CHAPTER ONE

What is nourishment of life?

When a person's natural endowment is kept intact, the spirit is harmonious, the eyes clear, the ears acute, the nose keen, the mouth perceptive, and the 360 joints of the body move smoothly. Such a person is trusted without speaking, acts exactly as needed without devising schemes, and succeeds without planning ahead. His vital essence circulates through heaven and earth and his spirit covers the cosmos ... Such a man may be said to keep his power intact.

The Annals of Lu Buwei, 3rd century BCE[10]

CHAPTER ONE

What is yangsheng - nourishment of life?

Keeping it simple

There exist no miraculous methods in the world, only plain ones,
and the perfection of the plain is miraculous.
Fei Boxiong, 1863[11]

The ordinary is the extraordinary.
Wang Xiang-Zhai (Qigong master), 1885 - 1963[12]

In 2008, a ten-year study was published that had followed the lifestyle and health outcomes of over twenty thousand British men and women aged between 45 and 79.[13] The lifestyle factors examined were plain and ordinary – they didn't involve following obscure diets, or taking expensive supplements or medicines. Rather, the researchers assigned one point to each of the following behaviours: not smoking, being physically active, drinking between one and 14 units of alcohol a week (i.e. moderate drinking), and having high blood vitamin C levels (indicating consumption of at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day). After adjusting the results to take account of age, gender, body mass and social class, those who scored zero points were four times more likely to have died during the study than those with all four points. Indeed those who scored the full four points were predicted to have added 14 extra years to their lifespan.

Equally dramatic results were found in a 2004 healthy ageing study.[14] Participants who adhered to a traditional Mediterranean-type diet, used alcohol moderately, did not smoke and were physically active, had a 50 per cent reduced risk of dying over the twelve years of the study, with a significant reduction in the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Finally, in view of the concern evoked by the rise in dementia in our ageing populations, a 35-year study has reported that taking regular exercise, not smoking, maintaining a healthy body weight and a healthy diet, and keeping alcohol intake low, can reduce the risk of dementia and cognitive decline by 60 per cent.[15] Lead author, Professor Peter Elwood of Cardiff University School of Medicine is reported as saying, "The size of reduction in the instance of disease owing to these simple healthy steps has really amazed us and is of enormous importance in an ageing population. What the research shows is that following a healthy lifestyle confers surprisingly large benefits to health – healthy behaviours have a far more beneficial effect than any medical treatment or preventative procedure." [16]

From the perspective of traditional Chinese health cultivation, the simple health behaviours listed in the studies above, whilst vitally important, form only part of a greater whole. The Chinese tradition pays attention to every major aspect of life and behaviour – physical, mental and emotional, and to cultivating them in ways that are sometimes the same as, and sometimes quite different from, current healthy lifestyle advice.

What is nourishment of life (yangsheng)

Do not take good health as granted. [Just as one] should not forget danger in times of peace, try to prevent the coming of disease beforehand.
Sun Simiao, 7th century CE[17]

I think the significance of yangsheng is that it's good for your body. For example, after I started exercising my body, my urinary tract problems didn't recur. Also, my spirits are good. Now I can't afford to see a doctor, even for an examination, so I have to nurture my life well – yangsheng is better than everything else. If you don't get sick, on the one hand, you can avoid medical costs, and on the other hand, it's good for society.
Zhu Hong, 60 year old Beijing widow[18]

If I knew I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself.
Mickey Mantle, baseball player, 1931 - 1995

The traditional term *yangsheng* is made up of two Chinese characters: *yang* (to nurture or nourish) and *sheng* (life or vitality). It is therefore commonly translated as the art of nourishing life and has a history dating back at least two and a half thousand years.

The aim of yangsheng is not just physical health. It aspires to harmony, the seamless integration of mind and body, physical and mental balance, serenity, detachment from excessive emotions, health and fitness into old age, wisdom, and ultimately an egoless identification with the Dao (everything that is).

