Visual Representation and Oral Transmission of *Yangsheng* Techniques in Ming China

Hsiu-fen Chen

**Abstract**

Pictures of publications abound in Ming China (1368–1644). So do the illustrations of books on medicine and health maintenance. In the case of *daoyin* gymnastics, the number of their illustrations increases rapidly in particular during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They are depicted in both *yangsheng* monographs and household almanacs. Some believe that the abundance of illustrations is due to the fierce competition in the publication industry and book marketing of the Ming. This article goes further to argue what the illustrations signify is not only the commercialisation of *yangsheng* knowledge, but the popularisation of the body techniques. These pictorial objects do make the written instructions more comprehensible. Another aspect that this article reveals is the verses, songs and maxims on *yangsheng* widely recorded in the Ming health manuals. These mnemonics help summarise *yangsheng* knowledge into an easy-to-remember form. They also indicate the influences from oral transmission of therapeutic techniques. With the aid of images and verbal evidence, Chinese *yangsheng* tradition handed down from the antiquity has been transformed in both its production and reception in the Ming times.

**Keywords**

*yangsheng*, *daoyin*, visual culture, oral tradition, Ming Dynasty

**Introduction**

Visualisation and appropriation are two of the major characteristics of publications in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). According to a survey, the number of pictures and illustrations for books is by then increasing rapidly, which is unprecedented in history. These illustrated books concern various topics, including arts, fiction, drama and family encyclopaedias, etc. It is especially worth noted in the books of painting—both the scale of their pictorial subjects and their ‘mutual borrowing’ are remarkable.¹ In Ming China, the emerging illustrations and their ‘mutual appropriation’ also characterise the texts of *yangsheng* (self-cultivation aimed at health preservation and longevity).

There is no doubt that the Ming yangsheng publications contain more illustrations than ever. However, not all instructions on health maintenance are accompanied by illustrations. The illustrations in the Ming health handbooks are mostly about the topic of daoyin (導引, literally trans. leading and guiding), the traditional Chinese gymnastic exercise by guiding qi and stretching the body. These body techniques are widely transcribed in both popular health guides and almanacs. In addition to written instructions, they are often illustrated. Meanwhile, the daily guides to yangsheng knowledge are sometimes summarised in the forms of verse, song and maxim. The visualisation and verbalisation of yangsheng techniques thus suggest that these health exercises might target the literate and semi-literate readers, who partly relied on these mnemonic techniques to acquire the knowledge of yangsheng.

In the past, scholars had researched into the topics of yangsheng mainly by textual analysis of written records, rather than pictorial evidences. In this article, I will instead focus on the relationship between image and word, as well as their effects in the representation and transmission of yangsheng knowledge. By examining the pictures, verses, songs and maxims in the health guides and family almanacs, I will try to answer the following questions: how were the yangsheng illustrations related to each other and to the written words in the Ming times? How did they act in the learning and comprehension of the yangsheng techniques? In so doing, I hope my research will contribute to better understanding of how the knowledge and techniques of yangsheng had been transmitted in late imperial China.

Visual representation of the gymnastic exercises

As stated above, most of the yangsheng illustrations are about the therapeutic exercises of daoyin in Ming China. The most popular daoyin exercises then include the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ (Wu qin xi 五禽戲), the ‘Eight Brocades’ (Ba duan jin 八段錦), and the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’ (Ershisiqi zuogong fa 二十四氣坐功法). Their celebrity is evidenced by their presence in both health guides and household almanacs in the late Ming.

2 In the Ming times, people believed that the therapeutic exercises of daoyin can undo the stagnation of qi and blood. Li Chan 李梴 (1999, p. 66), for example, indicated that daoyin can alleviate the harms caused by standing, walking, lying or sitting for long.
The Five Animal Mimes

The ‘Five Animal Mimes’ are therapeutic exercises that mimic the motions of five animals—the tiger, the bear, the deer, the ape and the bird. Although similar practices in terms of the ‘Six Animal Mimes’ and the ‘Eight Animal Mimes’ had been practised throughout the ages, the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ remained the most renowned. In the popular lore, the invention of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ is often accredited to Hua Tuo 華佗 (2nd–3rd centuries), who might have handed down these exercises to his disciple Wu Pu 吳普. Similar mimetic exercises can even be traced back to the early philosophical text Zhuangzi 莊子 and the gymnastic charts excavated from the Mawangdui 馬王堆 tombs (in present Hunan Province). But the detailed instructions of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ were not provided until the Yangxing yanming lu 養性延命錄 (Record of Nurturing Nature and Prolonging Life) by Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456–536).

To be sure, the Yangxing yanming lu contains no pictorial evidence but a verbal record of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’. It was after the mid-sixteenth century that the illustrations of these mimetic exercises emerge in health-preserving handbooks. These works include Weisheng zhenjue 衛生真訣 (True Verses for Guarding Life, 1565) attributed to Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–64), Chifeng sui 赤鳳髓 (Marrow of the Crimson Phoenix, 1578) by Zhou Lüjing 周履靖, Fushou danshu 福壽丹書 (Cinnabar Book for Fortune and Longevity, 1624) by Gong Jüzhong 龔居中, etc. Not least, most of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century household almanacs also record instructions and illustrations of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’. The Wuche bajin 五車拔錦 (Miscellanea of Various Books, 1597) and Miaojin wanbao quanshu 妙錦萬寶全書 (Complete Book of Miscellanea and Ten Thousand Treasures, 1612) are just two examples.

