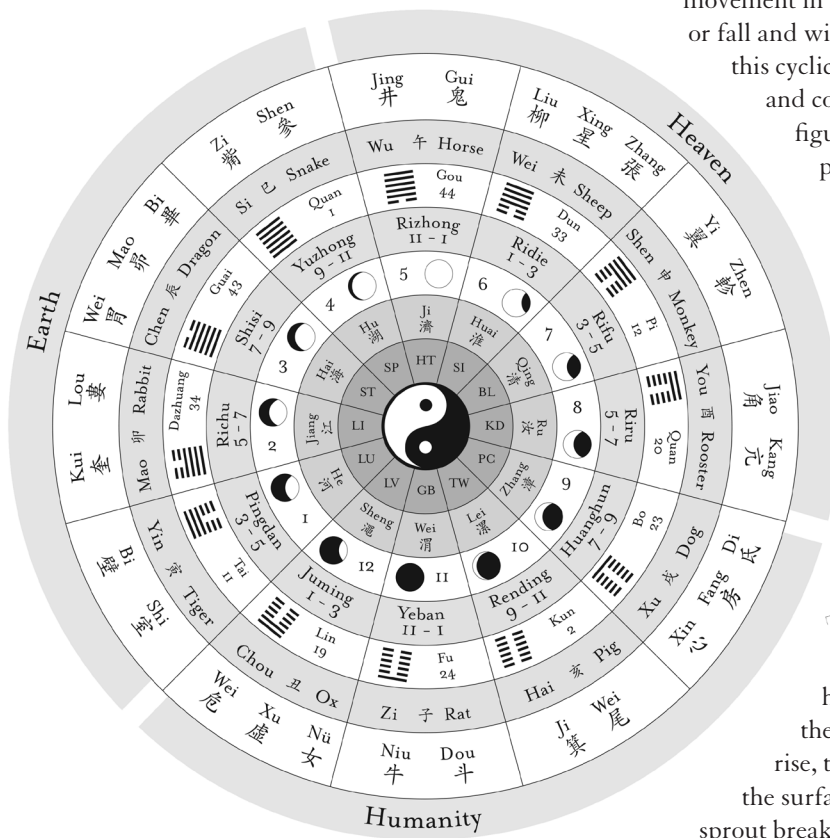


A Classical Chinese Medicine Perspective on the Nature of Aging and Longevity

An Exploration of the Functions of the Heart, Small Intestine, Bladder, and Kidney Networks Through the Lens of Their Respective Symbol Categories

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

One of the most common references in this system of symbolic representation of energetic forces, utilized specifically by the earthly branches, is the image of plant growth. When cosmic energy is in a state of hibernation, all plants hibernate below the ground; when the energy begins to rise, the growing seedling pushes against the surface; when the energy pushes on, the sprout breaks through the ground; when the energy expands further, the plant rapidly spreads out its stems and leaves; when the energy stabilizes at its climax of expansion in summer, plant growth stops and all activity turns inward, creating flavor and blossoms and seeds; when the energy contracts, the leaves and the fruit begin to droop and fall to the ground; and when, finally, the energy withdraws to a state of complete storage again, all plant life retreats below the surface of the earth. The phenomenon of aging is likened to



the contracting phase of the life force in nature—an inward ripening process resulting in a bountiful harvest, and the maturation and dissemination of the seeds of wisdom.

Against the backdrop of these cosmological considerations, the ancient Chinese story of aging and dying is without negative connotation, just as the seasons of fall and winter do not compare unfavorably to spring and summer. Since the ancient pictogram for winter represents the image of a bottled-up sun, a paraphrased interpretation of the Chinese term *dong* (winter) could be “where the movement of the sun comes to an end by going into storage, so that the cycle of life can continue once again.” The story of aging, therefore, is about the evolution toward a state of inner enlightenment and eventual rebirth, and the associated spiritual journey of surrendering all attachment to material possessions, including the youthful predilection for the vigor and prowess of the physical body.

