends back, possibly indicating rhythmical movement.

There is some variety among them. Two figures are in a forward bend, one with head lowered, the other with head raised. Another is bending slightly forward with a rounded back and hands hanging down toward the knees. Yet another has one arm on the ground and the other extended upward in a windmill-like pose. The captions are often illegible, but among them are the well-known ‘bear amble’ and ‘bird stretch’, respectively showing a figure walking in a stately fashion with arms swinging, and one bending forward with hands on the floor and head raised.

---

Fig. 1. The Mawangdui ‘Exercise Chart’.

The lack of written explanations is somewhat alleviated by the *Yinshu*, which consists entirely of text. It was found in a manuscript at Zhangjiashan, also in Hunan, in a tomb that was closed in 186 BCE. The text divides into three parts: a general introduction on seasonal health regimens; a series of about 100 exercises, divided into three sections; and a conclusion on the aetiology of disease and ways of prevention (see Fig. 2).

The first part, on seasonal health regimens, discusses hygiene, diet, sleep, and movement as well as appropriate times for sexual intercourse. It is ascribed to Pengzu 彭祖, a famous immortal of antiquity, said to have lived over 800 years. It says, for instance:

Spring days. After rising in the morning, pass water, wash and rinse, clean and click the teeth. Loosen the hair, stroll to the lower end of the hall to meet the purest of dew and receive the essence of Heaven, and drink one cup of water. These are the means to increase accord. Enter the chamber [for sex] between evening and greater midnight [1 a.m.]. More would harm the *qi*.6

---

This places the practice firmly in the home of a wealthy aristocrat with leisure to pursue long life and well-being and the inclination to perform proper hygiene and develop bodily awareness. It also assumes that the practitioner lives in society and has a wife or concubine for bedroom activities. The scene could not be farther removed from the kind of hermit setting commonly believed to lie at the foundation of Yoga. On the other hand, we should be cautious of being mislead by characterisations of the ascetic Indian yogin as exclusively renunciatory and hermitic, since hātha yogins appear to have sometimes lived lives of luxury and opulence.7

Following a general outline of daily routines, the middle part of the Yinshu provides concrete practice instructions, describing and naming specific moves. For example:

‘Bend and Gaze’ is: interlace the fingers at the back and bend forward, then turn the head to look at your heels (#12).

---

7 Cf. Pinch 2006.
'Dragon Flourish' is: step one leg forward with bent knee while stretching the other leg back, then interlace the fingers, place them on the knee, and look up (#19).

'Pointing Backward' is: interlace the fingers, raise them overhead and bend back as far as possible (#29). *8

After presenting 40 exercises of this type, the text focuses on the medical uses of the practices. It often repeats instructions outlined earlier and in some cases prescribes a combination of them. For example, a variation on lunges such as 'Dragon Flourish' is the following, which can be described as a walking lunge:

To relieve tense muscles: Stand with legs hip-width apart and hold both thighs. Then bend the left leg while stretching the right thigh back, reaching the knee to the floor. Once done, [change legs and] bend the right leg while stretching the left leg back and reaching that knee to the floor. Repeat three times (#46).

Another variant of the lunges is recommended to relieve qi-disruptions in the muscles and intestines. Lunging with the left foot forward and the right leg back, one goes into a twist by bending the right arm at the elbow and looking back over the left shoulder. After three repetitions on both sides, one is to maintain the lunge position while raising one arm at a time and then both arms up as far as one can (each three times), bending the back and opening the torso (#68). The idea seems to be that by stretching arms and legs one can open blockages in the extremities, while the twisting of the abdominal area aids the intestines.

Exercises like these in the medical section of the text also include breathing techniques, notably exhalations with chui, xu, and hu to strengthen the body and to harmonise qi-flow, as well as exercises in other than standing positions, such as seated, kneeling, or lying down. For example, to alleviate lower back pain, one should lie on one's back and rock the painful area back and forth 300 times—if possible with knees bent into the chest. After this, one should lift the legs up straight to 90 degrees, point the toes, and—with hands holding on to the mat—vigorously lift and lower the buttocks three times (#55).