At a glance, the Ming versions of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ look very different from their early counterparts. Chifeng sui, for example, differs from the Yangxing yanming lu not only because of its newly added illustrations, but also its revised descriptions. In addition to physical movements, Chifeng sui also emphasises instructions on breath control, descriptions of qi and blood circulation, and spiritual state. Besides, Chifeng sui attributes the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ to certain ancient immortals and hermits, which is found nowhere else.

In the late Ming, the practices of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ are clearly elucidated in both scholarly health manuals and family encyclopaedia. We will now look into the ‘Tiger Mime’ to exemplify their general characteristics. In the comparison with Weisheng zhenjue, Chifeng sui and Wuche bajin, they all contain similar verbal descriptions on the purpose of imitating the tiger’s motions. That is, to control breath and regulate qi in the channels of the body, so as to maintain good spirit and prevent illnesses. As the Chifeng sui suggests:

Hold the qi and bow the head, clench the fists, [adopt a stance] like a tiger making a show of strength. As though [you were] holding a thousand jin of iron in your hands, lift them gently and gradually, without releasing the breath. Straighten up the body, gulp down air into the abdomen, allow the spiritual qi to rise and then descend again, be aware of it making a thunderous sound inside the abdomen. Do this about five to seven times. Through this exercise, one can regulate the qi in the channels [of the whole body], make the spirit bright and clear, and prevent the myriad diseases from arising.

The description of the ‘Tiger Mime’ in the Chifeng sui—and the other contemporary works as well—is far more complex than that in the Yangxing yanming lu. In his description of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’, Tao emphasises the vivid imitation of the wild animals’ actions, but in the late Ming monographs on health maintenance such as the Weisheng zhenjue and Chifeng sui, the instructions on the mimetic exercises became more civil and less wild. The Ming versions emphasise the harmony between action and breath, and were associated with the control of the mental states. Just as Wang Shumin suggests, the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ by then ‘had developed into practices that involved gymnastics, techniques for moving qi, visualisation’. This echoes the view of some scholars who regard the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ as the evidence to show the increasingly blurred boundary between dao yin exercise and the inner alchemy. While the original mimetic regimen was simply focused on the imitation of animals’ outward behaviours, the late Ming version nevertheless emphasises to pacify the spirit and cultivate the qi inside the body.

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The penetration of inner alchemy into the therapeutic exercises of daoyin helps to explain why the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ in the Chifeng sui moved away from sheer imitation of animals’ actions to more sophisticated and elegant exercises incorporated by breath training. The large, wild movements of the body that imitate the wild animals in earlier records were domesticated, and the invisible breath control and the circulation of qi were only to be imagined by the reader/practitioner through verbal instructions.

The slight differences between the late Ming books of health maintenance should also not be overlooked. First, the phrase of the ‘Tiger Mime’ in the Weisheng zhenjue seems to have lost the word ‘five’ when it suggests to ‘[do the exercise] or seven times’. Secondly, each set of the mimetic exercises in the Wuche bajin is accompanied by a short poem that summarises the exercises. It does not appear in other works. The poem of the ‘Tiger Mime’ in the Wuche bajin concludes:

Shut the mouth, bow the head and clench the fists separately.
Show your strength like a tiger and stand in front of village.
As though holding heavy things you lift them up gradually.
Straighten up your body and swallow the qi usually.\(^\text{11}\)

In her recent survey, Catherine Despeux sheds new light on the body images of medical and Daoist illustrations in a comparative perspective. As she puts it, the illustrations of the healing exercises have evinced much similarity ever since the Song dynasty (960–1279): models in those illustrations are mainly males, with similar facial complexions, hairdos and postures. Some of them are dressed, some half-naked; most of them seem motionless. These illustrations were produced mainly for the sake of education, communication and memorisation.\(^\text{12}\) At a glance, the male models in the illustrations appear similar. All of them have moustaches and hair coils, and are in long robes. Yet, in the Weisheng zhenjue and Chifeng sui the models stand and lean forward, stretch their arms and clench their fists. It is obviously the pose when the practitioners just rise up after mimicking the tiger on the ground. (Figs 1 & 2) In contrast, the Wuche bajin depicts the man bending his body and touching the ground with his fists. It seems the initial step in imitating the tiger. (Fig. 3)

\(^{11}\) The original text is ‘閉口低頭拳兩分，張威似虎立前村；如持重物隨隨起，每次平身把氣吞’. Wuche bajin 1999, juan 32, p. 644a.

In addition, the male figures in the illustrations of the *Weisheng zhenjue* and *Chifeng sui* look slim, which implies the practitioner is neither an athlete nor a martial artist, but a member of the literati gentry. In contrast, the male model in the *Wuche bajin* appears more unkempt and wild. It suggests that household almanacs have their unique visual style in representation and are different from the monographs on health maintenance. To explain such differences, I suggest that *daoyin* as a healing art should be contextualised in the publication and marketing of *yangsheng* books. I shall return to this issue later.

**The Eight Brocades**

The ‘Eight Brocades’ refers to eight sets of exercise for self-cultivation. Literally, it means eight sections of colourful texture. The ‘Eight Brocades’ was no
Fig. 2. The ‘Tiger Mime’ in the Chifeng sui
less popular than the ‘Five Animal Mimes’ in late imperial China. Although it was not recorded until the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), the ‘Eight Brocades’ might have been practised much earlier.