Certain sources have described the active yang phase of this universal movement as *shen* 伸 (stretching out) and the passive yin phase as *gui* 歸 (returning inward), definitions that later merged with the homophonic mythopoeia *shen* 神 (solar light spirits) and *gui* 鬼 (nocturnal lunar demons). While the connotations of the latter generally invite the common bias toward the dynamic aspects of youth on one hand and prejudice against the outward decline of old age on the other, its original message is clearly impartial: all existence in the universe remains equally balanced between the processes of light and dark, active and passive, spring(ing up) and fall(ing down), and male and female. From this perspective, aging is likened to the reflective quality of the moon and the distinctly feminine quality of “letting be,” as opposed to the withdrawal into the dimming lights of “hell” portending impotence and senility.¹ It is important to note in this context that the Chinese term for demon connotes an inappropriate attachment to the realm

of the corporeal, describing the “ghost” of an overly attached ego that keeps hovering above the haunts of the physical body after death. If, by extension, someone in the letting-go phase of life stays farcically attached to the appearance of youth, s/he would take on the qualities of a ghost-like existence.

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

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

Turning Point: The Heart

The Chinese term for heart also means center. The 5th lunar month represents the center of the year, where

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

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

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

of the famous root underlie its common affiliation with the heart, the blood, and the gender primarily associated with the metabolism of blood and hormones. The classical record prescribes that conscious aging initiates heart cultivation, which in turn nurtures the sacred female inside, the holy grail of yin blood that contains yang spirit. Continuing in this vein, the hexagram that captures the energetic state of the summer solstice (hexagram 44) identifies the heart as *Gou* 姤 (The Queen), a reflection of Mother Nature herself.

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

Retreat: The Small Intestine

The mythological markers surrounding the organ system associated with the 6th lunar month and the after-noon time segment of 1-3 PM resume the theme of drawing inward. The associated tidal hexagram *Dun* (hexagram 33) is most often translated as Retreat, and the term *xiaochang* 小腸 (small intestine) itself can be interpreted as "the organ that functions like the sun's withdrawal into the earth." The earthly branch marking this position, *Wei* 未 represents the image of a tree with a double layer of foliage, signifying the gradual darkening of the retreating light in late summer or early afternoon. In China, this is the time of the monsoon season and the after-lunch nap, and, in the context of our investigation, the place where the afternoon of life fully begins.

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

The central theme evoked by the archetypal image of Mt. Song, however, is the phenomenon of ancestor worship and sacrifice. An older version of the mountain range’s name can be translated as Mt. Ancestor Sanctuary. Furthermore, its peak Taishi (Ancestral Hall) shares its name with the ceremonial center of the ancestral temple at the dynastic court. Recent archeological excavations have unearthed evidence that for over 7,000 years, Mt. Song has been a major sacrificial site viewed as the “belly button” center of the Chinese world where the umbilical connection to the ancestral realm could be ritually maintained. The natural setting of Mt. Song and other sites of ancestral worship was later institutionalized at the dynastic court of the Zhou Dynasty in the establishment of the Ancestral Temple, a conception often attributed to the legendary King Wen. The primary function of the temple’s Ancestral Hall was the execution of the ancestral rites, as well as the containment of the sacred books mandating and detailing those rites, notably the *Yueling* (Lunar Mandates) chapter of the *Liji* (Book of Rites).⁸

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

The Five Sacred Peaks were traditional places of hermitage where cultivating adepts sought inner peace. Chinese cultural etiquette used to encourage a voluntary withdrawal into such places at the height of one’s career. Just at the moment of temptation to reach higher and higher levels of rank, fame, and fortune, traditional wisdom deemed it appropriate for the successful official to retreat for a lengthy sabbatical. Mt. Song, specifically, became the prototypical emblem for this sacrificial retreat in the afternoon of life. Chinese mythological sources report, for instance, that this is the place where the humble emperor Yu retreated to avoid the wrath of Shun’s son, and where an extensive network of caves forms the legendary entrance to a dusky underworld.⁹

On a microcosmic scale, the story of the small intestine mirrors the themes of humility, retreat, sacrifice, and universal knowing. As the “government” (*fu*) of the heart, and associated with the constellation Leo above and the City of the Sun below, the functional

atmosphere of the small intestine resembles the fire of late summer—radiant, yet acutely aware of its waning momentum. The cave passages of Mt. Song mirror the anatomical manifestation of the small intestine system, which lies beneath the belly button and snakes itself toward the underworld of the human body. Furthermore, chapter eight of the medical classic states that “the small intestine is the official who knows to fully receive and then sacrifice.”¹⁰

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

Fall: The Bladder

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

indicator for the proper posture of aging. The bladder channel, appropriately, envelops and governs the spine.

