Introduction

The new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) refers to pneumonia caused by a new type of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) infection. It is the most widespread pestilence in human history. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has played an important role in this pandemic situation. As part of the TCM method, qigong (气功) therapy is also applied in the frontline of tackling the disease. In the Wuhan field hospital, doctors taught patients to practice Ba Duan Jin (八段锦) and Liu Zi Jue (六字诀), etc. On February 22, 2020, to make full use of the unique advantages of TCM and to accelerate the recovery of COVID-19 patients, the experts committee for the COVID-19 Joint Control Mechanism Response Team of China’s State Council formulated a guideline named the Chinese Medicine Rehabilitation Suggestions for Patients during the Recovery Period of New Coronavirus Pneumonia (Trial Implementation).

In this guideline, it is stated that “After checking out from the hospital, patients with mild and common types of new coronary pneumonia can take a variety of exercises; while for severe or critical patients; they should choose the appropriate traditional exercises according to their recovery conditions.” Recommended qigong methods include Ba Duan Jin, Tai Ji Quan (太极拳), and Liu Zi Jue. Qigong therapy has once again entered the notice of the public.

Philosophy of Fighting the Epidemic with Traditional Chinese Medicine Qigong Therapy

The well-known TCM saying “when there is sufficient healthy qi inside the body, the evil cannot invade the body (正气存内, 邪不可干)” is actually the principle found in the Huangdi’s Internal Classic for use in the treatment of epidemic diseases, and the treatment method adopted mainly is the qigong therapy. Su Wen “Ci Fa Lun” (《素问·刺法论》Plain Questions “Discussion on Acupuncture Methods”) states that, “The Yellow Emperor (黄帝) said: “I have heard...

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that the five kinds of pestilence can all spread from people to people. Among children or adults alike, the symptoms are the same. How come there are people who are not affected by the pestilence even though no treatment is used? (余闻五疫之至，皆相染易，无问大小，病状相似，不施救治，如何可得不相移易者) . Qi Bo (岐伯) is said to answer: “Those who are not affected by the pestilence is due to sufficient healthy qi inside their bodies. That is why evil cannot invade their bodies. When pestilence has occurred, care should be taken to avoid toxic qi. Evil qi usually gets into and out of the body through the nose. Healthy qi originates from the brain, so evil can’t attack it (不相染者，正气存内，邪不可干，避其毒气，天牝从来，复得其在，气出于脑，即不邪干).”[1] The “pestilence” described by the Yellow Emperor has the characteristics of the plague, which is able to “spread from people to people, and despite their ages, they all exhibit the same symptoms (皆相染易，无问大小，病状相似).” Qi Bo points out that by improving the healthy qi of the human body, the intrusion of the epidemic qi can be avoided. He proposes three methods to treat epidemic diseases, all of which are related to qigong therapy. The first method is to keep thinking: “Qi comes from the brain, that is, the heart is just like the sun. If you want to enter the epidemic room, first think of the blue-green qi coming out of the liver, moving from the left to the east and transforming into a forest; then think of the white qi coming out of the spleen, moving right to the west and transforming itself into dagger and armor; the red qi coming out of the heart, going south to the top and turning into flame; the black qi coming out of the kidneys, going north to the bottom and transforming itself into the water; finally think of the yellow qi coming out of the spleen, to be stored in the center, and then turning into soil. After thinking of these five qi of the viscera which could protect the body, then you can enter the epidemic room.”[1] The second method is expiration and inspiration: “On the vernal equinox, you breathe out before the sunrise (于春分之日，日未出而吐之).”[1] The third method is to use medicine combined with qigong therapy: “Formulae of Minor Golden Elixir... Take a sip of qi from the brilliance of the sun from the east every day, take a pill with ice water, and swallow it. If you take ten pills, you won’t suffer from epidemic diseases (小金丹方……每日望东吸日华气一口，冰水下一丸，和气咽之，服十粒，无疫干也).” When taking the minor golden elixir, you breathe in the sun’s yang qi from the east and ingest the pill with the cold qi of cold water, so that epidemic disease will not attack you. In addition, the same chapter of the book also uses daoyin (导引) method after treating the “earth pestilence (土疫)” with acupuncture.” “When the acupuncture is completed, the patient should not travel at night or long distance. They need to keep clean within 7 days, and refrain from meat, wine, and other stimulants. All people with chronic kidney diseases should face south from 3 a.m. to 5 a.m., keep calm without thinking of anything, hold their breath for 7 times, and then breathe in smoothly as if swallowing something very hard. After doing it 7 times, there will be vast quantity of saliva underneath the tongue.”[1] After the treatment of acupuncture, one needs to calm the mind, swallow the saliva and accept the qi. Therefore, it can be inferred that qigong therapy was at that time a common method to treat pestilence in the Qin and Han dynasties. In the process of fighting against pestilence, qigong therapy can be applied standalone or in combination with other therapies. Su Wen “Shang Gu Tian Zhen Lun” (《素问·上古天真论）Plain Questions “Ancient Ideas on How to Preserve Natural Healthy Energy”) states that: “When vital qi in the body is in harmony, essence and spirit will remain inside and diseases will have no way to penetrate (恬淡虚无，真气从之，精神内守，病安从来）.”[1] Although qigong therapy seems to be mysterious, when it is used by the ancients’ minds which were pure, calm, and harmonious, the strength of the vital qi protecting the body is unperceivable by the impetuous homo sapiens.