An example of a kneeling practice is the following:

To relieve thigh pain. Kneel upright, stretch the left leg forward while rotating the right shoulder down to bring them together with some vigour. Then stretch the right leg forward while rotating the left shoulder down to bring them together. Repeat ten times. (#50)

---

*8 These translations are based on the original text. It is published with modern characters and some punctuation in Zhangjiashan hanjian zhengli zu 1990; Ikai 2004. For a study of the book, see Lo forthcoming.
Following this detailed outline of concrete exercises, the *Yinshu* concludes its third part with a list of 24 brief mnemonic statements. After this, it places the practice in a larger social and cultural context. It notes that the most important factors in causing diseases are climatic excesses:

People get sick because of heat, dampness, wind, cold, rain, or dew as well as because of [a dysfunction] in opening and closing the pores, a disharmony in eating and drinking, and the inability to adapt their rising and resting to the changes in cold and heat.9

This harks back to the seasonal regimen in the beginning of the text, restating the importance of climatic and temporal awareness in the way one treats the body. The proper way of treating the body, however, as the text points out next, is accessible mainly to ‘noble people’ of the upper classes, who fall ill because of uncontrolled emotions such as anger and joy (which overload Yin and Yang *qi*). ‘Base people’, whose conditions tend to be caused by excessive labour, hunger, and thirst, on the contrary, have no opportunity to learn the necessary breathing exercises and therefore contract numerous diseases and die early.

This, as much as the fact that the manuscripts were found in the tombs of local rulers, makes it clear that *daoyin* practice in Han China—unlike Yoga in India, which was originally part of the hermit culture, an esoteric art undertaken away from ordinary society—was very much the domain of the aristocracy and upper classes and aimed predominantly at alleviating diseases and physical discomforts, providing greater enjoyment of daily luxuries and faster recovery after raucous parties.10 Also, the very existence of the texts with their detailed instructions shows that the practices were public knowledge and accessible to anyone with enough interest and financial means to obtain them.

Historical records show that medical and philosophical materials were often collected by aristocrats. Some searched out already written works and had them transcribed; others invited knowledgeable people to their estate and had them dictate their philosophical sayings and medical recipes to an experienced scribe.11 While knowledge was transmitted orally in a three-year apprenticeship from father to son in professional medical families or from master to disciple among itinerant practitioners and within philosophical schools, the dominant tendency was to offer this knowledge to society at large, and there was little concern for the establishment of close-knit hierarchies or esoteric lineages, which only became important in later religious developments.

---

9 Engelhardt 2001, p. 216.
Daoist transformation

As history moved along and Yoga was adopted by health seekers and began to spread into wider segments of society, *daoyin* moved in the opposite direction and became part of the Daoist enterprise of attaining immortality. The transformation of Chinese healing exercises into an aspect of religious culture had to do with the emergence of various organised Daoist groups that adopted some self-cultivation methods practised by Chinese hermits. Most prominent among them was the school of Highest Clarity (*Shangqing* 上清), which arose in the 360s. Around this time, two brothers of the aristocratic Xu family hired the medium Yang Xi 杨羲 (330–386) to establish contact with Xu Mi’s 許謙 wife, who had died in 362, to find out about her fate in the otherworld. She appeared to tell them about her status and explained the overall organisation of the heavens. She also introduced the medium to various other spirit figures, who revealed methods of personal transformation, meditations, visualisations, and alchemical concoctions; gave thorough instructions on how to transmit the texts and their methods; and provided prophecies about the golden age to come.

Source: *Shangqing lingbao dafa*.

Fig. 3. A talisman used in Highest Clarity practice.
The Xu brothers wrote down everything Yang Xi transmitted, however disparate it may have seemed, and created a basic collection of sacred texts. They shared their new revelations with their immediate neighbours and relatives, thus establishing the first generation of Highest Clarity followers. They developed a spiritual practice that also included a daily routine of stretches, breathing, and self-massages in combination with the use of talismans and incantations—all to purify their bodies and to enhance their vigour for the great endeavour of becoming immortal.

How *daoyin* functioned in the daily practice of these would-be immortals is described in the *Baoshen jing* (Scripture on Treasuring the Spirit). The text says:

When you get up in the morning, always calm your breath and sit up straight, then interlace the fingers and massage the nape of your neck. Next, lift the face and look up, press the hands against the neck while moving the head back. Do this three or four times, then stop.

This causes essence to be in harmony and the blood to flow well. It prevents wind or wayward *qi* from entering the body. Over a long time it will keep you free from disease and death.

Next, bend and stretch; extend the hands to the four extremes [up, down, right, left]; bend backward and stretch out the sides; and shake out the hundred joints. Do each of these three times.

These and similar morning practices were further accompanied by incantations that implored the deities and perfected ones to support the practitioner, and enhanced their visions of divine ascension. An example is:

My spirit and material souls receiving purity,
My five spirits [of the inner organs] are restful and at peace.
I return in a flying carriage to visit [the heaven of] Jade Clarity,
Ascend to Great Nonbeing and journey with the sun.
Becoming a perfected, I merge in mystery with emperors and lords.