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

The Chinese term for bladder, *pangguang* 膀胱, was originally written 旁光 or 方光 in early renditions, meaning ferry light, border light, or bed chamber light. The reading of ferry light refers to the bladder’s main task of ferrying *jing* (vital essence) up the spine to produce *shen* (spirit). Even the *jinye*, “the fluids stored by the bladder,”¹² should not be viewed as a form of urine (slated to go down and out), but must be understood in close association with the nature and momentum of *jing* (slated to go up). *Jinye*, interpreted in most literal fashion, means “ferrying night liquid (bound to transform the black essence of the lower burner into the daylight of *shen* after a boat ride up the spine).” Typical age related conditions such as spermatorrhea or dribbling urination are signs of bladder pathology, indicative of the life essence leaking downward rather than moving upward to produce the seeds of wisdom and enlightenment.

The notion of the “border light” organ refers to the bladder’s function of guarding and adorning the body’s surface with the hormonal glow of prenatal essence. Just as nature lights up in fall and afternoon, efficiently displaying the force of its waning light on the surface, so the healthy bladder process produces a glimmer of brightness in the eyes, face, and heart of the aging

protagonist. In addition, the experienced guardedness of age can bring the potential of reduced sickness in comparison with younger people. On the pathological side of the spectrum, however, older people tend to be more often afflicted by *taiyang* bladder disease during flu epidemics in fall and winter, a result of surface invasion caused by a breach of bladder function.

The terminology of the bladder being a “bed chamber light organ” alludes to the pair of side rooms flanking the king’s bedchamber, *fang* 房, framing the center just like the double line of the bladder channel runs alongside the spine. The adjacent rooms were traditionally occupied by concubines of the king. This connotation of the bladder’s name makes reference to its command of *yang qi* during sexual activity, the bodily feat that expends more prenatal essence and energy than any other. In keeping with the developing story line that it is the mandate of autumn to stretch out *jing* and harvest *shen*—the



earthly branch of this position, Shen 申, in one early version drawn as a picture of two hands stretching a spine, is a precursor of *shen* 神 (spirit)—the theme of tantric cultivation features prominently for this season of life. Ancient Chinese longevity classics generally suggest to moderate sexual activity for people over sixty. Alternatively, they recommend to observe strict instructions as transmitted by some of the core teachings of tantric Daoism and Buddhism. These type of practices, in a non-religious context often synthesized under the term *fangzhongshu* 房中術 (bed chamber arts), generally involve the accumulation of sexual energy that is preserved rather than released, utilizing pelvic contraction techniques, and guided up the spine for the purpose of “enlightenment.” Note that urination and ejaculation are controlled by tightening the same muscles of the perineum. The *Neijing*, therefore, defines the bladder as *zhoudu zhi guan* 洲都之官 (Official of the Perineum),¹³ a title that by virtue of the homophonic relationship of the terms *zhou* 洲 (perineum) and *zhou* 舟 (boat) and *zhou* 周 (cycle) can

also be translated as Official of the (Upstream) Boat (Ride) Harbour, or Official of the Microcosmic Orbit. The concept of tantric cultivation also resonates in the tidal hexagram associated with the bladder position, Pi (hexagram 12: The Saying No), as well as two other hexagrams related to this position in a specific system of Han dynasty *Zhouyi* application, notably Heng (hexagram 32: The Everlasting) and Jie (hexagram 60: The Holding Back). According to the *Yijing* expert Frank Fiedeler, all make clear reference to the sexual longevity practice of *coitus reservatus*.¹⁴ Hexagram 12, specifically, expresses the phenomenon of conception through the archetype of solar and lunar conjunction the female process of encapsulation and self-fertilization, facilitated by a process of female (yin)



preservation rather than a male (yang) ejaculation of source essence. The original pictogram for Pi is the image of a plant root squeezing its essence upwards to form seeds, fruit, and stamen. Pi is also the ancient name for Cheqiancao (Plantago), one of the primary herbs in the Chinese *materia medica* to benefit proper urination, spinal problems, and sexual function in elderly men.