The ideological principle of cultivating healthy qi to fight against evils via qigong therapy has continued to this day. In the early days after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, there was a shortage of medicines and medical treatment, hence the promotion and use of qigong therapy. Liu Guizhen (刘贵珍), the initiator of the widespread application of Qigong therapy in the New China published a book entitled the Qi Gong Liao Fa Shi Jian (《气功疗法实践》 Qigong Therapy Practice) in 1953. He says that during the process of practice and collation, they realize that although the names of the exercises are different, they are all about body, breathing, and mind exercise to cultivate the body’s healthy qi in order to prevent illness and prolong lives. According to the classical theory, this kind of self-exercise method which focuses on cultivating healthy qi is named qigong. Liu explains that the “qi” of qigong does not only include respiratory qi, but also the healthy qi in the human body. In qigong practice, disease can be cured by of strengthening the healthy qi. When the healthy qi is consolidated, the body constitutions will be strong, and the function of the zang-fu organs will also be enhanced, thus maintaining health and prolong life. The “gong” of qigong refers to the kung fu of practicing qigong. If you practice qigong without kung fu, you cannot achieve good results. The word “qigong” summarizes the practice of meditation, expiration and inspiration, daoyin, and internal kung fu. Because qigong is used for curing and preventing disease, it is named qigong therapy.[1] It can be deduced that through various methods such as meditation, expiration and inspiration, daoyin, and internal kung fu, that qigong can achieve the goal of enhancing healthy qi, preventing diseases, or expelling evil. This very same idea is the philosophical thinking of using qigong to fight the epidemic.
Methods of Fighting the Epidemic with Traditional Chinese Medicine Qigong Therapy

Qigong has been used in the fight of epidemic since the ancient times. In the unearthed Mawangdui tombs of the early Western Han dynasty, the “Daoyin for Warm Diseases” figure is a typical representative of using daoyin to treat warm diseases. The Han Bamboo Slips, Yin Shu (《引书》Book of Daoyin) unearthed from the same period of time also mentions fever during the onset of consumption diseases, and daoyin was used as its treatment. The Yin Shu states that when the seasons change, human beings will inevitably be affected by the excessive counterflow of qi and suffer from illness. The “counterflow qi” includes qi of the epidemic diseases. Methods of daoyin and expiration and inspiration are applied to prevent and treat illness. There are also many records of the fighting epidemic with qigong in other classics of Chinese medicine, i.e. the chapter of “Symptoms of Epidemic Diseases” from Zhu Bing Yuan Hou Lun (《诸病源候论》Treatise on the Pathogenesis and Manifestations of Various Diseases) and the chapter of “Epidemic Diseases” from Gu Jin Tu Shu Ji Cheng (《古今图书集成》Collection of Ancient and Modern Books). All of them have adopted daoyin therapy.