The renowned jotting book Yijian zhi 夷堅志 (The Record of the Listener, 1174) gives the first hint of the ‘Eight Brocades’, but neither instruction nor illustration is provided. Their detailed descriptions can only be traced back to the Daoshu 道樞 (Daoist Pivot) and the Xiuzhen shishu 修真十書 (Ten Books for Pursuing the Truth, 1250). Still, it is not clear when the illustrations of the ‘Eight Brocades’ initially emerged. In his Baosheng xinjian 保生心鑑 (Heart Mirror for Preserving Life, 1506), the author Hermit Tiefeng (tiefeng jüshi 鐵峰居士) made reference to the fact that he had seen the illustrations of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Huoren xinfa 活人心書 (Core Book for Saving Life, 1424). It is therefore plausible to assume that the illustrations of the ‘Eight Brocades’ had come into being probably in the fifteenth century and no later than 1506, the date of Baosheng xinjian.

The various versions of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in multiple late Ming texts suggest their popularity during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Their

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13 The author of Huoren xinfa is often attributed to one of the first Ming Emperor’s sons, Zhu Quan 朱權 (1378–1448). See Hermit Tiefeng (Tiefeng jüshi 鐵峰居士) 1988, p. 317; Zhu Quan (i.e. Hanxüzi 涵虛子) 1987, pp. 29–36. This Korean edition preserves certain illustrations of the ‘Eight Brocades’.
illustrations appeared in both yangsheng monographs and household almanacs.\(^{14}\)

For comparison, I will focus on four of the texts and see how the practice of ‘Eight Brocades’ is represented. In addition to Chi fang sui and Wuche bajin as mentioned above, I will add Gao Lian’s 高濂 Zunsheng bajian 遵生八牋 (Eight Discourses on Respecting Life, 1591) and Jiang Xüecheng’s 蔣學成 Zunsheng yaozhi 尊生要旨 (The Themes of Respecting Life, 1592) for further examination. To summarise the instructions of the ‘Eight Brocades’, all these texts except the Zunsheng yaozhi provide a verse as follows:

Close the eyes and sit with meditated mind,
Hold the palms and think of spirit quietly;
Clench the teeth thirty-six times,
Hold the kunlun 崑崙 with the hands;
Strike the left and right tiangu 天鼓,
Make the sound twenty-four times.\(^{15}\)

As it is not easy for all the readers to fully comprehend the meanings of this verse due to the Daoist jargons such as ‘kunlun’ (i.e. the head) and ‘tiangu’ (heavenly drums, i.e. the back of the head), the Zunsheng bajian goes further to detail the practice:

One must close the eyes, meditate, and squat. Put the thumbs under the other fingers, stay in calmness. Clench the teeth and stay in concentration; cross the hands on the nape, count to the ninth breath, without hearing one’s own breath. Then cover the ears with the palms; use the index finger to cross the middle finger, tap the back of the skull, right and left twenty-four times.\(^{16}\)

The comparison between these four texts also shows that the publication of the Zunsheng yaozhi and Wuche bajin are rather careless since they contain many typos. For example, the Zunsheng yaozhi wrongly transcribes the ‘middle’ (zhong 中) finger as the ‘ten’ (shi 十) fingers. Also, the Wuche bajin

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Fig. 4. The First Set of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
Fig. 5. The First Set of the 'Eight Brocades' in the Zunsheng bajian
transcribes ‘clenching the teeth’ (kouchi 叩齒) as ‘and teeth’ (er chi 而齒).\(^{17}\)

Clenching the teeth is Daoist jargon with reference to an act to expel the evil and enhance the teeth. The fact that the *Wuche bajin* contains such a typographical error suggests its inadvertent editing and careless typesetting.

On the illustrations of the ‘Eight Brocades’, the painting style in the *Zunsheng yaozhi* and the *Wuche bajin* are relatively simple and less elaborate than that in the *Chifeng sui* and the *Zunsheng bajian*. Furthermore, the male model in the *Wuche bajin* leaves his breasts and belly undressed; this image does not seem to be how a literary man should behave. (Figs 4–7)

In addition, the accessories for self-cultivation are also noteworthy. Although the verbal instructions of the ‘Eight Brocades’ do not specify what kinds of cushion should be used for the regimen, the *Zunsheng bajian* does elaborate on cushions in an individual chapter dealing with furniture and amenities for self-cultivation.\(^{18}\) It is thus not surprising to see the different cushions as illustrated in the *Chifeng sui* and *Zunsheng yaozhi*. (Figs 8–14) These exemplify the new sense of self-cultivation reformulated in terms of the late Ming material culture, which have been detailed elsewhere.\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) Chen 2009, pp. 29–45.
Fig. 7. The First Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the *Wuche bajin*
Fig. 8. The Second Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
Fig. 9. The Third Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
Fig. 10. The Fourth Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
Fig. 11. The Fifth Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
Fig. 12. The Sixth Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
Fig. 13. The Seventh Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sūi
Fig. 14. The Eighth Exercise of the ‘Eight Brocades’ in the Chifeng sui
The Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms

The regimen of the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’ is usually attributed to the renowned Northern Song Daoist Chen Tuan 陳摶 (?–989), also known as Chen Xiyi 陳希夷. What it attempts to stress is a set of gymnastic exercises governed by time.