There are broadly three main ways to cultivate health and longevity.

• The first is avoiding behaviour that causes harm, for example drinking to excess, smoking, allowing damaging emotions to wreak havoc on our physical and mental health, eating poor quality food, and being physically inactive.

• The second is behaving in ways which actively promote health and well-being. These include trying to tame our more harmful emotions and cultivate positive ones, eating well, taking appropriate exercise, sleeping sufficiently and regularly, and spending time in nature and with friends and family.

• The third goes a little beyond this. Within the Chinese and other Asian traditions there are activities which are thought to more deliberately 'nourish life', for example meditating, breathing slowly and deeply down into the 'cinnabar field' in the lower abdomen, practising qigong and the internal physical arts (e.g. tai chi or yoga) and reducing the quantity of food eaten.[19] These are all discussed during the course of this book.

The four legs of the chair

[Therefore] in all matters of nurturing life, one must widely hear and then embody the most essential things, broadly look and then choose well. The partial cultivation of one thing will not prove sufficient to rely on. Furthermore, one must be on guard against the tendency of specialists to tout the one thing they are good at.
Ge Hong, 283-343[20]

Cao Cao received from Feng Junda, popularly known as the Youthful Daoist, a twenty-character life-preserving formula. It goes, "Exercise the body frequently, eat little, worry less, avoid excessive joy and anger and be temperate in sexual behaviour."
The Mystery of Longevity, Liu Zhengcai[21]

The following practices make up the Chinese nourishment of life tradition

1. Cultivating the mind and emotions
2. Regulating diet by paying attention to how, when and what we eat and drink
3. Cultivating the body by balancing the right kind of rest with the right kind of activity and exercise
4. Sleeping well and sufficiently
5. Having a healthy and rewarding sex life
6. Enjoying nature, music, dance and art
7. Paying special attention to lifestyle during pregnancy and after childbirth
8. Caring for children wisely
9. Managing the ageing process as well as possible

The first four - mind and emotions, diet, exercise and sleep - are considered the most important because they have the greatest impact and apply to all of us at nearly every stage of life.They can be compared to the legs of a chair. When all four legs are strong, the chair is stable. If even one leg is weak or broken, then the chair becomes unstable, and increasingly so if more than one leg is defective.

The reason this is important is because in pursuit of health, as Ge Hong warns above, we often focus exclusively on one aspect and ignore others. We might love exercise and body

training, yet neglect diet or fail to get sufficient sleep. We might become preoccupied by diet yet neglect to exercise. And – perhaps most common of all – we might take great pains with our exercise and diet yet be unable to manage our mental and emotional life – suffering from stress, anxiety, depression and so on.

Where does this Chinese health tradition come from?

Practised for at least two and a half thousand years, the art of nourishing life draws from a wide range of spiritual, cultural and medical traditions including Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, classical medicine, the martial arts and folk knowledge.

As an example, scrolls found in tombs sealed during the second century BCE offer instructions on how to adapt to climatic changes through the four seasons of the year, how to practise over a hundred different healing exercises, how to eat well, and how to conduct a healthy sex life.[22]

Where does modern health and lifestyle research come from?

There has been an explosion in lifestyle research over the past few decades, triggered by Richard Doll's ground-breaking 1950s work on the harmful effects of smoking.

One of the most useful methods has been the longitudinal study. This kind of research enrols large numbers of participants, regularly interviews them in great detail about their behaviour and health, and uses the data to draw conclusions.

The Nurses' Health Study, for example, enrolled 122,000 participants in 1976, with a further 166,000 nurses recruited in 1989. It was designed to try and improve understanding of the risk factors for cancer and cardiovascular disease. Data was collected on participants' health status, smoking, alcohol consumption, use of oral contraceptives etc. with additional questions, for example on diet, added as the study continued. As the years have passed (the study is ongoing with participants interviewed regularly) vast amounts of data have been generated. This has enabled hundreds of peer-reviewed studies into the effects of different lifestyle factors to be published.[23]

Similar longitudinal studies include the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study begun in 1986 with over 51,000 male participants, the Agricultural Health Study which enrolled nearly 90,000 pesticide applicators and their families, the British Cohort Study into approximately 17,000 babies born in the same week in 1970, the the US Millennium Cohort Study of 200,000 military personnel, and many more.