The practice also involved the use of talismans, written in red ink on yellow paper in imitation of the sacred writings of the otherworld. Adepts used them...
either by placing them on themselves or by burning them and drinking the ashes (see Fig. 3).17

The morning practices of daoyin in Highest Clarity served several goals: dispersal of obstructive and demonic forces, self-purification in the face of the divine, clarity of vision and keenness of hearing to open otherworldly perception, extension of life expectancy to have more practice time, and preparation for ascension through visualisations of gods and the heavens.18 Variations of the practice include: bends and stretches known from the medical manuscripts as well as deep breathing to release stale qi and absorb new energy; self-massages of the face, eyes, and ears; saliva swallowings to harmonise qi in the body and calm the viscera; visualisations of the inner organs with the body gods.

In this religious Daoist context, therefore, the practice of daoyin was transformed into an aspect of spiritual purification, including but not limited to the maintenance of health and extension of life. Although the setting was still aristocratic and mundane, it had come much closer to Yoga, leading to extensive explorations of the unseen world and deep absorptive trance states. At the same time, however, daoyin continued to make inroads in Chinese society at large, where it was coupled with various other means of body cultivation.

Practice in context

A variety of texts from the fourth century document the use of daoyin for health and longevity among Chinese noblemen. They all warn against excesses and provide remedies to improve bodily functions through diet and herbal decoctions, supported by prescriptions for proper sleep, hygiene, sexual activity, and exercise. Daoyin, from being a branch of preventative medicine, thus becomes a key aspect of overall life regulation.

One key text of the period, the Yangsheng yaoji 養生要集 (Long Life Compendium) by the aristocrat and official Zhang Zhan 張湛, recommends that practitioners avoid specific combinations of food, such as anything hot and cold, sweet and raw, or more specifically, wheat and oats, onions and honey, celery and pig’s liver, dried ginger and rabbit.19 They should use alcohol sparingly, boil water before drinking it, and take care not to get cold when sweaty. The text also has specific recipes for beneficial food combinations, and descriptions of the qualities and healing properties of herbs and foodstuffs, as well as

---

17 Baoshen jing, DZ 1319, 16b.
18 See Robinet 1993.
a series of instructions for pregnancy.\textsuperscript{20} In many cases, it provides specific remedies for certain conditions, notably stomach and digestive problems, including cramps, flatulence, constipation, and diarrhoea.\textsuperscript{21}

The overall goal of the presentation is to encourage people to live as healthily as possible, working closely in harmony with nature and the four seasons. Citing the ancient immortal Pengzu 彭祖, the text says:

The method of nourishing longevity consists mainly in not doing harm to oneself. Keep warm in winter and cool in summer, and never lose your harmony with the four seasons—that is how you can align yourself with the body. Do not allow sensuous beauty, provocative postures, easy leisure, and enticing entertainments to incite yearnings and desires—that is how you come to pervade the spirit.\textsuperscript{22}

The most important advice is to remain moderate in everything, since any excess will harm the lungs and kidneys: to eat and drink with control, to stay away from various luxuries that lead to a weakness of $qi$, and to keep speech and laughter within limits.\textsuperscript{23} Citing Pengzu once more, the text points out that heavy clothing and thick comforters, spicy foods and heavy meats, sexual attraction and beautiful women, melodious voices and enticing sounds, wild hunting and exciting outings, as well as all strife for success and ambition will inevitably lead to a weakening of the body and thus a reduction in life expectancy.\textsuperscript{24} In the same vein, various mental activities will harm key psychological forces and thus bring about a diminishing of $qi$, which takes one further away from the \textit{dao} and reduces life. The text formulates this in a set of 12 things to do only in ‘little’ increments. It says:

Those who wish to preserve harmony and complete their perfection should: think little, reflect little, laugh little, speak little, enjoy little, anger little, delight little, mourn little, like little, dislike little, engage little, deal little.

\begin{itemize}
\item If you think much, the spirit will disperse.
\item If you reflect much, the heart will be laboured.
\item If you laugh much, the organs and viscera will soar up.
\item If you speak much, the Ocean of $Qi$ will be empty and vacant.
\item If you enjoy much, the gall bladder and bladder will take in outside wind.
\item If you get angry much, the fascia will push the blood around.
\item If you delight much, the spirit and heart will be deviant and unsettled.
\item If you mourn much, the hair and whiskers will dry and wither.
\item If you like much, the will and \textit{qi} will be one-sided and overloaded.
\item If you dislike much, the essence and power will race off and soar away.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{20} Stein 1999, pp. 208–10.
\textsuperscript{21} Stein 1999, pp. 226–8.
\textsuperscript{22} Ishinpo 23.3a; Stein 1999, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{23} Stein 1999, pp. 179, 186.
\textsuperscript{24} Stein 1999, p. 178.
If you engage yourself much, the muscles and meridians will be tense and nervous. If you deal much, wisdom and worry will all be confused. All these attack people's lives worse than axes and spears; they diminish people's destiny worse than wolves and wolverines.25