People in China had long acknowledged the importance of time in the practice of regimen. Some of early yangsheng experts emphasised that the regimens for health maintenance should vary in different Seasons. That is, to cultivate the body differently according to the sequence of the Four Seasons (sishi 四時).20 Some other Chinese, in contrast, paid attention to the order of the Twelve Months when practising regimens. In any case, one should always do what one should do and never do what one should not do in different times.21

Apart from the seasons and months, many pre-modern scholars and hermits went further to highlight the role of the ‘twenty-four solar terms’ (ershisi jieqi 二十四節氣, lit. twenty-four period-qi) for health improvement. In the pre-modern Chinese calendars, a year could be divided into ‘twenty-four solar terms’. Each of the solar terms matches a particular astronomical event or signifies some natural phenomenon. This is particularly significant in the agrarian societies in which farmers always cultivated the farms according to the seasonal changes. Since the changes of both nature and human beings largely correspond to the calendar times, it is therefore important to strengthen the body and treat different diseases by gymnastic exercise in proper times. In short, the regimen of the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’ shows an old idea of microcosm-macrocosm correspondence, in which the

20 The thought that stressed the importance of Season sequence on self-cultivation can be found in the following works: the Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi neijing 黃帝內經, first century BCE to first century CE), The Book of Guiding (yinshu 引書, excavated from Zhangjiashan 張家山, present Hubei), Chiu Chuji’s 丘處機 the Treatise on the Information of Nourishing Life (shesheng xiaoxi lun 攝生消息論, 1287), Zou Xuan’s 鄒鉉 compiled New Book on Prolonging the Life of the Parents and the Aged (Shouqin yanglaol jin shu 蓄親養老新書, 1307), and Leng Qian’s 冷謙 Main Theme for Self-Cultivation (xiuling yaozhi 修齡要旨, 1442), etc.

21 The instructions for daily life based on the lunar calendar can be traced back to the early and mediaeval canons such as the Records of Rites (liji 禮記), Records of the Regions in the Years of Hunan and Hubei (jing chu suishi ji 荊楚歲時記) and The Precious Canon of Candles (yüzühu baoqian 玉燭寶典). This idea of time sequence was widely elaborated upon in the instructions for regimen. The renowned examples include Zhou Shouzhong’s 周守忠 Monthly Views of Nourishing Life (yangsheng yuelan 養生月覽, 1220), Jiang Tui’s 江遂 Monthly Record for Nourishing Life (yangsheng yuelu 養生月錄, 1276), Wei Xinggui’s 魏行規 Monthly Record of Preserving Life (baosheng yuelu 保生月錄, 1276), Yao Cheng’s 姚澄 Nourishing Life for the Seasons (shesheng yueling 攝生月令, and Qu You’s 曹佑 Suitable and Unsuitable Things for the Four Seasons (sishi yiji 四時宜忌, 1425), etc.
natural factors (e.g. seasonal changes and periodic qi) interact with human health and sickness.

To display the feature of the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’, I will focus on the works Baosheng xinjian (1506), Zunsheng bajian (1591) and Sancai tuhui 三才圖會 (Collective Illustrations of Heaven, Earth and Man, 1607), since they include not only the textual descriptions but also illustrations of the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’. The first of these serial exercises is entitled as the ‘Sitting exercise at the start of the spring and the first month’ (lichun zhengyuejie zuogong 立春正月節坐功). As the title suggests, this regimen should be practised at the beginning of a year when the new qi (chu qi 初氣) just emerges and the ‘circulatory phase’ (yün 運) falls on ‘reverting yin’ (jüeyin 厥陰). At the time, the bodily functions are largely governed by the Channel of the Hand Lesser yang (shou shaoyang 手少陽), which usually manifests itself by the ‘Fire’ of the organ ‘triple burners’ (sanjiao 三焦). If one suffers from pains of the neck and the shoulders, these symptoms will be easily cured by the exercises of massaging the hips, turning the trunk and the neck, clenching the teeth, controlling the breath and swallowing saliva particularly at midnight and at noon. (Figs 15–17).

In general, the written instructions in these three works look basically identical, while the styles of visual representations vary. In the Baosheng xinjian, the illustrations seem to be those of a manuscript; its style is rather sketchy and unsophisticated. Besides, the explanation in this illustration is shorter—it omits the detailed instructions for the exercise. In contrast, the visual style in the Zunsheng bajian is more aesthetic; the illustrations obviously accord with its author Gao Lian, who was renowned for his hermetic status and aesthetic taste. As for the Sancai tuhui, its illustrations are as pedestrian as those in other popular household almanacs. To explain the difference between the yangsheng monographs and household almanacs, as well as to estimate the illustrations in

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22 Hermit Tiefeng 1988, pp. 317, 323–31. According to the preface, the author had compiled this work partly based on his studies of earlier medical canons. It suggests that the practice of the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’ might have a longer history than the written record.

23 These ideas were probably inspired by the theory of wuyün liuqi 五運六氣 (The system of the five circulatory phases and the six seasonal influences) prevalent in late Imperial China. The theory suggests the mutual influence between seasonal changes, atmospheric evolutions and human illnesses. For details, see Despeux 2001, esp. pp. 134–5.

24 Hermit Tiefeng 1988, p. 324; Gao Lian 1988, juan 3, p. 97b; Wang Qi and Wang Siyi (eds) 1995, juan 10, p. 172a. It is worth noting that the verbal explanations in these texts are slightly different, possibly owing to the different source of transcription.