Qigong therapy refers to a comprehensive treatment method with various measures. Its prevention and treatment against epidemic diseases are as follow:

Daoyin

Dao Shu “Zhen Gao Pian” (《道枢·真诰篇》Principle of Daoyin “Advising Chapter”) states that: “The Jingjing Massage Classic says that when waking up, you should calm your breath and sit up straight. First you cross the left and right hands to cover the back of the neck, raise the neck to look forward for three to four times. This will make the essence and blood flow smoothly and the wind qi won’t penetrate the human body. Once this movement is completed, stretch out the four extremities backward, then the static qi will be dispelled and vessels will be smooth. Doing these two kinds of movements for three times separately. When waking up, wipe the neck and ears with the thick cloth until the adjacent areas are warm. Then rub the back from hairline to the neck multiple times, and rub the face with left and right hands for a long time. Once these activities are completed, swallow the saliva for twenty times to circulate the inner fluid. Practicing these movements consistently will improve vision, cleanse the body, and prevent evils from attacking your body.”[3] The book concludes that through the flexion and extension, rubbing hands, and swallowing saliva, daoyin can enhance the healthy qi, maintain wellbeing, and prevent the invasion of evils.

Dao Shu “Yi Sheng Pian” (《道枢·颐生篇》Principle of Daoyin “Prolonging Lives Chapter”) states that “Zuo Zhenren (左真人) (named Ci) said, ‘The elderly is often attacked by the wind. They should cross the left and right hands day and night, moving their heads towards the ground. Let the Qi in their body go upwards to the Tianzhu acupoint and produce sweat in the limbs. These movements can be used to eliminate pestilence, guide the qi and improve vision.’”[3] Zuo Ci (左慈) is a cultivator. He believes that the elderly is vulnerable to wind attack, and the method of daoyin to produce sweat can be used to eliminate pestilence. Dao Shu “Tai Qing Yang Sheng Xia Pian” (《道枢·太清养生下篇》Principle of Daoyin “Part 2 of Health Cultivation Chapter”) points out the causes of the pestilential outbreak and the methods of applying daoyin to eliminate pestilence. “Pestilence is a kind of evil yang qi. It gathers in various viscera and enters different kinds of vessels (温疫者, 阳气也, 聚于诸藏, 人于诸脉.)”[3] Qi mechanism of the five viscera, such as the liver, spleen and kidney, tends to rise upward; qi mechanism of the six fu organs, such as the stomach, small intestine, and large intestine, tends to flow downward. The zang and fu organs are connected to each other. If the qi of the viscera does not rise, the qi of the fu organ will not descend. If the qi of the fu organ does not descend, the evil heat will not be eliminated. Through prostrating and lifting, bending and stretching the body, it is possible to adjust the ascending and descending of the five zang and six fu organs, harmonize the yin and yang of the qi, blood and meridians, and finally expel the evils. Malaria is also a kind of pestilence, which is caused by yang exposure and yin blockage. It can also be treated with daoyin when it attacks. The “Chen Xiyi (陈希夷) sleeping in Huashan Figure” from the Chi Feng Sui (《赤凤髓》Red Phoenix Marrow) states that “To treat color consumption (色瘀), rest your head on your right hand, use the left fist to rub up and down on the abdomen. Lay your right leg slightly curled, and rest the left leg on top of the right leg. Keep thinking and adjust your breathing. When sleeping, breathe in the qi for 32 times and retain it in the abdomen. Practice this measure for 12 times, and the disease will be healed over time.”[4] “Consumption” is a chronic infectious disease. The above-mentioned approach adopts comprehensive qigong methods such as horizontal daoyin, thinking, and inspiration and expiration to treat deficiency caused by “color consumption.”

