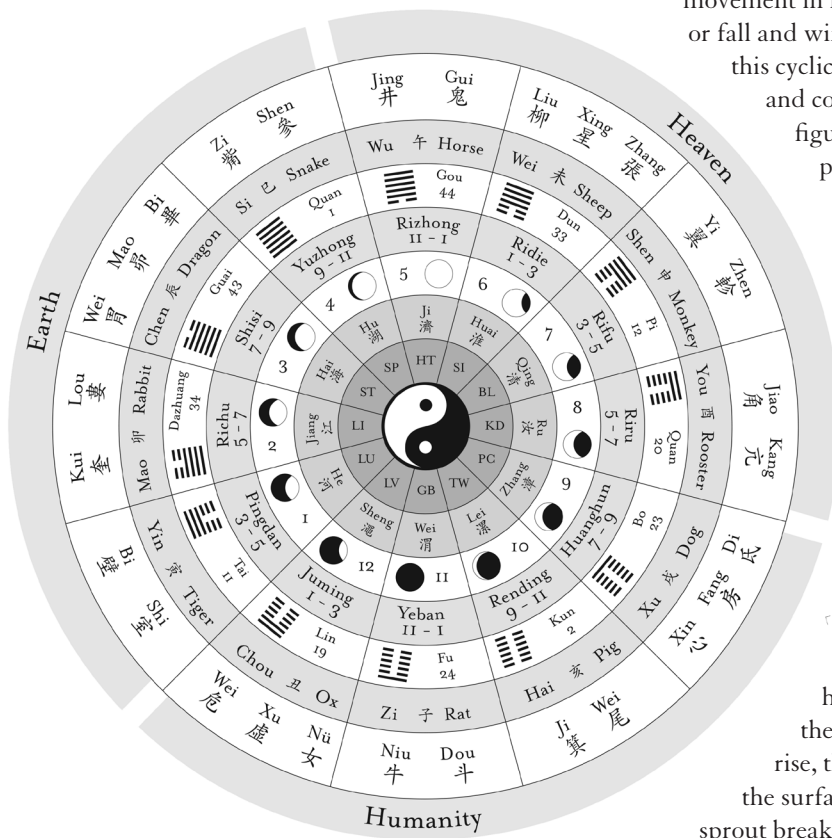


# A Classical Chinese Medicine Perspective on the Nature of Aging and Longevity

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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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