Fig. 15. The ‘Sitting exercise at the start of the spring and the first month’ in the *Baosheng xinjian*
Fig. 16. The ‘Sitting exercise at the start of the spring and the first month’ in the Zunsheng bajian
Fig. 17. The ‘Sitting exercise at the start of the spring and the first month’ in the Sancai tuhui

the visual transmission of yangsheng techniques, it seems necessary to return to the issue of the Ming visual culture as a whole.

Commercialising and popularising the body techniques

Recent surveys indicate that the increasing amount of pictorial illustrations in Ming publications was historically unprecedented. These illustrated editions all emerged in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Illustrations in particular abounded in technical manuals on agriculture, medicine, technology and household almanacs. No less remarkable are the works of literature—half of the late Ming fictions, including the renowned Xixiang ji 西廂記 (Romance of the West Chamber) and Sanguo yanyi 三國演義 (Romance of the Three
Kingdoms), were illustrated.26 The texts on techniques for health preservation were certainly not immune to this fever of visualisation.

There were two reasons for putting illustrations into the texts of health maintenance: commercialisation and popularisation. According to Craig Clunas, illustrations could reach a larger audience whose readers were semi-literate or even illiterate. Moreover, the illustrated texts appeared more entertaining than the simple texts, hence making them more competitive in the publication industry. As a result, illustrations often serve as a marketing strategy for commercial publication.27 Another survey also shows that late Ming booksellers and publishers were very sensitive to the market trend and reader taste. Such sensitivity had some bearing on the publication industry, especially on popular books like novels and dramas. It naturally pushed those editors and compilers to produce books in peculiar formats which would help to create ‘new reading publics’.28

Theoretically, the pursuit of profits should increase the use of illustrations as well as to improve their quality in book markets. Surprisingly, however, the late Ming publications were often scorned for their careless editing and crude reproduction. Take the yangsheng monographs discussed in this article for instance. Gao Lian published the Zunsheng bajian at his own cost. This book maintained better quality of publication because of Gao’s wealth and social networks. In contrast, the illustrations in the serial yangsheng monographs compiled by the book merchant Hu Wenhuan 胡文煥 can hardly be said to have any aesthetic and visual merits. It is also true in the case of the anonymous household almanacs printed in Fujian during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Despite their prompt production and wide circulation, their simple formats and poor printed quality were often criticised by later scholars.

A more specific comparison can be made on the illustrations of the ‘Eight Brocades’ between the Zunsheng bajian and the household almanac Wuche bajin. Both were published at the end of the sixteenth century. But the differences in their print quality and visual effect are obvious.29 (See Figs 5 and 7) By close examination, it also revealed the ‘mutual borrowing’ of both text and illustration between the different household almanacs. Popular household almanacs turned out to be of poor quality primarily because of their lower costs and cheaper prices. Hence, commercialisation and mass production do not necessarily lead to publications with high quality; rather, they may in effect backfire.

27 Clunas 1997, p. 34.
Comprehending the body techniques by illustrations

Apart from the visuality in the popularisation and commercialisation of yangsheng illustrations, another question to be raised would be: do the illustrations make the texts more comprehensible and readable?

To be sure, comprehensibility always depends on the context of the illustrations and the ways in which readers contemplate, read or gaze at the texts. Concerning the contexts of illustrations, I will again take the example of the healing exercises of daoyin. It is common that the typical daoyin illustrations offer neither background nor context; their emphasis is simply on the model’s external act itself. For instance, the first set of exercises of the ‘Eight Brocades’ includes clenching the teeth, concentrating, and tapping the back of one’s head. But the relevant illustrations show nothing except for the movement of putting one’s hands behind the head. (See Figs 4–7) The body represented in this way looks rather static. Other sets of exercises and their illustrations have the same characteristics. In short, these illustrations only demonstrate some particular steps, rather than the entire process of the regimen. What they provide is partial or supplementary information to the verbal and written instructions. Therefore, for the best results, these illustrations must be read in tandem with verbal instructions. It is impossible to practise the regimen by looking at the pictorial illustrations only.

Roel Sterckx has a similar view. In his survey of the animal illustrations in classic Chinese texts, Sterckx suggests two styles of illustrations across the transmitted corpus of the bencao (materia medica): one is performative and the other illustrative. In the former case, explanatory text captions are often subsidiary and serve to illustrate the images. In the latter, illustrative images would rather offer a type of annotation, supplement or commentary to the text. The illustrations of the bencao works in late imperial China were mainly illustrative; they have their own limits and hence cannot completely be substitutes for the texts.30 In my analysis, the texts on yangsheng techniques have something in common with that of bencao. Both of them differ greatly from the performance guides in our modern times. Despite the abundance of images, these texts were mainly for the literates and semi-literate, whether for reading or for contemplation. Needless to say, the illustrations in these texts helped to transmit the body techniques of daoyin and, as Despeux points out, were of assistance to education and memorisation.31

31 Despeux 2005, p. 10.
The influence of the late Ming illustrations of the gymnastic exercises is profound. Meir Shahar suggests that the late Ming period witnessed significant breakthroughs in Chinese martial arts. The Buddhist communities incorporated the Daoist gymnastic exercises into boxing training, and laid the foundation for Shaolin 少林, Taiji 太极, and Xingyi 形意 styles of boxing in the later ages. It is easy for us to find many similarities between the illustrations of Shaolin boxing in the Qing dynasty and the illustrations of self-cultivation in Daoist manuals. The similarities suggest that Daoist techniques of daoyin impacted on Shaolin martial arts in the Qing period. Such training was not just for combat, but also for illness prevention and self-cultivation. The amalgamation of martial arts, healing and spiritual training might be traced back to the trend of religious syncretism in the late Ming.32 In this regard, although the illustrations could not substitute for the words in the texts of health preservation, they do serve as an important clue for mapping the genealogy of Chinese martial arts and Daoist therapeutic exercises.