Self-massage is also a daoyin method. For example, in the Yi Qie Jing Yin Yi (《一切经音义》Meanings of All Classics), Huilin (慧琳) of the Tang dynasty said that “Daoyin means scrape, pinch, stretch and contract your hands and feet to relieve fatigue and vexation (凡人自摩自捏, 伸缩手足, 除劳去烦, 名为导引).” This method can also be used to remove pestilence. Dao Principle “Advising Chapter” states that “For producing qi, swallow your saliva for 14 times and then press the painful parts of the body……Swallow saliva for 14 times, and press the painful parts of the body for 21 times. By taking
these measures often, there will be no diseases attacking you."[5] This is the method of self-massage combined with Zhu You’s method to eliminate pestilence. Between 10 pm and 12 pm, when the body is producing qi, swallow the saliva, massage the painful parts of the body, and pray with Zhu You to get rid of the “evil wind qi and pestilence (风气疫癌).”

Respiratory Method

Since the early Han dynasty, there have been records of breathing, inspiration and expiration to prolong lives in Chinese classics. The Zhuangzi (《庄子》 Chuang Tzu) states that “Breathe, exhaling old (air) and inhaling new (air) just as a bear hangs itself while climbing a tree or as a bird stretches its legs while flying and doing so can prolong lives (吹呴呼吸, 吐故纳新, 熊经鸟申, 为寿而已矣).” The Book of Dao Yin from the Zhangjiashan Han bamboo slips has clearly pointed out that the “breathing out” method could be used to remove heat, and that the “blowing” method could be used to remove cold. Ling Jian Zi (《灵剑子》 Master of the Magical Sword) explains that, “About all kinds of heart diseases, they could be cleared with the breathing out method. There is no need to treat them according to the six qi methods. If there are cold diseases, the blowing method could be used to supplement it. And it will regulate the disease of the upper energizer (凡诸熟病, 大开口呵之为泻, 不必六气也。有疾冷, 即吹以补之, 则调理上焦之疾, 往来微, 自求安之道也).” Both cold and heat are common phenomena in epidemic diseases. The methods for inspiration and expiration with pronunciation could be applied to remove the evils of cold and heat. Yang Xing Yan Ming Lu (《养性延命录》 Records for Cultivation and Prolonging Lives) states thus: “There is one method for receiving qi, six methods for expelling qi. The one method for receiving qi refers to inhalation. The six kinds of expelling qi methods refer to blowing, exhaling, sighing, breathing out with open mouth, breathing out slowly, and panting…. Blowing is used for cold diseases, while exhaling is used for warm diseases. About the functions of the six methods, blowing could eliminate wind, exhaling could eliminate heat, sighing could eliminate vexation, breathing out with open mouth could descend qi, breathing out slowly could dispel stagnation and panting could relieve extremities.”[6] Through different phonetic sounds, the corresponding exogenous evils can be removed, which can be used flexibly in clinical settings.

Qi of absorbing and regulating the elements is a common method of qigong. The Master of the Magical Sword states that “if your heart dies (气灰心绝), and you do not want to be affected by diseases, then all kinds of diseases including those contagious ones could not attack you. If the brain is depleted, epidemic pathogen will attack human body from the top of the head. If the brain is sufficient with essence, nothing can harm it. Anyone who has illnesses should get up early, adjust their breathing to drive the illnesses out of the five zang and six fu organs via the movement of qi. This is deemed to be effective if a large amount of warm sticky sweat is produced. Before the sweat degrades, adjust the movement of qi as before and close the pharynx. Otherwise, you need to wrap the body with clothes and quilts. Both of these actions belong to qi adjustment. For patients with wind, qi, pestilence, consumption or toxin diseases, the former method could be taken to dispel evils from tendons, bones, and marrows. The effect is unparallel that even large quantity of various medicines may not achieve it.” “Heart dies” refers to the state of “forgetting body and cognition (离形去知)” from Chuang Tzu. If a person could separate themselves from the human body, no pestilence or toxin can invade them. In addition, adopting the method of Qi adjustment can also ward off evils and eliminate diseases such as wind, qi, misma, consumption, and toxin. Bao Pu Zi “Shi Zhi” (《抱朴子·释滞》 Works of Master Bao Pu “Interpretation of Stagnation”) states that “Qi movement can cure all diseases, or can help people remain safe and sound during a plague (行气或可以治百病, 或可以入瘟疫).”[7] This book points out that practicing Qi movement can cure all diseases and defend the body against epidemic. Bao Sheng Xin Jian “Dao Yin Fa” (《保生心鉴·导引法》 Heart Mirror for Health Preservation “Daoyin Method”) states that “Starting from midnight, no breathing out from the mouth should happen. Only a slight clear breath is taken from the nose. Take this measure once after midday and again before noon, or three times every day. Over time illness will be gotten rid of and the body will gradually be lightened.”[8] Therefore, practicing two to three times inspiration and expiration a day in a calm state can help get rid of pestilence and improve body health.

