

Illustrated Book of Traditional Chinese Life-Nurturing Exercise

中国传统运动养生图典



中国大百科全书出版社

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Prologue

China is an ancient nation with civilization and heritage over five thousand years. During its long course, China has created and perfected its health preservation theory. This theory integrates the essence of Chinese ancient culture like Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and medicine, and combined the best of traditional conduction, martial arts, games, massage, acupuncture and diet regimen, which has made great contributions to the nation's health and reproduction for thousands of years.

The theory of the traditional Chinese life-nurturing exercise holds a different view about physical fitness from that of the Western countries. Its purpose is to build and maintain the self-awareness and habit of body function balances, prominently among which are as follows: the trinity of 'essence (*Jing*), energy (*Qi*), and spirit (*Shen*)'; the health mechanism of 'harmony between *yin* and *yang*' and the

movement rules of 'adjusting *yin* and *yang*'.

This book aims to examine the unique role that Chinese life-nurturing exercise played in history and its evolution process, discuss the value of the exercise for life, expound its mechanism and introduce some widely used skills and methods.

In this book, there are not only explorations of executants, images, forms and methods concerning traditional Chinese health preservation, but also the perceptions and experience of many life-nurturing exercise experts or practitioners; there are not only the search for the origin of the traditional life-nurturing exercise, but also the review of communication and development of the modern life-nurturing exercise. They are all to ensure that the book can fully reflect the essence of the Chinese life-nurturing exercise. Therefore, it deserves to be called a popular illustrated book truly representing Chinese life-nurturing exercise.

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Chapter 1

An Overview of Traditional Chinese Life-Nurturing Exercise

Chapter Contents

- ▶ Origin and development of traditional Chinese life-nurturing exercise
- ▶ Theoretical basis of traditional Chinese life-nurturing exercise
- ▶ Philosophy of traditional Chinese life-nurturing exercise
- ▶ Characteristics of traditional Chinese life-nurturing exercises
- ▶ Principles of nurturing life through exercise

Life nurturing (*Yang Sheng* in Chinese) was also known as life cultivation—in ancient times as *She Sheng*. *She* means to take care and maintain health. The word *Yang Sheng* was first recorded in the *Inner Chapters of Zhuang Zi* (aka Chuang Tzu). *Yang* means to preserve, regulate, cultivate, nurture and protect. *Sheng* means life, living and growth. When used in combination, *Yang Sheng* refers to all-inclusive activities that can enhance health and achieve longevity. The life-nurturing activities may include cultivating the mind, regulating diet, exercising the body, moderating the sexual life and adapting to weather changes.

Life nurturing through exercise (*Yun Dong Yang Sheng* in Chinese) refers to traditional Chinese health preservation practice that aims to cultivate the body and mind and thus achieve health and longevity. These exercises comply with the nature, coordinate *yin* and *yang*, move the sinews or bones, regulate breathing, circulate *qi* and blood of the *zang-fu* organs (the internal organs, aka functional organ systems) and tranquilize the mind. Originating from health practice and life experience of Chinese people over the past thousands of years, life-nurturing exercise is a key part of traditional Chinese health preservation culture and has distinctive principles, methods, and movement patterns.

Historically in ancient China, there was a common focus on health cultivation among all different groups of society. Physicians focused on the eradication of diseases; Confucians cultivated morality; martial artists trained the body; religious practitioners sought refuge in spiritual discipline. These studies showed the wisdom of traditional Chinese life-nurturing practice, involving regulation of the postures, breathing, mind, sound, body and movement. Because of its excellence in technique, comprehensiveness in experience, distinction in effect and profoundness in cultural deposits, ancient Chinese health cultivation practice is exceptional of its kind from the worldwide perspective.

As an accumulated and concentrated health-specific tradition/practice that the Chinese people have been cultivating and practicing for thousands of years, traditional health-preservation exercise is not just limited in practice to Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and martial arts players. More importantly, it is ingrained into the classical works on traditional Chinese medicine. In essence, this represented the general wisdom of Chinese culture.



Bronze mirror showing Chinese *Qigong*,
kept in the Museum of Hunan Province

1. Origin and Development of Traditional Chinese Life-Nurturing Exercise

With a long standing and well-established history, ancient Chinese life-nurturing exercise is characterized by distinctive Eastern and Chinese styles. Since remote antiquity, the ancestors of the Chinese nation have understood the significant role of physical exercise in health preservation, realized the natural law of ‘life is movement’ and advocated enhancing

health through active body movements. Continuous development over the past thousands of years has enabled traditional Chinese life-nurturing exercise to be popularly practiced among the folk people and become the key means to maintain human life and health.

1.1 Life-Nurturing Exercise in the Primitive Society

According to the literature recorded in the *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*¹, during the late primitive society, ancient people 'lived a gloomy and dull life and suffered from rigidity of their joints because the sun was often shut off by heavy clouds and it rained all the time; turbulent waters overflowed the river's banks. Therefore a remedy dancing was recommended.' From the experience of their long-term struggle with nature, the ancients gradually realized that body movements, massage and various ways of breathing could help readjust certain bodily functions. The word '*Daoyin*' derived from the expression of 'guiding others to dance to make the body flexible'. It referred to an ancient health cultivation practice to circulate *qi* and blood and enhance health through breathing and moving the body and joints.

1.2 Life-Nurturing Exercise in the Pre-Qin (2070 BC-221BC) Period

The idea of 'nourishing life through physical movements' (including labor and exercise) developed in the Pre-Qin period. The *Xun Zi*² *Discussion of Heaven* observes, 'With abundant nutrition and physical exercise, heaven cannot make one ill; with insufficient nutrition and physical inactivity, heaven cannot make one healthy.' The *Master Lü's*

¹ An encyclopedic Chinese classic text compiled around 239 BC under the patronage of the Qin Dynasty Chancellor Lü Buwei.

² Xun Zi: a Chinese Confucian philosopher who lived during the Warring States Period and contributed to one of the Hundred Schools of Thought. Xun Zi believed man's inborn tendencies need to be curbed through education and ritual, counter to Mencius's view that man is innately good. He believed that ethical norms were invented to rectify mankind.