Oral transmission of the gymnastic exercises

The knowledge and techniques of yangsheng were probably first transmitted orally, given the numerous evidences of verses, song and maxims largely preserved in the surviving yangsheng texts. In the Chifeng sui, many verses on breath and daoyin techniques are recorded, such as the ‘Verse of six words for qi exercises in the supreme highness scroll’ (taishang yuzhou liuzi qi jüe 太上玉軸六字氣訣), ‘Mr Huanzhen’s verse for swallowing the inner qi’ (huanzhen xiansheng fu neiqi jüe 幻真先生服內氣訣), ‘Immortal Li’s esoteric verse of sixteen words for longevity’ (Li zhenren changsheng yishiliuzi miaojüe 李真人長生一十六字妙訣), ‘Song of the secrets of foetus breath’ (taixi miyao gejüe 胎息秘要歌訣), ‘Method of six words for reliving disease and prolonging life’ (qubing yannian liuzi fa’ 去病延年六字法), and ‘General verse of sleeping exercises at Mount Hua’ (huashan shier shuigong zongjüe 華山十二睡功總訣), etc.33 The Zunsheng bajian include other songs and verses, such as the ‘Verse of gymnastic exercise and massage in the true scripture of the Left Cave’ (zuodong zhenjing anmo daoyin jüe 左洞真經按摩導引訣) and the ‘Song of gymnastic exercise for dispelling disease’ (daoyin qüebing gejüe 導引卻病歌訣).34 In addition, there are some further songs

34 Gao Lian 1988, juan 9, pp. 272a–4b; juan 10, pp. 307a–10b.
The compilation of these verses and songs is mainly to help the readers remember better the yangsheng knowledge. In his *Leixiu yaojiu* 類修要訣 (Essential Verses for Self-Cultivation, 1592), for example, the compiler Hu Wenhuan explained that he only collected songs and verses of yangsheng which were ‘convenient for memorisation’.36

By examining the texts of yangsheng verses and songs, therefore, it is not difficult for one to imagine the following scenes. While practising the yangsheng exercises, the practitioner is more likely to recall from his memory the tips set in songs and verses, rather than opening and referring to the books in the midst of his practice. It is well acknowledged that the oral transmission of knowledge could reach a wider audience than written words, even in a period such as the late Ming when printing techniques and book publications had become prosperous. These oral mnemonics might facilitate not only one’s solo practice but also the transmission of knowledge from a master to a disciple.

Now, I will examine ‘Master Xiaoyao’s verse of daoyin’ (xiaoyaozi daoyin jüe 逍遙子導引訣) along with some maxims to exemplify the oral transmission of yangsheng techniques in the late Ming.

**Master Xiaoyao’s Verse of daoyin**

The ‘Master Xiaoyao’s verse of daoyin’ was well known in the Ming dynasty. The verse had initially been entitled the ‘Song of gymnastic exercise for dispelling disease’ in Leng Qian’s *Xiuling yaozhi* (1442), which was followed by Gao Lian’s *Zunsheng bajian* (1591).37 Most of the late sixteenth-century yangsheng monographs attribute it to Master Xiaoyao (xiaoyaozi 逍遙子), although we know nothing about his identity and lifespan.38 In *Fushou danshu* (1624), this verse is instead named the ‘Method for treating various diseases by regulating qi’ (tiao qi zhi zhubing fa 調氣治諸病法).39

The ‘Master Xiaoyao’s Verse of daoyin’ comprises instructions on 16 sets of gymnastic exercises; each of the exercises is summed up as a verse. What follow are the titles that summarise the contents of these exercises:

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36 Hu Wenhuan (ed.) 1988, p. 57b.