Just as the forces of the 7th lunar month are in charge of the production of “white dew,” therefore, the bladder governs the closing of the perineum in order to ascend the lunar milk of kidney essence to the heart and head via the spine. The quality of this essence is often compared to the delicate and mysterious nature of jade. The River Qing, associated with the bladder channel in the *Neijing*,¹⁵ is said to be laden with jade.¹⁶ It emerges from Mt. Kunlun, often described as the macrocosmic lower *dantian* of China situated in the barren regions of the Northwest—filled with secret treasures, surrounded by strange beasts, and forming a natural wall that traditionally protected central China from invasion by the Northern horse tribes. Mt. Kunlun is also the location of the mythical “ladder to the sky,” where according to Chinese mythological sources many emperors ascended to Heaven. The prenatal streams

of sperm, menstrual blood or urine thus emerge from the lower *dantian* of the body just like the River Qing emerges from Mt. Kunlun. The names of the acupuncture points BL 60, Kunlun (Mt. Kunlun), and BL 43, Gaohuang (Jade Grease Membrane), further reflect this allegorical relationship between the bladder channel system and China's mythical jade treasury. Chinese medical books, furthermore, occasionally make reference to the bladder as Yuhai—the Sea of Jade.¹⁷

Similar to the body's prenatal essence administered by the water organs, jade has always been considered to be a mystical substance associated with the qualities of beauty, wisdom, and longevity. During the Han dynasty, many a craftsman was busy outfitting the mummified corpses of the nobility with suits meticulously fashioned from jade discs. Along with jade plugs that were inserted into the nine orifices, such suits were believed to preserve the body forever. Bladder function in Chinese medicine, therefore, can be described quite graphically through the allegory of the jade suit: like the plugs, the bladder is supposed to keep vital essence from leaking out; like the discs, it is supposed to keep invaders from coming in, as well as endow the body surface with a shimmer of beauty; and like the entire outfit, it is supposed to promote the longevity of the physical body. Even in modern China, elderly people knowledgeable in the art of nourishing life often rub their face with jade objects in order to make it soft, shiny, and wrinkle free.

The story of the bladder and its crucial role in the processes of aging and longevity is thus inextricably intertwined with the kidney's *jing*. In Chinese medicine, *jing* is regarded as the essence of eternal youth, similar to recent Western medicine insights about the anti-aging activities of certain sex hormones. The Chinese character for youth reads *qing* 青, composed of two parts that together mean “that which is generated from the *dantian*.” At the same time this word signifies green, normally the color of wood and spring, but here appearing in the metal context of everlasting green jade. Many characters in the etymological word field of the bladder position contain this element: *jing* 精 (essence), the Stuff of Youth, generated by the lower *dantian*; Qing 清, the River of Youth, laden with jade-like essence; *jing* 睛 (as in the acupuncture point name BL 1, Jingming), the Eye of Youth, brightened by prenatal essence; and

qing 圜 (toilet), the Treasury of Youthful Distillate, documenting the insight of many ancient medical traditions that urine contains valuable physiological essences such as antibodies, hormones, and enzymes that are utilized in another domain of esoteric longevity cultivation, urine therapy.¹⁸

Last but not least, a look at the two stellar constellations that mark this position in the zodiac corroborates the themes introduced above. The constellation Yi (Wings), signifying the wings of the heavenly phoenix, is said to govern *yuanqi* (source essence qi). The constellation Zhen (Axis) represents the turning point of a cart, driving the evolutive wheel movement of a celestial spine. It governs protection from wind invasion, and contains the star clusters Gao (Cart Wheel Grease), a macrocosmic counterpart of the acupuncture point BL 43, and Changsha (Everlasting Fleck), associated in Han dynasty astrological manuals with fate and longevity.¹⁹

Just as fall is the quintessential season of aging, the bladder appears cast in the role of the principal longevity network. In a spiritual sense, the ancient record describes this point in space-time as the facilitator of mystic cultivation and evolution, characterizing it as the monk or nun stage of life when a process of self-fertilization takes place. In a physical sense, it is the gatekeeper, preserving the vital essence of life as synthesized by the early 20th century master physician Zhang Xichun:

The *Neijing* chapter *Shanggu tianzhen lun* (On Safeguarding Prenatal Energy in Most Ancient Times) states that the self-realized masters of the past understood and thus controlled the quintessential forces of the universe; that they were able to hold on to it without leaking it, just as if they were carrying a substance; that they could continually breathe in more universal essence, in order to supplement this fundamental force and keep it strong; that they mobilized extraordinary internal focus to congeal it; and finally, that due to all these skills, they were able to change the qualitative make-up of their bodies, returning their flesh and muscles to a youthful state and thus live forever. ... The chapter *Siqi tiaoshen lun* (Treatise on Regulating the Shen in Accordance With the Climatic Atmospheres of the Four Seasons) states, furthermore: “Keep

your aspirations concealed and stored away, as if entertaining private thoughts that have already been fulfilled.”... “Concealed and stored away” refers to the process of enticing the heart fire to move downwards; “as if entertaining private thoughts” refers to the process of enticing the heart fire downwards to mate with the kidney, which produces a sensation of pleasure and fulfillment. It is by this sentence that the Daoist practice of systematically playing with infants and joining with beautiful women must have been inspired. The words “already fulfilled” refer to the process of prolonged accumulation of true yang in the lower *dantian*, causing the source essence to become strong and exuberant, while at the same time staying for good in the region behind the belly button. Isn’t this indeed self-fulfillment, and one, for once, that lasts and won’t evaporate?²⁰

If the cultivational mandate of the fall season is not executed, a wide variety of *taiyang* bladder symptoms may manifest: cold neck and back, hunched spine, atrophied brain, poor immunity, dribbling urination, “cold” (thin and clear) urine or sperm, impotence, memory loss, inability to say “no,” inability to think clearly, inability to keep secrets, inner eye disease, root (genital) disease, head (orifice and brain) disease—in sum, the tell-tale pathology of aging.

Sunset: The Kidney

The point marked by the autumnal equinox during the 8th lunar month continues to develop many of the age related themes introduced in the bladder section. While nature was bowing during the preceding period, it is now performing a full-body prostration. This is harvest time when all fruit and grain is falling down, from the top of the plants to the earth. But rather than signaling a final and irrevocable end to the process of life, the ancient sorghum or rice harvest marked the beginning of the alchemical work of blending substance with “spirit.” This interpretation is illuminated by the relevant earthly branch You 酉, representing a jug of wine. The process of alcoholic fermentation is used to symbolize the time when the life force becomes preserved in a sealed jug, the point of the fall equinox and sunset when the myriad manifestations of the material world return to their original essence. In this process, the ritual kowtow performed by nature is a prerequisite for spirit to enter.

The result of the alchemical procedure, alcohol, in turn has the potential of turning into an instrument for the ceremonial facilitation of surrender.

Against this macrocosmic backdrop, the sunset of life appears equivalent to a state of ripeness and maturity that requires harvesting and fermentation, often in the hermetically sealed environment of spiritual retreat. Under these conditions, the kaleidoscope of life’s myriad events becomes simplified and reveals its essence. At the twilight of the autumnal equinox, as stated repeatedly in classical commentaries describing this time, “the ten-thousand phenomena divulge their symbolic nature, observable through the inner eye of wisdom.”²¹ The associated tidal hexagram Guan (hexagram 20: Observing With the Inner Eye), which is referenced in this remark, is conveying the state of awakening to big picture consciousness. Just like the minutiae of things blur at dusk and detail oriented perception wanes in old age, accompanied by the realization of a larger and more sacred sense of reality, Guan characterizes an initiation into the awe of beholding the interconnectedness of life. The line text of hexagram 20 reads: “Beholding (in the twilight of the ancestral temple): the ritual ablution facilitating connection to spirit, not the details of the ceremony; this brings about the state of deep surrender.”²²

Altogether, the themes of inner sight and surrender feature prominently in the story of the kidney. The character for kidney itself, *shen* 腎 literally means “the organ that is in charge of executing *chen* 臣



kowtowing).” The 2nd century character dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* (Definitions of Simple and Complex Pictograms) defines the term *chen* as “acting with a noose around one’s neck; an image of a person who prostrates himself in a state of complete surrender to his master.”²³ Many ancient systems for the development of inner sight involve the practice of prostration postures, where the pressure of the floor