In other words, harmony with the dao manifests itself in mental stability and physical wellness, and any form of agitation or sickness indicates a decline in one's alignment with the forces of nature. Thus 'going along with Heaven and Earth brings good fortune; going against Heaven and Earth brings misfortune',26 the text says, and notes: 'The dao is qi. By preserving qi you can attain the dao, and through attaining the dao you can live long. Spirit is essence. By preserving essence you can reach spirit brightness, and once you have spirit brightness, you can live long'.27

The major points on moderation made in the aristocratic Yangsheng yaoji during the same period also appear in more religiously inspired texts that can be linked with a more esoteric tradition of medieval China, that of hermits and alchemists. Most important among them are two short synopses of the key alchemical treatise Baopuzi 抱朴子 (Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity),28 contained in the Daoist canon: the Yangxing lun 養性論 (On Nourishing Inner Nature)29 and the Yangsheng lun 養生論 (On Nourishing Life).30 Although in title and edition linked with the hermit tradition and probably compiled on the basis of eremitic documents,31 they closely match Zhang Zhan's attitude and recommendations. Like the Yangsheng yaoji, they do not speak of mountain isolation, alchemy, or specific recipes, but emphasise the need for moderation in daily life. Thus, the Yangxing lun says:

The method of nourishing life involves not spitting far and not walking hastily. Let the ears not listen to excess; let the eyes not look around extensively. Do not sit until tired; do not sleep beyond your needs. Wait until it is cold before you put on more clothes; wait until it is hot before you take them off. Do not get too hungry, because hunger harms the qi, and when you eat beware of overindulging. Do not get too thirsty before you drink and do not drink too deeply at a time. If you overeat, your bowels will be blocked and obstructed to the point of illness; if you drink too deeply, phlegm will accumulate into lumps.32

26 Stein 1999, p. 182.
27 Ishinpo 23.17ab; Stein 1999, p. 172.
28 The text of the Baopuzi has been translated in its entirety in Ware 1966.
29 DZ 840.
30 DZ 842.
31 Schipper and Verellen 2004, pp. 362, 357.
32 DZ 840, 2a; also in Yangsheng lun 2a; Baopuzi 13; Ware 1966, p. 223.
The *Yangsheng lun* proposes similar guidelines, which it supplements with a set of six exhortations to release mental strain and sensory involvement. It says:

1. Let go of fame and profit.
2. Limit sights and sounds.
3. Moderate material goods and wealth.
4. Lessen smells and tastes.
5. Eliminate lies and falsehood.
6. Avoid jealousy and envy.

It then repeats the set of 12 'little' activities as found in the *Yangsheng yaoji* and moves on to echo Pengzu's warning against wearing 'heavy clothes and thick sleeves', eating 'meats, fatty foods, and sweets and getting intoxicated', and against enjoying 'sexual infatuation, engagements with the opposite sex, and overindulgence in the bedroom', similarly found in the mainstream work.

The fact that general admonitions for moderation—physical, mental, and social—are equally found in a variety of texts of the period shows that they formed part of an aristocratic culture of simplicity and self-control that favoured working toward long life and well-being, but did not necessarily involve seclusion, devotion, or alchemical experiments. Practitioners used *daoyin* and conscious breathing as part of their overall regimen of life enhancement, which, like the Eight Limbs of traditional Yoga, also came to include moral guidelines and the recommendation of generally life-enhancing attitudes.

### Integrative systems

In the high middle ages of China, the sixth to ninth centuries, *daoyin* underwent further formalisation. This becomes clear in the *Daojinjing*, the only text in the Daoist Canon that deals exclusively with physical practices. Its full title is *Taiqing daoyin yangshengjing* (Great Clarity Scripture on Healing Exercises and Nourishing Life).

Integrating various forms of exercises and modes of guiding the *qi*, the *Daoyinjing* brings the tradition to a new level of development, characterised by certain key features. They are: the refinement and variation of medical exercises and animal forms; the organisation of healing practices into integrated

---

33 DZ 842, 1b.
34 *Yangsheng lun*, DZ 842, 1b–2a.

A full translation of this important text will be included in my future project, called 'A Sourcebook in Chinese Longevity'.
sequences and their ascription to legendary Daoist immortals; and the use of meditation techniques that integrate the guiding of *qi* with various body imaginings and Daoist visualisations. The text accordingly has three major kinds of instructions: methods for medical relief that constitute a development of those first found in the manuscripts; integrated sequences of practice that can be used to create healing but are more dominantly marked as methods of long life and immortality; and meditative ways of guiding the *qi* and visualising the body which place the practitioner into a more divine and spiritual context. Within these three areas, the *Daoyin jing* first shows the systematic progress from healing through longevity to immortality that becomes central in all later *daoyin* forms and systems.