In addition to these large longitudinal studies, many thousands of smaller studies are carried out every year.

Throughout this book, discussion of the theory and practice of the Chinese health cultivation tradition will be compared with the findings of such modern lifestyle research.

Longevity in Chinese culture

You should not do any harm to your body. Not even your hair and skin because you get them from your father and mother.
Confucius, 6th/5th centuries BCE[24]

By and large, the belief in an afterlife is not part of Chinese religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions. This life is the only one we have or will ever have. It arose through the coming together of matter and energy, and at death will disperse to be absorbed again into 'heaven and earth'. How rare and precious it is, and how vital to enjoy, protect and preserve it for its entire natural span.

And this body does not even belong entirely to us. It was brought into being through the embraces of our parents and grandparents who then nourished and cared for us. To stay healthy and keep the body undamaged was a debt owed to one's family line.

The three attributes of a good life, personified as the three 'star gods', are happiness, prosperity and longevity (shou). The god of longevity is depicted holding a peach and a gourd (both symbols of long life) and is distinguished by his large, high forehead. He may also be pictured in the company of a crane, a deer, and the medicinal mushroom *Ganoderma lucidum* (ling zhi in Chinese, reishi in Japanese), further symbols of long life.[25-27] The character shou (longevity) can be seen everywhere in China, on textiles, furniture, ceramics, jewellery and many other everyday objects.[28] Long life is also listed as one of the five blessings (wufu) – along with wealth, health, love of virtue and a peaceful death. On Chinese birthdays, a bowl of long unbroken noodles (symbolising long life) and steamed breads shaped like the peaches of immortality are served.

By following the wise teachings of the nourishment of life tradition, there is compelling evidence that all of us can increase our chances of living well and long.

Once upon a time, a wayfarer came across ten old men; over a hundred years of age ... With earnestness and sincerity he hastened forward for the key to their venerable age. The first, twisting his beard, said: I am not addicted to drinking or smoking. The second, smiling, replied: I walk a hundred paces after a meal. The third, nodding, answered: I have a vegetarian diet. The fourth, a stick in hand, said: I have all along walked instead of riding. The fifth, straightening his sleeves, said: I myself have always taken part in physical labour. The sixth said: I practice tai chi every day. The seventh, rubbing his big nose, said: I always leave windows open to let in fresh air. The eighth, stroking his short beard, said: I retire early and rise early. The ninth, caressing his red cheeks, said I bathe in the sun and this gives me a suntan. The tenth, raising his eyebrows, said: I always keep myself from worries.
A Rhyme of Ten Old Men Enjoying Longevity[29]

Notes

1. A number of technical Chinese terms appear throughout this book, for example yinyang, qi, jing (essence) etc. Please see the Glossary for explanations.
2. This book inevitably contains some Chinese medicine content. Where this appears I have tried to explain it in ways that all readers will be able to understand. For those who already know and practise Chinese medicine, I make no apologies. Even the most basic of theories reveal new layers of meaning each time we revisit them.
3. This book is liberally sprinkled with quotations - mostly from ancient Chinese sources. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that it is a Chinese tradition. Referencing the 'classics' is a form of respect and a harkening back to the perceived authority of an earlier, wiser age. It has been said that for Westerners, time is linear - we follow a thread of continual progress where what is new steadily supplants what is old. By contrast, for the Chinese, time is more like a circle, with the present moment at its centre. We are as close to what happened two thousand years ago as we are to what happened last year; the wisdom of past ages is as fresh and vital as today's.