stimulates the forehead or “third eye,” creating the potential for internal vision. The animal symbol for this position, moreover, is the chicken (*ji* 雞), a bird of sacrifice characterized by the character *xi* 奚, originally the image of a prisoner with a rope around his neck. In a larger sense all birds are symbols for this position, especially the owl, since a literal analysis of the hexagram name Guan yields the meaning of “seeing with the eyes of an owl.” The owl symbol makes reference to the circumstance that the advent of dusk requires the ability to see in the dark, a way of seeing that is completely different from daylight perception. This mode of seeing is more like listening, the domain of the kidney, further illustrated by the anatomical feature that owls carry their ears virtually in their eyes and thus literally observe their environment by listening into the shadow world of fall and winter and dusk and night. The outward appearance of the owl, moreover, is characterized by “feathered horns” and the absence (or all-encompassing presence) of a neck—the former an indication of the soft “water” strength of this animal, and the latter a physical representation of the lack of stubbornness, fear and other attachments of the ego. Fittingly, the stellar constellations associated with the 8th month and the kidney are labeled Jiao (Horns) and Kang (Neck), both traditionally classified as longevity stars. An owl may be all horns and neck, but completely devoid of the rigid properties that are traditionally associated with these body parts. The longevity instruction of the ancient record thus becomes: Be like an owl when reaching the state of advanced age; surrendered yet determined, without fear, without stubbornness, without ego. The posture of sticking out unyielding horns in the push of rebellious belligerence, or of sticking out one’s neck in the ambitious pursuit of “becoming somebody” or “wanting to be seen” are deemed appropriate characteristics for the spring of life, but not for the diametrically opposed phase of old age.

The owl’s ominous strength and determination is reflected in the fact that it is a bird of prey, “taking prisoners” by capturing the eggs of other birds. Analogous to the main function of the kidney system, the owl thus appears as an enforcer of spiritual law, bringing about the act of surrender and letting go at the threshold of darkness. Of the many ancient Chinese names for this bird, a prominent designation is *funiao* (Bird of Surrender), referring both to its own state of being as well as to that of its victims. As a creature that

cherishes the darkness of night, the owl was viewed by ancient cultures not only as a symbol for the dignified looks of old age, but also as an ominous harbinger of the grim reaper of death. On a deeper level, however, ancient folk mythology always honored the owl as a bird of wisdom, who knows a deep truth that others fear—that night is the prerequisite for day and rebirth, for instance, and that embracing darkness and death brings true enlightenment.

In other words, the owl motif represents just the state of consciousness that classical virtue encourages one to embrace at the sunset of life. Han dynasty literature features an excellent demonstration of this circumstance in Jia Yi’s prose poem *Funiao fu* (The Owl Ballad):

The year was tan-wo ... at sunset, when an owl
alighted in my house.
On the corner of my seat it perched, completely
at ease.
I marveled at the reason for this uncanny
visitation
And opened a book to discover the omen. The
oracle yielded the maxim:
“When a wild bird enters a house, the master is
about to leave.”
I should have liked to ask the owl: Where am I
to go?
If lucky, let me know; if bad, tell me the worst.
Be it swift or slow, tell me when it is to be.
The owl sighed; it raised its head and flapped its
wings
But could not speak—Let me say what it might
reply:
All things are a flux, with never any rest
Whirling, rising, advancing, retreating;
Body and breath do a turn together—change
form and slough off,
Infinitely subtle, beyond words to express.
From disaster fortune comes, in fortune lurks
disaster
Grief and joy gather at the same gate, good luck
and bad share the same abode.
...
The Great Man is not biased, the million
changes are all one to him.
The stupid man is bound by custom, confined as
though in fetters;
The Perfect Man is above circumstance, Tao is

his only friend.
 The mass man vacillates, his mind replete with
 likes and dislikes;
 The True Man is tranquil, he takes his stand
 with Tao.
 Divest yourself of knowledge and ignore your
 body, until, transported,
 you lose self
 Be detached, remote, and soar with Tao.
 Float with the flowing stream, or rest against
 the isle,
 Surrender to the workings of fate, unconcerned
 for self,
 Let your life be like a floating, your death like a
 rest.²⁴

The owl's advice, summarizing the energetic conditions of sunset, reflects an attitude of inner strength that aptly characterizes the kidney system in Chinese medicine. In the *Neijing's* defining chapter on organ function, the kidney is described as “the official in charge of firmness,”²⁵ and its associated spirit is identified as *zhi* (will power). Like the owl's disposition, both of these qualities reflect the soft yet powerful nature of the kidney element water: soft and surrendered on the outside, but firm and determined on the inside. The term for firmness itself, *qiang* 強, leaves no doubt about the type of strength it reflects—it represents the image of a creeping worm. In the typical multi-dimensional fashion of symbolic discourse, this character also contains the aspect of kidney and age related pathology. If pronounced *jiang*, it comes to connote stiffness, rigidity, and the inability to yield to the natural flow of events. “While mastering others requires force,” elaborates the *Daodejing*, “mastering the self needs true strength.”²⁶