Table 1. The exercises of ‘Song of gymnastic exercise for dispelling disease’ (i.e. ‘Master Xiaoyao’s Verse of *daoyin*’) in Ming China\(^\text{40}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘shuichao chu houhuan’</td>
<td>When the mouth is full of tidal waves (i.e. saliva), it can dispel illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘huoqi de chang’an’</td>
<td>The rise of (<em>yang</em>) Fire (from the sole of foot up to the Brain then descending to the Cinnabar Fields) leads to long peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘mengshi feng jingui’</td>
<td>Seal the Golden Caskets (by massaging the abdomen and guiding qi into the Cinnabar Fields) to heal nocturnal emission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘xingshuai shou yuguan’</td>
<td>Guard the Jade Gate (of the Cinnabar Fields) to prevent from feeble appearance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘guhe xiao jiju’</td>
<td>Exhale and blow qi to relieve (the symptoms of) bloating abdomen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘douli zhi shanggan’</td>
<td>Hold the testicles and bend the head (with meditation) to cure Cold Damage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘kouchi ya wuji’</td>
<td>Clench the teeth (and swallow saliva) to prevent from illness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘shengguan bin buban’</td>
<td>Control the breath upward and downward to prevent from white hairs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘yunjing chu yanyi’</td>
<td>Turn the eyes round to remove cataracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘yaner qu touxuan’</td>
<td>Cover the ears with the palms to dispel dizziness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘tuota ying qing gu’</td>
<td>Raise the hands and stand still to strengthen the bones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘cuotu zi meiyian’</td>
<td>Massage the face with the hands (and saliva) to make it bright and smooth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘bimo tong zhiqi’</td>
<td>Hold the breath and do massage to break the stagnation of qi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘ningbao gu dantian’</td>
<td>Squat with meditation and concentration to enhance the Cinnabar Fields.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘dan shi neng duo bu’</td>
<td>Consume meals with light flavours to replenish the body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘wuxin de da huan’</td>
<td>Those who have tranquil mind finally attain the Truth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In general, what the ‘Master Xiaoyao’s Verse of daoyin’ involved include the exercises about: (1) how to swallow saliva, (2) how to manipulate the fire of yang, (3) how to retain the semen, (4) how to remain young, (5) how to deal with stasis, (6) how to treat cold diseases, (7) how to strengthen the teeth, (8) how to keep the hair dark, (9) how to have keen eyes, (10) how to heal dizziness, (11) how to solidify the bones, (12) how to beautify oneself, (13) how to circulate the stagnation of qi, (14) how to concentrate on the Cinnabar Fields (dantian 丹田) where the qi originates, (15) how to ingest insipid food for health, and (16) how to attain spiritual perfection. On the whole, the verse deals with the issues of disease prevention, health maintenance and longevity, as well as physical beauty. Its ultimate goal is certainly to attain spiritual perfection.

Although each of the gymnastic exercises in the ‘Master Xiaoyao’s Verse of daoyin’ is entitled, not all the readers can comprehend their contents immediately. Hence, the late Ming texts also record detailed instructions for their practice. Due to the restricted scope of this article, I will only take the initial two sets of exercises that refer to water (yin) and fire (yang) for further explanations.

According to the instruction for the first set of exercises, the practitioner should wake up at dawn, sit straight up and concentrate. He should raise his tongue against the upper gum, then the saliva naturally abounds. When the mouth is full of saliva, the practitioner should swallow a mouthful of saliva three times. Continual practice of this exercise will help reduce the evil fire, improve the circulation of qi and blood, and prevent diseases. The regimen is summarised by Master Xiaoyao in a poem: ‘the saliva is generated at the tip of the tongue; it was swallowed down to the inner field of essence; the saliva is smooth and sweet; the practice will help retain youth forever’.41 What is worth noting here is the significance of saliva. In Daoism, saliva is often called the ‘jade spring water’, the ‘jade liquid’, or the ‘mellifluous spring’. Its significance is emphasised in the ‘Eight Brocades’ and other monographs on yangsheng as well.42

In contrast to the first set of exercises associated with water that should be practised in the morning, the second set of exercises associated with fire should be practised at noon and at midnight. The practitioner should envision that some ‘True Fire’ (zhenhuo 真火) ascends from the bottom of the feet, to the back of the head, down through the middle between the eyebrows, and then descends into the lower abdomen. He should repeat this practice three

41 The original text is ‘津液頻生在舌端，尋常嗽嚥入丹田，於中暢美無凝滯，百日功靈可注顏.’ Xiaoyaozi 1987, pp. 3–4; Hu Wenhuan (ed.) 1988, p. 63b.
42 Zhou Lüjing 1987, pp. 68–9, 73.
times. The exercise stresses the importance of concentration and envisioning. The imagined ‘True Fire’ rises from the lower body to the upper body, and then descends. The circuit is said to guarantee ‘smooth circulation in the hundred vessels, to avoid stasis in the Five Viscera, to strengthen the limbs, and to help the hundred skeletons healthy’.\textsuperscript{43} The poem by Master Xiaoyao summarises this set of exercises roughly in this way: ‘One must know that the fire arises from the below; it then ascends to the head; the incessant circulation engenders stoutness—that is how the perfect immortals transform their bodies’.\textsuperscript{44}

Comparing the first and second sets of exercises—one about water (\textit{yin}) that goes down and the other about fire (\textit{yang}) that goes up—we may conclude that such a balanced regimen evinced a harmonious view of the ideal human body. By applying the techniques of meditation, envision, massage, breath manipulation, etc. to practice, such paired exercises would render the arcana of Daoist Inner Alchemy more comprehensible to the general audience.

\textit{Maxims of yangsheng knowledge}

There are many maxims about self-cultivation in the late Ming \textit{yangsheng} texts. Although the maxims are stylistically different from the verses and songs (as discussed above), their aims are quite identical. That is, they all attempt to help the practitioner understand and memorise the regimens more easily. Such strategies of re/presenting knowledge were particularly evident in popular health manuals and household almanacs. These maxims show how the \textit{yangsheng} techniques might be simplified and transmitted at the grassroots level.