The *Daoyin jing* continues the ancient medical tradition by paying much attention to breathing. Representing the *qigong* system that is still standard today, it lists the six healing breaths, each associated with a particular organ and set of ailments.36

For example, the first breath is *he*:

*He* is the breath associated with the heart, and the heart governs the tongue. If the mouth is dry, even well assembled *qi* cannot pervade the body, thus allowing various forms of wayward *qi* to enter. Heaven will take care of that. If there is great heat, open the mouth wide. If there is little heat, keep the mouth lightly closed. Also, use your intention to measure it suitably. If you do it beyond being cured, however, the practice will cause renewed diminishing.37

Similarly, *hu* is related to the spleen and helps with conditions of low fever and discomfort, a feeling of fullness in belly, stomach, and intestines, bad circulation, and energetic compression. Third, *xu* belongs to the liver which governs the eyes; it is effective in cases of inflamed and congested eyes and other vision troubles. The next breath is *chui*, which corresponds to the kidneys and the ears and helps in cases of abdominal cold, infertility, and hearing afflications. Fifth comes *si*, the breath of the lungs and the nose, effective in cases of temperature imbalances and skin troubles. Sixth and finally, the *xi* breath activates the Triple Heater and alleviates all maladies associated with this digestive and energy-processing organ. The text concludes by saying:

Each of the six breaths—*he, si, hu, xu, chui, and xi*—is ruled by one of the five organs. In case of extreme fatigue, one can use them easily to regulate the *qi* and improve one’s condition.38

---

36 See Despeux 2006, p. 49.
37 DZ 818, 16a.
38 DZ 818, 16b.
This model of the six breaths represents a detailed medical method to treat various imbalances of qi associated with the five inner organs and the Triple Heater. It follows the standard correspondence system of Chinese medicine, is both therapeutic and preventive, can address many different conditions, and still forms an important part of qigong practice today.

Beyond providing a general overview, the Daoyin jing also prescribes the different breaths in connection with stretching exercises. It says:

Place both hands on the ground, contract the body, and bend the spine, then lift up. Repeat this move three times. Doing this exercise every day will tonify and increase qi and extend your years. The best time to do it is when there is no one around. It also involves holding the breath in, then absorbing it once and exhaling so softly that the ears cannot hear it. If you are exhausted or fatigued, use si to exhale. If you have cold-based troubles in the organs, use chui. If you have a heat-based condition, use hu. 39

Other ways of moving qi and increasing overall vitality include standing up straight against a wall and holding the breath, then guiding the qi from head to feet or feet to head, 40 or lying on the back, closing the mouth, pulsing jaw and belly, and making the qi fill the mouth ready for swallowing while intentionally moving it toward the back and around the body. 41 Stretching both arms to the right or left while holding the breath to the count of nine will, furthermore, keep the qi firmly within the body and prevent unwanted leakages, while guiding it mentally to the area below the navel and holding it there will release knots and tensions. 42 Overall health, moreover, is promised to anyone regularly practising one or several of the following exercises:

Raise both hands as if lifting a thousand-pound rock, right and left moving well together. 43

Sit cross-legged, interlace the fingers, reach up above your head, then stretch the head and bring it forward so as to touch the ground. Hold the breath for the count of five.

Kneel upright and bend the arms back so that the hands embrace the nipples. Rock to your right and left while holding the breath. 44

Like its forerunners in the medical manuscripts, the exercise involves simple arm movements. Unlike them, it places greater emphasis on holding the

39 DZ 818, 15b–16a.
40 DZ 818, 14b.
41 DZ 818, 15a.
42 Ibid.
43 DZ 818, 15b.
44 DZ 818, 18a.
breath, thus working with a greater inward focus. Breathing is the key method of working with ailments and has replaced the emphasis on outward bodily movements to a large degree. Although the earlier exercises are still rudimentarily present, the inward shift has altered their composition and execution.

Beyond this development of the tradition, the *Daoyin Jing* is also important in that it prescribes various integrated sequences that do not treat specific ailments but are designed for longevity and immortality. As the text says about one of them:

> If done regularly, this practice will make your hearing keen, your vision bright, and your years extended to great longevity, with none of the hundred diseases arising.\(^ {45} \)

Since the practices serve a more spiritual purpose, they have to be performed under careful conditions. As the text specifies, the practice platform should be high off the floor ‘to prevent earth-*qi* from rising up and attacking you as well as to keep demon *qi* from invading your body’ (16b); one should never be hasty or aggressive in one’s practice, since ‘haste and aggression are robbers of the entire body’ (17a); and one should avoid facing north or practising while turning the back on the gods or ancestors, violations which could result in a reduced life expectancy. Also, the text requests that the sequence be undertaken ‘between midnight and noon’ (2a) or when getting up early in the morning (1a).