Meditation

The methods of keep thinking for preventing plagues are mentioned in “Symptoms of Warm Diseases (温病候),” “Symptoms of Pestilence (疫病候),” and “Disease Cause of Warm Disease (温病论病源)” which are the chapters in the Treatise on the Pathogenesis and Manifestations of Various Diseases. Chapter of “Symptoms of Warm Diseases” stated that “When the rooster crows, recite the names of the gods of the four seas several times to ward off hundreds of evils, so that people will not get sick. The god of the East Sea is A Ming(阿明), the god of the South Sea is Zhu Rong (祝融), the god of the West Sea is Ju Cheng (巨乘), and the god of the North Sea is Yu Qiang (禺强). It is also said that the heart qi is red, the liver qi is blue-green, the lung qi is white, the spleen qi is yellow, and the kidney qi is black. These kinds of Qi surround the human body and ward off evils. You need to keep thinking that the heart is flaming and bright against protect the body from evils and it could stay safe during an epidemic.”[9] In “Cultivation Chapter (道林养性)” of the Bei Ji Qian Jin Yao Fang (《备急千金要方》 Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold Pieces for Emergencies), it is stated that “At
the beginning of learning the Tao, practitioners need to get rid of external interference. If they can do it, they will not get sick even in an epidemic (是知勿外缘者,真人初学道法。若能如此者,可居瘟疫之中无忧疑矣).”[9] If a practitioner can withdraw from external disturbances, his mind will be calm, his qi and blood circulation will be smooth and his healthy qi will be strong. He will not contract the contagious diseases even during an epidemic outbreak.

Sit still as a form of therapy

In the Dong Jing Gong An Mo Mi Jue (《动静功按摩秘诀》Secrets for the Dynamic and Static Massage), daoyn is also applied to treat “color consumption (色痨)” and “wine consumption (酒痨).” The same book also points out the treatment methods for “consumption” disease. “When you are sick due to overexertion, sit upright, clear your mind, keep your eyes closed, deactivate the Manipura chakra, and close your nose and mouth. This would descend the heart fire and ascend the kidney water, resulting in the heart and kidney qi mixed together. (凡劳疾,正坐,清心瞑目,不视脐轮,缄鼻闭口。使心火下降,肾水上升,二气交结为妙).” Keeping calm and meditating will intersect the heart and kidney, and promote the growth of healthy qi.

All in all, qigong therapy mainly adopts methods such as calming the mind, daoyn with flexion and extension, keeping the thought of the circulation of qi, and etc., in order to promote the abundance of healthy qi, dispel evils, or to prevent the invasion of external evils. Qigong therapy focuses on the prevention of epidemic diseases. As is mentioned above, there are many such similar expressions in TCM classics, including “pestilential pathogen and toxin will not be able to cause the disease (瘟瘴疫毒莫能为患),” “not suffering from the epidemic disease even in the prevalence of pestilence (坐于温疫之中无忧疑),” “not being attacked by the pestilence (不入瘟疫),” “no invasion of the evil qi (邪气不侵)” and so on. Chapter of “Symptoms for Warm Diseases not Infecting People (温病今人不相染候)” in the Treatise on the Pathogenesis and Manifestations of Various Diseases states that, “Epidemic diseases are caused by abnormal climate and disharmony between warmth and coolness. People who contract such pathogenic qi will become sick, and will easily affect other people. It may even cause the extermination of an entire family and infecting others, therefore medicines and ‘magic arts’ must be taken to prevent it.”[10] This suggests that epidemic diseases possess the characteristics of “been contagious (传相染易),” and “magic arts” are proposed as an early prevention method. “Magic arts” refers to the methods of praying by witch doctors and keep thinking in qigong therapy. If people have contracted evil qi, the evils must be expelled as soon as possible. As is mentioned in the Jin Gui Yao Lue (《金匮要略》Synopsis of the Golden Chamber), “daoyn and expiration and inspiration should be practiced when the four extremities are heavy (四肢才觉滞涩,即导引吐纳).”[10] Daoyn and expiration and inspiration should be used when the evils are in the superficial layer of the body and the evils should be used when the evils are in the superficial layer of the body as soon as possible.

