

## Ritual, rejuvenation practices, and the experience of aging in early Chinese religion

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### Abstract

*Scientific advances in the field of biomedicine have fundamentally changed the ways in which we think about our bodies. Disease, aging, and even death, are no longer seen as inevitable realities but as obstacles that can be controlled, and in some cases even reversed, by technological means. The current discourse, however, can be enriched by an investigation of the various ways in which the aging process was perceived and explained throughout human history. In this article, I argue that in early China, the experience of aging and the challenges and anxieties it produced played a constitutive role in the shaping of religious culture. Drawing on a variety of medical, philosophical, and liturgical sources, I outline two models of aging: one that presented aging, and especially the loss of virility, as an undesirable but solvable condition that can be reversed with the aid of various rejuvenation techniques, and a more socially conscious model that depicted aging as a process of gradual social ascension, a natural but fundamentally unalterable condition that should be accepted, marked, and even celebrated through ritual. I conclude by demonstrating the legacy and lasting influence of these models on two of the most fundamental tenets of Chinese religion: the pursuit of longevity and the ideal of filial piety.*

KEYWORDS: AGING; CONFUCIANISM; DAOISM; SELF-CULTIVATION; LONGEVITY;  
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## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a surge in academic publications focused on the body. This ‘somatic turn’, as it has come to be known, is the product of multiple philosophical, sociopolitical, and cultural processes and trends, from the emergence of new forms of intellectual discourse such as social constructionism, phenomenology, and feminist theory, to the increasing dominance of consumer culture and the ever-growing influence of technology on every aspect of human life. The latter, especially, has played a key role in the resurgence of the body as the subject of study. Scientific advances in the fields of medicine, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology have fundamentally changed the ways in which we think about our bodies. Aging, disease, and even death, are no longer seen as inevitable realities but as obstacles that can be treated, controlled, and in some cases even reversed, by technological means (Shilling 2005:2–5; Turner 2012:1–3).

The scientific study of aging, gerontology, has produced a wealth of data about the cellular and molecular processes that regulate aging and the impact of senescence on the deterioration of cognitive and physical abilities. No scientific project, however, can be completed without a theoretical model that organises, explains, and guides the empirical findings. Thus, despite the inherent difficulty of working across diverse academic fields, methodologies, and technologies, contemporary scholars are now producing new and exciting interdisciplinary theories of aging that draw on ideas and paradigms from the fields of humanities and social sciences to better frame the existing empirical data and shape future trajectories. One of the shared tenets of these theories is the assertion that while physiological factors such as damage to irreplaceable molecules and cells and deterioration of visceral systems play a substantial role in the process of senescence, aging, as an analytical category, is also socially constructed. While all living organisms age, the experience of aging varies across different cultures, socio-demographic groups, and gender. The demarcation of life stages and the definition of youth, adulthood, and old age are socially and culturally constructed through institutional discourses and practices. In addition, they have real consequences for those whom they seek to define, as they not only shape the way individuals make sense of their own process of aging but they also shape the way society treats its elderly population (Bengtson *et al.* 2009:4–6; Calasanti and Selvin 2001:14–17).

Current scholarship in the field of gerontology identifies religion as one of the key institutions that help shape the experience of aging. An increasing number of studies suggest a strong correlation between an active religious life and higher scores on the quality of life index among elderly

people. From a psychological perspective, a strong belief in a set of spiritual convictions is said to be instrumental in handling the physical and mental stress of aging. Sociologists, on the other hand, stress the role of religious communities as social networks that offer a safety net for aging members of the population. While the great majority of the existing empirical research is focused on Judeo-Christian traditions, studies based on data collected in Asian religious communities are now accessible. However, a significantly lesser amount of scholarly attention has been directed to the study of aging in the history of religions in general and Asian traditions in particular. This state of affairs is especially surprising in the case of China, as two of the basic tenets of Chinese religions – filial piety, namely the veneration of one's elders often associated with the Confucian tradition, and the individual quest for longevity, associated with the Daoist tradition – offer us well-developed and multilayered theories of aging (Kimble *et al.* 1995–2003).<sup>1</sup>