The simplest of these spiritual, integrated exercises is associated with the ancient immortal Master Redpine. Limited to a seated or kneeling posture, it is called the ‘Seated Exercises of Master Redpine’ and consists of six exercises that use the arms in various ways to open the chest, shoulders, and upper body (see Fig. 4).

There are no specific benefits, medical or otherwise, mentioned for each exercise, but the sequence as a whole is said to increase long life and vigour. It runs:

1. First, [sit or] kneel upright and stretch out both arms before you, palms open and fingers turned out.
2. Interlace the fingers, stretch the arms away, and roll the body to the right and left.
3. With the right hand on the hip, reach the left hand up and above the head. Repeat on the other side.
4. With the right hand stretched out backwards, use the left hand to grasp the hip from the front. Repeat on the other side.

\(^ {45} \) DZ 818, 19b.
Fig. 4. A daoyin adept sitting up and stretching his arms

5. Alternate the right and left arms stretching forward, then bend them back to grasp the hips from the back.
6. Raise both hands up with vigour. (19ab)

This rather simple sequence looks a bit like a warm-up, but since it is listed separately in the text, it must have been practised independently for longevity purposes. It may also have been a supplementary practice to other sequences associated with Master Redpine or served as an alternative for followers of the Master Redpine lineage—maybe for people who found it difficult to stand up and bend or get down and stretch. The various movements take the arms and shoulders through their full range of motion and open the upper body and chest quite effectively. There is little doubt that this sequence, short and easy as it may seem, has good benefits for health and vigour.

The other major sequence linked with Master Redpine appears right in the beginning of the *Daoyin jing* and is reprinted in its other versions, showing that it was widely known and quite popular. It is an integrated set of exercises...
that takes the practitioner through all the different postures of the body and flows along nicely to provide an overall expansion of qi and the release of tensions and energy blockages in various parts of the body. As with other long life sequences, it is to be undertaken in the early morning and begins by stretching the arms overhead while facing east. Next, practitioners lie down and reach their arms away to the right and left to stretch the upper back. This is followed by an abdominal crunch which flows smoothly into a cross-back stretch:

With your left hand push against your left knee as it is raised above the hip. Stretch your right arm up [and back] as far as you can. Repeat on the other side. Do this for five breaths on each side. This releases the chest and belly.

After this, adepts sit up (or kneel, matching the dominant sitting posture in medieval China) and interlace their hands in front of their chests, then turn and twist in different ways, right and left, forward and back, head and neck. They conclude by once again stretching the arms overhead, then stand up and loosen their legs and thighs (1a–2a).

This flow of postures works from a standing through a lying and sitting posture back up to standing. It uses all the different parts of the body and claims to benefit the entire system. However, in its actual movements, like Master Redpine’s seated sequence it focuses dominantly on the upper body, stretching arms, shoulders, and torso. Like other sequences described in the text, it requires the continued use of the breath and works dominantly with patterns of five slow, deep breaths, allowing about half a minute for each repetition. Although reminiscent of medical exercises in the Yinshu in that it makes heavy use of interlaced fingers and encourages bends and stretches in different directions, the sequence makes no claims about improved eyesight, hearing, or health. Instead, the sequence focuses on releasing or stretching the different parts of the body to encourage an overall balanced and harmonious qi-flow and to serve the continued openness and release necessary for extended longevity. While not holding postures as long as Yogis might and/or working with inversions, medieval daoyin in its overall patterns has a lot in common with Yoga and Magical Movements.

**Divergent techniques**

Taking all this information together, we can now begin to answer the questions posed in the beginning. Is daoyin essentially the same as other Asian forms of body cultivation? Or are they separate traditions, which have very little in common? It should be clear by now that, in its original social setting, cosmological speculation and textual formulation, daoyin is very different
indeed, although it shares some basic notions about the possibility of spiritual attainment and proposes similar physical practices.

To conclude this discussion, I would now like to take a closer look at the actual practices and their commonalities and differences. First, quite obviously, both Yoga and daoyin support a moderate and simple lifestyle, a nutritious and natural diet, freedom from strong emotions, and clarity in daily living. They have a basic moral code, formulated as the yamas and niyamas in Yoga and apparent in Daoism in various sets of precepts for lay followers, priests, and monastics. 46

Both also prescribe a fairly straightforward exercise regimen that, combined with deep, abdominal and chest-expanding breathing, can be executed in all different positions of the body. Exercises include bends and stretches, most commonly forward bends, backbends, lunges, and twists, as well as some weight-bearing practices, such as pull-ups and push-ups. Many of these basic exercises are part and parcel of any workout routine and will be familiar to athletes and gym-users everywhere. They have been proven effective for health over many centuries and in many different cultures, just as a moderate lifestyle and good moral foundation have been helpful all along.

