
Chinese Philosophy and Healthy Living

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ABSTRACT

Beyond more traditional health research focusing on illness treatment and management, interest in healthy living has been on rise in recent years. Some have turned to philosophical thoughts (e.g. of meaning of life) to develop new conceptualizations of healthy living. This position paper articulates the intertwined relationship between Chinese Yang Sheng (life nurturing) and Chinese philosophy, and discusses their implications for healthy living and HCI.

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond more traditional health research focusing on illness treatment and management, interest in healthy living has been on rise in recent years. For example, mobile and self-tracking devices have been extensively explored to help develop healthy behavior. To conceptually explore what constitutes healthy living, some have turned to philosophical thoughts (e.g. meaning of life). For example, notions such as "positive health" [3] suggest philosophical and spiritual aspects of life is key to long-term health, along with social connections and physical exercises.

This paper focuses on Chinese Yang Sheng¹ (life nurturing) and associated Chinese philosophy to explore healthy living and implications for HCI more broadly. Yang Sheng is interconnected with not only philosophy but also practices that regular people are undertaking in the course of their daily lives. Many practices of Yang Sheng have become globally popular, e.g. Massage and Meditation have been popularly undertaken for healing, stress reduction, or mindfulness.

Yang Sheng and many of its practices are direct embodiment of philosophical thoughts, particularly those of Taoism philosophy. In other words, while in the western world the philosophical accounts (particularly of how to live well) have little influence on human health, possibly due to scientific revolution which largely confined health into the biological disciplines [3], the connection between philosophy, and health have been largely sustained and integrated, particularly through Yang Sheng practices.

In this position paper, a brief introduction of Yang Sheng and Chinese philosophy is provided first, then the intertwined relationship between Yang Sheng and Chinese philosophy is articulated, and implications for engaging philosophical thinking in HCI and health research are discussed.

YANG SHENG AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Yang Sheng and the associated Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), as other traditional Chinese cultures, have their roots in Chinese philosophy, particularly Taoism. Many thoughts of Chinese philosophy could be traced back to I Ching or Classics of Changes[4], the earliest known Taoist texts, which is fundamentally concerned with the regular patterns of change. By observing the change of day and night, the succession of seasons, and so on, ancient Chinese concluded that change is a constant aspect of existent, and more importantly, change is not a chaotic process but follows a certain course. To understand such a course of events and the direction of changes, one fundamental notion is Yin Yang, which describes how the seemingly opposite forces are actually complementary

¹ In Chinese, Yang means "take good care of", "nurture", "maintain", and "conserve", and Sheng means "life"

and interdependent to each other, give rise to each other, and form a whole when coming together. The theories of Yin-Yang form the foundation of Chinese philosophy, culture, and science, and have influenced everything and all domains of human life from national governance to everyday practices, including TCM and everyday health maintenance practices.

Another key notion in TCM is Qi, as the fundamental element of the universe and the vital energy of all living beings. It is believed that substance, including human beings, and Qi can be turned into each other. When Qi assembles and takes shape, it is turned into substance. When substance disappears, it disassembles into Qi. In this respect, Qi is the Yang aspect of substance, and substance is the Yin aspect of Qi. Qi is in a state of continuous flux, transforming endlessly from one aspect of Qi into another, and Yin-Yang is employed to talk about the relationships between the various aspects and manifestations of Qi.

When human life and health are concerned, theories of Yin-Yang and Qi are the fundamental principles of various Yang Sheng exercises including Martial Arts, Qigong, Taiji, and others. From the Yin-Yang perspective, Yang Sheng/TCM is concerned with the balance of the human body and harmony with the nature, with all the opposite elements or forces (or Ying-Yang) considered. Yang Sheng, based on TCM, is a way to take care of life before disease occurs by ensuring balance of body and harmony with the nature through everyday living habits, as well as the various exercises and techniques.

THE INTERTWINED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YANG SHENG EXERCISES AND PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING

We conducted a qualitative study of 10 serious amateur Yang Sheng practitioners in China to understand the influence of Yang Sheng practices and philosophical thinking on health and wellbeing. Our finding suggests that Yang Sheng exercises such as Qigong, Taiji, Medication are not simply based on Chinese philosophy, but also drawn on to study and more deeply understand Chinese philosophy. That is, as YangSheng exercises are based on and developed from foundational notions such as Yin-Yang and Qi of Chinese philosophy, in turn, they also become concrete and embodied approach to access related notions. This quote is a representative one, *"Much of Chinese culture can only be understood through real practices. Baduanjin (a kind of Qigong), Bigu, and Mediation are convenient methods for us to appreciate essences in traditional culture, so we shall do it."* Another quote suggests why that is the case: *"Those practicing the Martial Art can more deeply appreciate Chinese culture than those who just study philosophies, because you have something tangible and something concrete to move you forward, not only mental processing..."*

At the same time, we found that philosophical understanding is important for Yang Sheng exercises as well as broader notion of healthy living. It is through Yang Sheng exercises that individuals are

able to achieve philosophical understanding and gain life wisdom to better take care of themselves, instead of relying on experts, scientists or scholars to make these connections.

The intertwined relationship between Yang Sheng exercises and philosophical understanding uncovered from our study may seem strange at the first, however, many of our findings resonate well with the insights from the philosophical study of phenomenology. Phenomenology, especially Heidegger's heuristic phenomenology in particular, is already familiar to the field of HCI [1, 2, 5] and is often drawn to analyze situated user experiences. Yang Sheng, like Phenomenology, is deeply concerned with the relationships between thinking, being, and mental and physical experiences.

IMPLICATIONS

Yang Sheng, as our study suggests, represents an embodied and integrated approach towards overall health. It sets contrast to the more behavioral, segmented and instrumental approach that have been commonly adopted in designing for everyday health in HCI. While the particular Yang Sheng practices are mainly based on Chinese philosophy, we believe the link between philosophical pursuits and healthy living could have more general and broader implications for everyday healthy living. That is, philosophies that deal with nature and what makes a meaningful life are all relevant here for wellness and health. More importantly, what the study brought to the fore is that the process or journey of philosophical pursuits by individuals, not particular philosophical thoughts per se, matters a great deal.

As such, our study suggests a turn from the pursuit of narrow definitions of health towards the combined pursuit of philosophies as a more fundamental approach towards healthy living. It also points to new design and research opportunities to explore health through supporting Yang Sheng practices and philosophical pursuits. While it could be helpful to make some of the resources (such as books, videos or others) more accessible and navigable for people to engage in self-education and thinking as uncovered in our study, we believe it is also as very important to connect the abstract ideas and thoughts embedded in these resources with people's everyday experiences.

CONCLUSION

In this position paper, we articulate Yang Sheng as a more embodied, integrated, and foundational health approach compared to the more behavioral, segmented and instrumental one more commonly adopted for health research and design, and philosophical pursuits of wisdom as a pathway towards health is highlighted. This paper further suggests that it is not simply for researchers or scholars to gain insights from philosophies and to develop guidelines, it is also important for lay people themselves to engage in a journey to gain life wisdom (engage with philosophical thinking) as a key element of healthy living.

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