Bedchamber Arts

Bedchamber arts belong to a broad tradition of macrobiotic practices within Chinese culture aimed at improving health and wellbeing, and extending the lifespan of the physical body. Related practices involve the regulation of breathing, the regulation of diet, consumption of special foods, and physical movement practices such as taijiquan (t’ai chi), qigong (ch’i-kung). Altogether these are known as nourishing life (yangsheng 養生) practices.

Such methods are not necessarily religious practices, though they share a common aim with Chinese religions in ensuring the physical and spiritual health of the individual.

The principle behind all these types of practices is that the body is comprised of interdependent networks of vital energy or qi (ch’i) 氣. When qi is sluggish, blocked, deficient or uneven, the body experiences sickness. Equally important, however, is the notion that qi can be consciously moved, guided, stored, refined, enhanced so as to improve health perhaps indefinitely.

Ways to Immortality

Chinese history from ancient times displays a fascination with immortality, which is conceived in two ways. First is the idea of extending the lifespan of the body so that one can live on the earth for a superhuman length of time. Second, and more important, is the idea of engaging in a process of transcendence, through which the physical body is transformed into a spirit body and is no longer bound by the physical constraints of ordinary mortal bodies. Such people are known as immortals or transcendants 仙人; some of them become famous and are venerated as gods or goddesses in temples.

Case Study: The Queen Mother of the West

The Queen Mother of the West is one of the most famous of goddesses revered across China, and thought to reign over a paradise to the West of China in the Kunlun 崑崙 mountains. Like almost all Chinese deities she was once an ordinary human being who transcended the world and became a spirit being. A Japanese compendium of medical texts known as the Ishimpō (982 CE) preserves a fragment of a lost Chinese text known as the Secret Instructions of the Jade Bedchamber 玉房秘訣 which describes how the Queen Mother of the West attained her transcendent status:

‘It is not only that yang can be cultivated but yin too. The Queen Mother of the West, for example, attained the Way by cultivating her yin energy. As soon as she copulated with a male, the male would immediately suffer illness, whereas her visage would become radiant and lush—even without make-up. She often ate curds and plucked her five-stringed lute. By this means, she harmonized her heart and stabilized her intentions, so that she had no other desire.’ It is also said: ‘The Spirit Mother has no husband; she enjoys copulating with young boys. For this reason, [her methods] must not be taught to the world. For why would only the Queen Mother act like this?’

(Translation adapted from Goldin 2006; see also Kohn 1993: 156; Wile 1992)

Early Western interpreters regarded this as a form of ‘sexual vampirism’ (van Gulik 1961), but more interesting is to note that the text is a warning against the transgressive possibility that women might sexually exploit men, rather than vice-versa:
This creates a scenario highly liberating for women, showing them that their sexuality and their inborn power of yin does not need to be harnessed and contained for reproduction or for the benefit of men. (Despeux and Kohn 2003: 40).

**Religious Responses to Sexual Cultivation Practices**

1. **Superiority**

In the following story, from an early collection of biographies of immortals, a woman who comes across a sexual cultivation manual is ridiculed because she failed to realize its full potential.

Nü Ji once met an immortal who had stopped by her house to drink wine and left a book on five scrolls of silk as a pledge in lieu of cash. Ji unrolled and examined the book, which presented techniques for nourishing inner nature through sexual intercourse.

Ji privately copied the text’s essentials, then had another room built where she invited various young men to drink her delicious wine and spend the night with her practicing the techniques described in the book. After thirty years of doing this her facial complexion was once again as it had been when she was twenty.

Several years later the immortal returned. Laughing, he told Ji, “Appropriating the Way without a teacher [is like] having wings but not flying!” She proceeded to abandon her home and follow the immortal. No one knows where they went. (Biography of Nü Wan / Nü Ji. 列仙傳 67).

2. **Competition**

The Way of the Celestial Masters 天師道 was one of the earliest forms of Daoist religion, originating towards the end of the 2nd century C.E. It sought to clearly distinguish religious methods from what it considered to be “fake” practices.

The Way teaches human beings to congeal their essence and make spirits. In the present generation there are those who practice counterfeit arts and slyly call them the Way, teaching by means of the texts of the Yellow Emperor, the Dark Maiden, Master Gong, and Rongcheng. When engaged with a woman, they do not ejaculate, but think they can circulate their essence [through their bodies] and cause it to fortify their brains. But because their mind and spirit are not at one [with the Way], they lose what they try to preserve; though they store up their pleasure, they cannot treasure it for long. (老子想爾注 trans. Goldin 2006: 22).

Note, however, that this early Daoist religious group practiced a ritual known as harmonizing qi 合氣 in which married couples engaged in a highly complex ritual form of sexual intercourse under the guidance of a master. This involved harmonizing the qi of each partner with cosmic forces, and moving in precise ways according to astronomically determined positions (Despeux and Kohn 2003: 12).

3. **Adaptation**

Daoist (Taoist) meditation techniques adapted and refined early thinking about sexual practices, placing them in a moral and spiritual framework. This involves transforming sexual essence (jing 精) into vital energy (qi 氣) and then into spirit (shen 神). For men, the key technique is “circulating essence and strengthening the brain” 還精補腦. For women, this involves self-massage of the breasts while swallowing saliva in order to convert menstrual blood into a white substance analogous to male semen. This is refined into vital energy and then spirit.

**Further Reading**