In the following pages, I will argue that the experience of aging and the challenges and anxieties it produced played a constitutive role in the shaping of Chinese religious culture. Drawing on a variety of medical, philosophical, and liturgical sources from the third and second centuries BCE, a seminal period in the development of early Chinese religion and thought, I will argue that the anxiety produced by aging and its adverse effects on the human body prompted two types of responses: individual and communal. On one side, proponents of medical, dietary, and sexual self-cultivation regimens, seeking to create demand for their services among the educated elites, opted to present aging, and especially the loss of virility, as an undesirable process of physical and cognitive degeneration, but also as an ultimately solvable condition that can be reversed with the aid of their arsenal of rejuvenation techniques. On the other side of the spectrum, the Confucian architects of the state and family ritual system, alarmed by the growing popularity of the culture of longevity and its potentially harmful impact on society, responded by presenting aging as a process of gradual social ascension, a natural but fundamentally unalterable condition that should be accepted, marked, and even celebrated through participation in a standardised set of communal rituals.

### **The culture of longevity and early Chinese rejuvenation practices**

The desire to prolong one's life [*changsheng*], suspend the process of aging, and even avoid death altogether is one of the most well studied facets of Chinese religion. While the search for longevity and immortality is often associated with Daoism, an organised religion that emerged in the second century CE and is still widely practised around the Chinese cultural sphere

today, requests for a long life [*shou*] can already be found in eighth century BCE prayers inscribed on ritual bronze vessels used in ancestral worship and other liturgical sources (Yu 1964–1965:87). By the fourth century BCE, we find that the human body and its cultivation became a prevalent topic in philosophical, religious, and medical discourse. While the various states that inhabited the Chinese Central Plain at that time were at constant war, the emergence of manuscript culture enabled the proliferation of new ideas and practices among educated elites. Although a great number of participants in this intellectual renaissance were motivated by a desire to find solutions for China’s sociopolitical woes, there were those who chose to focus on devising answers to more individual concerns – improving one’s health and prolonging the lifespan through new medical, sexual, and dietary regimens and techniques. Recent archaeological excavations have unearthed a large number of technical manuscripts, ranging from prognostication, divination, and exorcism manuals to bio-spiritual self-cultivation guidebooks, which offer us a glimpse into the realm of these religious adepts, physicians, and ritual experts, whose techniques and the theoretical models that underlined them were later standardised and incorporated into canonical religious and medical texts that remained influential throughout Chinese history.<sup>2</sup>

The recent influx in the publication of excavated manuscripts confirms that a significant number of educated affluent elites in early China were concerned with the cultivation of their bodies through meditation, callisthenic, and sexual regimens. Moreover, a close reading of these sources reveals that, out of all the different topics they address, the process of aging and its negative effects on the body was most likely the single most important concern for the common practitioner. The fact that *The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor – Basic Questions* [*Huangdi Neijing Suwen*], one of the most influential theoretical texts in the history of traditional Chinese medicine, opens with a chapter dedicated solely to an exploration of aging only serves to reaffirm its significance as a constant source of anxiety and concern. Like most of the chapters in this book, Chapter 1 takes the form of a dialogue between the mythical ruler the Yellow Emperor and his private physician and tutor, Qi Bo. It opens with the following question:

I have heard that the people of high antiquity lived to be more than a hundred years old, but in their movements and activities there was no weakening. As for the people of today, after one half of a hundred years, the movements and activities of all of them weaken. Is this because the times are different or is it that humans have lost this ability? (Unschuld and Tessenow 1998:30, with minor alterations)<sup>3</sup>

Laying the groundwork for the detailed theory of aging that will be outlined throughout the chapter, the Yellow Emperor's question reveals a few significant points. First, it depicts aging as a negative process of physical decline, thus betraying its importance as a major source of anxiety. Secondly, it also posits an important juxtaposition between the people of today, who cannot prevent the process of aging, and the people of high antiquity, who were able to overcome its negative effects and prolong their lives while maintaining their youth and vigour. Third, and most notably, it reveals the Yellow Emperor's most pressing concern – will he be able to prolong his life or is the secret of longevity a thing of the past?