So far, both systems do not contradict each other, nor are they different from other health enhancing methods, whether they emphasise the physical or the spiritual. Their effectiveness is not questioned, nor is their general applicability. Beyond this, however, things become more complicated. Both Yoga and daoyin have more complex postures and sequences that are not at all alike in name or execution. 47

Daoyin variously makes use of ropes and swings, which are not found in Yoga. Yoga, on the other hand, places a great emphasis on inversions and balancing poses which are strikingly absent in daoyin. Also, with the exception of the meditation known as ‘Standing Like a Pine Tree’, daoyin tends to encourage movement, while Yoga demands holding—sometimes for periods of ten, twenty, or thirty minutes. This, of course, goes back to the ultimate goal in Yoga of reaching a level of complete inner stability that allows the awareness of the eternal true self, contrasted with the aim of Daoists to become one with the flow and to find perfect harmony by moving along with the patterns of dao.

46 For an extensive study of all the different kinds of Daoist moral codes and precepts, see Kohn 2004.

47 One exception is figure 44 on the Daoyin tu, shown with legs in lunge position and arms extended and named ‘Warrior Pointing’, which is strikingly similar to the Yoga pose known as ‘Warrior II’. 
A similar set of differences also applies to the breathing practices associated with the two systems, *qifa* 氣法 in *daoyin* and *prānāyāma* in Yoga. Both encourage holding of the breath—called *bqi* 閉氣 in *daoyin* and *kumbhaka* in Yoga—for the opening of energy channels. Both use a method of directed breathing to alleviate discomforts and distress, and both guide energy up the spinal column. Yet, in general, *daoyin* works with the systematic circulation of *qi* throughout the body, while Yoga focuses on the concentrated use of breath in the nostril, sinus, and throat areas.

For example, one form of *daoyin* breathing is called ‘swallowing qi’ (*yanqi* 咽氣). According to the *Huanzhen xiansheng fu neiqi juefa* 幻真先生服內氣訣法 (Master Huanzhen’s Essential Method of Absorbing Internal Qi), this involves lying flat on one’s back with the head slightly raised and the hands curled into fists. In this position, adepts inhale through the nose, allow the breath to reach the mouth, mix it with saliva by moving the tongue and cheeks, and swallow it down, guiding the *qi* mentally to reach the stomach and spread from there into the various inner organs. To help the movement, practitioners massage the passageway of the breath by rubbing the chest and belly (2b–3b).

In an extension, they also ‘guide the qi’ (*xingqi* 行氣) by first taking the swallowed saliva-breath mixture into the lower elixir field, then entering it into two small caverns at the back and imagining it moving up the body in two strands to enter the Niwan Centre or upper elixir field in the head. From here, they allow it to stream into all parts of the body, ‘through hair, face, head, neck, and shoulders into the hands and fingers; from the chest and the middle elixir field at the heart into the five inner organs and down along the legs to thighs, knees, calves, heels, and soles’ (3b–4a). As they do so, all congestions of blood and blockages of *qi* are successfully dissolved, paving the way for the refinement of *qi* into subtler energetic forces.

A yet different variant is called ‘surrendering to qi’ (*weiqi* 委氣), which is described as flowing mentally along with the *qi* in the body wherever it may go, in a state of deep absorption, ‘where there is no spirit, no conscious awareness; deep and serene, the mind is one with the Great Void’ (5b–6a). This in turn causes the body to become independent of nostril breathing as the *qi* will begin to flow through the pores of the skin. In an extension of this heightened power of *qi*, adepts can then spread it to other people in a form of laying-on of hands to create healing and greater harmony with the *dao*.

---

48 DZ 828. The text has a preface dated to the mid-Tang period. It also appears in the *Chifeng sui* 赤鳳髓 (Marrow of the Red Phoenix) of the late Ming. It is translated in Despeux 1988, pp. 65–81, and summarised in Kohn forthcoming.
In contrast to these breathing practices, Yoga followers use the breath to heighten awareness, to calm the mind, and to cleanse the air passages. To give a few examples, there is a popular form known as *ujjayi* breathing, often called the ‘ocean-sounding breath’. It involves the tightening of the muscles at the back of the throat, allowing the air to flow slowly and making a soft, rasp­ping noise, said to stimulate the endocrine and thyroid glands and increase mental alertness. A breath that calms the mind and balances energy channels is *nāḍī śodhana*. Also called ‘alternate nostril breathing’, it is done by alternately closing off one nostril with the fingers or thumb of the right hand. Encouraging long, calm inhalations and complete, deep exhalations, this is very soothing and aids the integration of the two brain hemispheres.