The second, linked, reason is that human concerns have not changed that much in the past two and a half thousand years. The challenge of health and sickness, how to manage the mind, the emotions and the physical body, how to eat, sleep, handle pregnancy, raise children, live and die, has remained largely unchanged, and the observations of wise teachers of the past are to be treasured.

In addition to quotations from the Chinese classics, I have been happy to include other sources and have especially relished the opportunity to quote William Shakespeare as often as possible. As an editorial in *The Guardian* newspaper said on New Year's Day 2016 (a year that marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death), "This extraordinary man, who seems to have known everything there ever was to know about human beings."
4. This book is also dense with research findings, and while this might make heavy reading at times, there are good reasons for it. On the one hand, the broad field of complementary and alternative medicine is littered with statements of fact whose only justification may be that they sound good to the people who make them and their sometimes uncritical audience. There are many ways to separate the wheat from the chaff, however, and research is one of them. Another is time. Just about everything that humans have come up with - from teapot design to parachutes to how to make a soufflé - has come about through time-tested processes which we generally trust. We don't, for example, require a double-blind trial to decide whether jumping out of a plane with a parachute is better than jumping without one. Much of the wisdom of Chinese medicine is time-tested in this way. Given that this kind of knowledge cuts little ice with the scientific community, however, and given also the generally poor reputation that complementary and alternative medicine has when it comes to self-critical questioning, it has seemed worthwhile to back up what the Chinese tradition says with another kind of evidence - in this case from epidemiological and clinical studies.

5. This book offers information on the importance of managing our emotions, eating well, exercising well, sleeping well and much more. For many of us, though, this can seem an overwhelming and daunting prospect – especially if we are ill or in circumstances where none of these are going smoothly. When I began my practice of Chinese medicine I would sometimes find myself in the middle of a lengthy lecture on all the ways my patient should change their lifestyle before I realised that the look on their face was one of dismay (or else their eyes had simply glazed over). Over the years, I learnt two things. The first is that we should generally avoid giving advice – it often backfires, creating conscious or unconscious resistance in the person we are giving it to (even if that person is ourself). Instead of advice, we should simply offer information and I hope that is the spirit of this book. The second is that sometimes we only need to change one thing and then, slowly, other things start to transform naturally. The trick is to know what that one thing is. If we want to help others, we have to develop the clear-sightedness to home in on what they need and the best, easiest and most effective way of helping them towards it. To see what key thing needs to change in ourselves is harder and we have to bring our best self- awareness to the task – as well as listening attentively to the feedback we receive from others.

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19 Some Daoist adepts went even further – into the realms of the magical. As one contemporary author puts it in a discussion of sexual cultivation practices, "The practitioner's most ambitious goal went beyond prolonging one's years to reversing the aging process altogether to attain immortality. Where ordinary medicine maintained health, the medicine of the internal alchemist was an elixir (dan) that an adept produced out of the resources of his own person. The realization of the body of immortality was an arduous process of lifelong self-cultivation – a higher discipline against which the more standard regimens for health and longevity stood as a preliminary, lower stage." Furth, C (1999). *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History*, 960-1665. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

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25 The crane is thought to live a long life, its white feathers mirror old age and it is the bird that carries 'immortal' Daoist masters to the heavens.

26 The deer, also believed to live an unusually long life, was associated with the mushroom ling zhi which it was skilled at finding. In Chinese medicine, deer antler and deer velvet (the covering of the antler as it grows) are considered to be powerful tonics.

27 Six varieties of ling zhi (Ganoderma lucidum) appear in the first Chinese herbal pharmacopoeia (The Shen nong ben cao, 1st/2nd century CE). This influential work which classified substances into upper, middle and lower categories, listed ling zhi in the upper category – substances which nourish life and can be taken for a long time without side-effects. Unlike most mushrooms which rot soon after releasing spores, ling zhi becomes wood-like and thus endures a long time.

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