The Key to Fight Epidemic Diseases with Qigong Therapy

Various treatment measures in qigong therapy emphasize the importance of “inner peace.” It is believed that inner peace can bring about qi tranquility, which can cultivate healthy qi and resist evils. For example, Xin Ke Bao Sheng Xin Jian “Huo Ren Xin Fa” (《新刻保生心鉴·活人心法》New Engraved Heart Mirror for Health Preservation “Mental Cultivation Methods for Human Beings”) points out that “Ancient sacred doctors could treat people’s minds to prevent illnesses from happening; while doctors today only know how to treat diseases but do not know how to heal the mind. It is definitely unwise to think that such doctors can cure people of diseases, they are just trying to catch the shadows and ignoring the substance. They hardly realize that disease is caused by the mind……this is the key factor in infecting all plagues （古之神圣之医而能疗人之心,预使不致于有疾; 今之医者, 惟知疗人之疾而不知疗人之心, 是由舍本逐末, 不究根源而攻其流, 欲求疾愈, 不亦愚乎……殊不知病由心生……凡传染一切瘟疫之证是也）.”[7] “If you want to treat the disease, you must first treat the mind (to remove doubts, anxiety, dissatisfaction) for the edification of Tao (欲治其疾, 先治其心。心正其心,然后资于道).”[7] Mental adjustment is the core principle of qigong therapy. It ensures the smooth movement of qi by regulating qi disorder caused by emotions. Emotional changes have great influence on the human body. Su Wen “Ju Tong Lun” (《素问·举痛论》Plain Questions “Discussion on Pains”) states that “Excessive anger drives qi to flow upwards; excessive joy slackens qi; excessive sorrow exhausts qi; excessive fear makes qi sink…… excessive fright causes Qi chaotic…… excessive contemplation binds qi (怒则气上, 喜则气缓, 悲则气消, 恐则气下……惊则气乱……思则气结).”[11] All kinds of emotional changes may cause qi disorder of the human body, leading to abnormal qi movement and blood circulation and ending up with diseases. The Huangdi’s Internal Classic states that “all diseases are caused by the disorder of qi (百病生于气) .” Abnormal qi movement is an important cause of diseases. Qigong therapy keeps emotions in a stable state by adjusting the mind and thus reducing the harm stemming from abnormal emotions.

Qigong therapy is of active self-medication, which requires the patient to practice persistently to achieve significant results. For example, Bao Sheng Xin Jian “Xiu Zhen Yao Jue” (《保生心鉴·修真要诀》Heart Mirror for Health Preservation
“Essentials for Cultivation”) states that “Anyone who wants to cultivate themselves must choose a clean room, adapting themselves to the warmth and coolness, dryness and dampness of the weather. At the early dawn when the qi grows, or while lying in bed at 3 am to 5 am, you may sit and stand up according to the qigong principles. You must first massage your eyes, make a fist, adjust your breath, and then focus on your breath. Being diligent, your body will be relaxed and healthy, the disease will be conquered, and life will be prolonged.”[7]

This emphasizes that practicing qigong must be diligent and persistent, and its effect will be achieved after quite some time. Qigong can not only prevent diseases but also prolong lives.

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None.

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