Another recurrent note sounded of at the moment of sunset is the theme of lineage and transmission. The graphic noose around the prisoner's neck is woven of the human realization that we are connected to the core essence of the universe through a concrete line of succession reaching all the way down to us, one loop at a time. Physically, it manifests in the form of genetic information, such as the determining strands of DNA. Most important to the ancient observer, however, was the recognition and ritual affirmation of tribal lineage, such as the identity of being part of a specific ancestral line, or the distinction of belonging to an exclusive school of knowledge. In a social context, this sense of

lineage is transmitted by the elders of the tribe, while in the microcosm of the human body it is governed by the kidney. The kidney, therefore, is recognized as the master of prenatal essence, reflecting the physical fact that the dissemination and application of genetic information is managed by this organ network. This, as well as a more general sense of kidney involvement in the functions of source connection



and source transmission is expressed in the color label of the water element, *xuan* 玄 (black, mysterious); a character originally depicting silken threads weaving a mysterious connection to the source.

The status of old age thus becomes both the transmitter as well as the object of ancestor worship, especially in the context of divine lineage. The best example for this phenomenon may be the mythical Emperor Shun, one of the three demigod rulers of the Golden Age of Antiquity and clearly a deliberate archetype for the space-time position of the 8th month. According to a variety of mythological sources, Shun was born as a bird, endowed with double pupils. After his death, his grave was protected by elephants and aggressive birds of prey, some of which also appear in accounts of the fierce beasts guarding legendary Mt. Kunlun. His father was named Gu Sou (Blind Man), and one of his half-brothers was named Xiang (Elephant). He used elephants to toil the fields at Lishan (Mt. Time), known as an “observatory of symbolic images.” During his life, Shun emerged unscathed from many moral trials, including alcohol poisoning. He gained the reputation of China's prototypical filial son, refusing to rebuke his father despite his attempts to murder him. Due to his virtues, he was picked as the successor to the mandate of Heaven by Emperor Yao, passing over his heir Dan Zhu—known for his sexual excesses—and nine other sons in favor of Shun, just like Shun himself later passed over his nine sons in favor of the more pious and capable Yu.²⁷

In conclusion, the mythopoeic method of aligning

macrocosm and microcosm reveals not only the true nature of the Chinese organ networks, but also how to live in perfect harmony with the movements of the universe at each stage of the cycle of life.

Endnotes

¹ Note that similarly to the Chinese term “demon,” the Western term “hell” also stems from feminine, lunar, earth-linked roots that were originally devoid of negative judgment: Hel is the name of the Nordic Earth goddess.

² Laozi daodejing chapter 33, in Baizi quanshu (A Compendium of Writings By All Ancient Masters), vol. 8 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin, 1984), no page numbers.

³ See chapters 11, 34, and 41 of the *Huangdi neijing lingshu*; in *Huangdi suwen lingshu jizhu* (An Annotated Collection of the Yellow Emperor’s Simple Questions and Spiritual Pivot), in Hu Daojing, ed., *Daozang* (A Repository of Daoist Writings), 36 vols. (Shanghai: Wenwu, 1994), vol. 21, p. 406, 421, 425.

⁴ See Sun Xiaochun and Jacob Kistemaker, *The Chinese Sky During the Han* (Brill: Leiden, 1997), p.160.

⁵ The Chinese medicine networks of lung, large intestine, stomach, and spleen inherently form a four item unit, defined by the intertwined pairing of lung/large intestine (metal) and spleen/stomach (earth) in the five phase element system, and lung/spleen (taiyin) and large intestine/stomach (yangming) in the six confirmation system of diagnosis. The remaining eight organ networks form two similar units, producing a clearly defined trinity of organ groups: Earth (lung, large intestine, stomach, and spleen: organs that generate, store, and metabolize post-natal qi to maintain physical functions, such as breathing and eating), Heaven (heart, small intestine, bladder, and kidney: organs that generate, store, and metabolize pre-natal jing and shen to maintain mental and spiritual functions, such as wisdom and clarity of thought), and Humanity (pericardium, triple warmer, gallbladder, and liver: organs that generate, store, and move blood to maintain emotional functions, such as love and fear of death).