Another classic yogic breath is *bhastrika*, which means ‘bellows’. In this exercise, the breath is pushed in and out quickly and powerfully ten times, after which it is held in for five to ten seconds. It is said to help with colds, destroy phlegm, relieve inflammation of the nose and throat, and over longer periods may cure asthma. The ‘skull-polishing’ breath, finally, is called *kapālabhāti*. It cleanses and tones up the nasal passages, expels bacteria, and increases concentration. For this, practitioners breathe in deeply and then expel the breath in short bursts from the lungs through the nose while vigorously contracting the abdominal muscles and pushing the diaphragm upward. They continue for 30 to 50 repetitions, then exhale completely, hold the breath out while ‘securing the locks’ by tightening the muscles in pelvis, belly, and throat, then inhale and hold the breath in.

This brief overview of the best-known breathing practices in the two systems shows just how significantly different they are in both form and purpose. Daoists mix the breath with saliva and guide it internally to effect opening of *qi*-channels, while Yogis work with strong, deep inhalations and exhalations to cleanse specific physical channels.

The difference is further enhanced by the vast variety in cleansing procedures in the two traditions. Daoists practise daily hygiene by washing the face, rinsing the mouth, and cleaning the teeth. They also expel stale *qi* upon waking in the morning. To do so, they close the eyes and curl their hands into fists. Lying down flat, they bend the arms and set the fists on the chest, while placing the feet on the mat to raise the knees. From here, they lift the back and

---

49 For a detailed description and physiological analysis of Yogic breathing methods, see Loehr and Migdow 1986.
50 Yesudian and Haich 1965, p. 120.
51 Yesudian and Haich 1965, p. 122.
52 Yesudian and Haich 1965, pp. 120–1.
buttocks, hold the breath in, and pound on the abdomen to make the stale qi in the belly flow back out through the mouth.  

Yogis likewise wash and rinse and clean their teeth, but in addition they also gargle, rub the base of the tongue and cleanse it with butter, and clean the hole in the skull by massaging the third-eye area. They clean the interior of the chest by inserting a plantain stalk through the mouth into the oesophagus and the nasal passages, hoping thereby to remove phlegm, mucus, and bile. They may also swallow a fine cloth about three inches wide, allowing it to reach the stomach, then pull it out again, or they might guide a thread through the nostrils into the mouth to open the sinuses. For intestinal cleansing, they push water in and out of the rectum or insert a stalk of turmeric into the colon. All these are methods quite unique to the Indian tradition that have no documented counterpart in China.

Conclusion

Given the enormous differences from other forms of Asian body cultivation in historical origins, fundamental worldview, and applied techniques, it is safe to conclude that daoyin is indeed quite unique in its concepts and practices. This is so despite the fact that it matches Yoga in certain basic similarities in body postures and energy circulation; that there was already rich cultural contact between Persia, India, and China in the first millennium BCE; that evidence shows the use of various technical Sanskrit terms in Chinese; and that Buddhist masters undoubtedly brought physical and breathing practices to China, in addition to scriptures and meditations, in the first few centuries CE. In spite of all this, examining the deeper levels of the two systems, it becomes clear that Yoga and daoyin are completely at odds in the way they deal with the body.

They see the body differently: Yogis strive to control and overcome its characteristics, while daoyin followers hope to align with it and perfect its functioning. They use the body differently: Yogis change its natural patterns and ultimately aim to keep it quiet and stable for the unfolding of mental purity and a vision of the true self, while daoyin practitioners enhance its natural

---

53 Huazhen juefa 1ab.
56 Mair 2004, p. 92.
57 See Despeux 1989; Eliade 1958.
functioning with the expectation of refining its energetic structure to greater levels of subtlety and thus reaching the perfection of the *dao*. They heal the body differently: Yogis accept health as a by-product and necessary condition for more advanced stages and—with the exception of Hatha practitioners—tend to scorn the pursuit of mere bodily well-being and successful functioning in society, while *daoyin* masters—again with some exceptions in later Daoist circles—emphasize health, long life, and the experience of mundane pleasures and see them as a key motivation of the practice, more spiritual states being possible but not essential.

Both systems, when followed at a basic level, can help people find wellness in their bodies, peace in their minds, and balance in their lives. They both fulfil an important role in modern technological and hyperactive societies. However, when it comes to higher spiritual goals, their visions, organisational settings, and practices are vastly divergent.

### References

#### Primary Sources


#### Secondary and modern sources


Ikai Yoshio 藪鷹祥夫 2004, ‘*Kōyō Chōkasan kanken Insho yakuchûkō*’ 江陵張家山漢簡引書釋註, draft paper, used by permission of the author.