Similar to the popular regimens of the ‘Five Animal Mimes’, the ‘Eight Brocade’, and the ‘Sitting Exercises of Qi for Twenty-four Solar Terms’, the \textit{yangsheng} maxims were also grouped by numbers. These maxims include the ‘Three Admonitions’ (\textit{san jie} 三戒) and the ‘Seven Prohibitions’ (\textit{qi jin} 七禁) attributed to the ancient sage Laozi, the ‘Fifteen Damages’ (\textit{shiwu shang} 十五傷) attributed to the mediaeval hermit Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–363), and the ‘Twelve Excesses’ (\textit{shier duo} 十二多) attributed to the physician Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581–682). What follow are three examples of the \textit{yangsheng} maxims entitled by numbers:

\textsuperscript{43} Hu Wenhuan (ed.) 1988, p. 63b; Xiaoyaozi 1987, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{44} The original text is ‘陽火須知自下生，陰符上降黃庭；周流不息精神固，此是真人大鍊形．’ See Hu Wenhuan (ed.) 1988, p. 63b; Xiaoyaozi 1987, p. 4.
### Table 2. Some Maxims of *yangsheng* in Ming China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Maxim</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Three Admonitions’ (san jie 三戒)</td>
<td>Do not covet wealth, or it will do you harm. Do not get drunk, or it will confuse your mind. Do not exhaust the body, or the <em>qi</em> and blood will be injured.</td>
<td>Laozi (laojün 老君)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Six Long’ (liu jiu 六久)</td>
<td>See long will injure the Heart and damage blood. Sit long will injure the Spleen and damage flesh. Sleep long will injure the Lungs and damage <em>qi</em>. Walk long will injure the Liver and damage tendons. Stand long will injure the Kidneys and damage the bones. Listen long will injure essence and damage the spirit.</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Twelve Excesses’ (shier duo 十二多)</td>
<td>Excessive joy injures blood. Excessive anger injures the vessels. Excessive laugh injures the organs. Excessive sorrow injures the Heart. Excessive thought leads to absent mind. Excessive happiness leads to dispersed <em>qi</em>. Excessive love leads to confusion. Excessive loathing leads to distress. Excessive worry leads to muddle head. Excessive pensiveness leads to un-concentrated mind. Excessive affairs lead to exhaustion of the body. Excessive talks consume the <em>qi</em>.</td>
<td>Immortal Sun 孫真人 (Sun zhenren)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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46 The original text is ‘一莫貪非財，恐傷汝身；二莫飲醉，恐亂汝性；三不得苦已勞形，恐傷榮衛’.

47 The original text is ‘久視傷心損血；久坐傷脾損肉；久臥傷肺損氣；久行傷肝損筋；久立傷腎損骨；久聽傷精損神’.

48 The original text is ‘多喜則傷血；多怒則傷脈；多笑則傷臟；多愁則傷心；多念則志散；多樂則氣溢；多愛則迷亂；多惡則憔悴；多憂則志昏；多思則神怠；多事則勞形；多言則耗氣’.
The maxims of the Ming yangsheng techniques listed above deal with the cultivation of both body and spirit. The cultivation of the body subsumes the regimens of external body, such as the head, face, torso, hands, feet, teeth, hair and ears, and the regimens of internal body, such as the liver, heart, spleen, lungs, kidneys, bones, marrow, semen and qi. The cultivation of spirit accentuates the ways to discipline and pacify one’s mind. The regimens of self-cultivation touch various facets of life such as diet, sleep, speech and sex. The maxims as simple tips were meant to disseminate the yangsheng knowledge to the general public and to be practised in daily life.

The popularity of yangsheng verses, songs and maxims suggests a gradual diversion from the religious traditions in the late Ming. The general populace might not be aware of the original implications of clenching the teeth and swallowing the saliva (both in Daoist practices), but the maxims could help them get the gist of yangsheng techniques easily. As Angela Leung points out, the knowledge of pharmaceutics, diagnostics of the vessel, acupuncture and moxibustion was often written down in verses and adages in the medical introductory works in Ming-Qing China. These verses and proverbs were aimed at the adult reader’s training, edification, memorisation and tests. Although the songs, verses and maxims of yangsheng techniques were not for the sake of examinations, they were nonetheless inseparable from the expansion of education and popularisation of knowledge ever since the late Ming period.

Conclusion

This article examines the visualisation and the oral transmission of yangsheng techniques in the late Ming period. Pictures abounded in the Ming publications, and most illustrations of the yangsheng techniques were about the gymnastic exercises of daoyin. Some scholars believe that the abundance of illustrations was due to the fierce competition in the publication industry and book marketing. In fact, these illustrations not only commercialised but popularised the arcana of daoyin techniques. Yet, as this article attempts to emphasise, the visual representations were subsidiary to the written texts in the transmission of health-preserving techniques. Without verbal instructions it seems impossible to fully comprehend the illustrations, as well as to precisely practise the regime.

Songs, verses and maxims reveal another dimension of the dissemination of the yangsheng knowledge. The transmission of traditional Chinese therapeutic

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49 Leung 2003, pp. 130–52.
and gymnastic exercises had initially relied on oral communication rather than on written texts. Even in the late Ming when there was a surfeit of books on health maintenance, the songs and adages still played a pivotal role in popularising the knowledge—perhaps even more far-reaching than most publications. A modern example of oral transmission is the practice of the Taiji Quan: most Chinese practitioners nowadays still acquire this regimen, not by reading texts nor by viewing pictures, but from living masters.

In conclusion, the visual and oral evidence displayed in this article points to two features of the late Ming discourses on health maintenance: popularisation and simplification. The new representations of the yangsheng techniques diversified the narratives of health maintenance which had been established by early masters. This transformation witnessed different social contexts and the changing meanings of the yangsheng techniques through the ages.

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