⁶ Jiao Yanshou’s version of the divinatory classic features $64 \times 64 = 4096$ essential poems for every possible transmutation of an *Yijing* reading, allowing for the possibility that every hexagram can turn into any other

hexagram, including itself. The cited poem is the reading of hexagram 33 turning into hexagram 33. See Jiao Yanshou, *Jiao shi yilin* (Master Jiao’s Forest of Symbols Interpreting the *Yijing*), in Hu Daojing, ed., *Daozang*, vol. 36, p.183.

⁷ *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chapter 70; in Ma Shi, *Huangdi neijing suwen zhuzheng fawei* (An Annotated Edition and In-Depth Analysis of the Yellow Emperor’s Simple Question Section of the Medical Classic), (Beijing: Renmin Weisheng, 1998), p. 505.

⁸ See the chapter “A Discussion of the Yueling in the Ancestral Hall” (Mingtang Yueling lun) by the Eastern Han dynasty scholar Cai Yong, in *Cai Zhonglang ji* (The Collected Writings of Cai Zhonglang).

⁹ See Frank Fiedeler’s excellent commentary on hexagram 55, which in Han Dynasty symbol science was also a descriptive marker of this position in space-time, and corroborates its clear relationship to the world mound, Mt. Song. In Frank Fiedeler, *Yijing* (München: Diederichs, 1996), p. 479-83.

¹⁰ *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chapter 8; in Ma Shi, *Huangdi neijing suwen zhuzheng fawei*, p.76.

¹¹ Note that the character Yi 夷 was also a term for “barbarian tribe,” the likes of which frequently assaulted the integrity of China’s boundaries from a Northwestern direction, similar to the season of fall. While the waning of the material sphere is considered to be a healthy function of nature, an excessive dose of the cooling influence of fall (or winter) is the main trigger for taiyang syndrome, the main pathology of the bladder system in Chinese medicine.

¹² See *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chapter 8; in Ma Shi, *Huangdi neijing suwen zhuzheng fawei*, p.76.

¹³ Ibid.; note that a more direct translation of this title means “Official of the Provincial Capital,” or “Official of the Island.” The rendering of zhou as perineum has its origin in the Shiwen (Ten Questions), an ancient instruction manual on tantric sex preserved in the so called Bamboo Annals of the Mawangdui excavation.

¹⁴ See Frank Fiedeler, *Yijing*, p.171-74, p.314-16, p.517-18.

¹⁵ See *Huangdi Neijing lingshu*, chapter 11; in *Huangdi suwen lingshu jizhu*, p.407.

¹⁶ See Anne Birrell, tr., *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (London: Penguin, 1999), p.15.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the first volume of the Ming dynasty formulary *Pujifang* (Formulas to Aid the Living), p.20 (of the *Siku quanshu* edition).

¹⁸ It should be noted in this context that the muscles controlling urination and ejaculation are the same. Many books on tantric cultivation, therefore, recommend a controlled tightening of the perineum not only when approaching orgasm, but also during urination—to prevent loss of vital essence via the Gate of Death, as the area of the pelvic floor is often referred to in ancient medical texts.

¹⁹ See the *Tianguan shu* (A Record of the Heavenly Officials) section of the *Shiji* (Book of History), summarized in Chen Jiujin's excellent book, *Xingxiang jiema* (Decoding the Stellar Constellations) (Beijing: Qunyan, 2004), p.101-02.

²⁰ See Heiner Fruehauf, tr., "On the Relationship Between Medicine and Philosophy," in *California Journal of Oriental Medicine* 9/2 (April 1998), p.12-13.

²¹ See, for instance, *Zhouyi cidian* (A Dictionary of the Zhouyi) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1992), p.33.

²² *Ibid.*, p.302.

²³ See Xun Zhen and Duan Yuzai, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* (An Annotated Version of the Definitions of Simple and Complex Pictograms), Shanghai: Shanghai Guji, 1995), p.118.

²⁴ James Robert Hightower, tr., "Chia Yi's 'Owl Fu,'" in J. R. Hightower, *Topics of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), p.127-29.

²⁵ See *Huangdi neijing suwen*, chapter 8; in Ma Shi, *Huangdi neijing suwen zhuzheng fawei*, p.76.

²⁶ Laozi *daodejing* chapter 33.

²⁷ See Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), p.74-77.