Qi Bo's response to this concluding query is unequivocal. Swiftly brushing aside any notion of a qualitative difference between the people of high antiquity and their contemporary counterparts, he frames the process of aging in a way that might sound very familiar to a modern reader, as an 'engineering problem'. As years progress, the body develops a variety of mechanical problems that are caused by a natural process of wear and tear (Turner 2010:435–8). But, whereas modern biomedical models explain this process using terms such as cell degradation and mitochondrial mutation, Qi Bo depicts aging as the result of the natural depletion of *qi* from the human body. *Qi*, often translated as vital breath or life force, is a fundamental concept in traditional Chinese medicine. Stored in the viscera, it is circulated throughout the body via a network of conduits that run alongside the blood vessels. When the flow of *qi* is unobstructed, the body is healthy, but when it is impeded or blocked, it causes symptoms that are perceived as a disease. A physician, drawing on a wide range of therapeutic techniques, can restore the harmonious flow of *qi*, thus removing all symptoms of illness (Harper 1998:69–70).

Drawing on this basic model of the body, Qi Bo proceeds to depict old age as a chronic state of *qi* disorder. The symptoms we associate with aging, such as hair loss, the appearance of wrinkles and grey hair follicles, and limited mobility, are caused by changes in the circulation of *qi*. But, whereas in the case of illness these are mainly triggered by pathogens, in the case of aging it is instigated by a natural diminution of *qi* in the viscera, our internal storage units. The human body, argues Qi Bo, ages according to a standard timetable. From birth until the late twenties, our bodies grow, develop, and become stronger. But, after reaching their prime physical shape, the natural depletion of *qi* causes them to decline and lose their vigour. Moreover, this deterioration can be further accelerated by external factors, such as exorbitant consumption of food and alcohol or excessive sexual activity, all of which are commonly practised by the people of today, thereby reducing their lifespan (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011:30–41).

Qi Bo's aging timetable divides human life into distinct stages. The first stage, from birth to the early twenties, revolves around the growth and maturation of one's physical frame, *qi* and blood vessels, and internal organs. The middle stage, initiated by puberty, is a time of peak physical condition and sexual fertility and vigour. It is followed by the third and final stage, which is characterised by a gradual decrease of *qi* in the viscera. This leads to the various side effects of old age discussed above, with special emphasis given to the waning of reproductive abilities, namely menopause for women and the loss of sexual potency for men. At this point, this model might seem perfectly reasonable, and even familiar, to the modern reader. It depicts the creation of new life through sexual reproduction as the apex of human biological existence and portrays the preceding period as preparation for this task. Once the body can no longer contribute to the continuation of the human species, it gradually deteriorates and finally perishes. But, when read in the context of the growing popularity of the culture of longevity in early China, a few substantial differences begin to emerge. First, Qi Bo's timetable depicts how aging would naturally progress if no measures are taken to influence it. But we already know that this process can be altered by certain activities that accelerate the depletion of *qi* or harm the viscera in which it is stored. It only stands to reason, then, that the same process can thus be decelerated, arrested, or even completely reversed through the use of the proper rejuvenation techniques. Immediately after presenting his timetable, Qi Bo proceeds to provide multiple examples of figures from the past who were able to 'reject old age' [*quelao*] and maintain the integrity of their body so they were able to remain sexually vigorous and produce offspring well into the final stage of their life (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011:41–2).

The close association between aging and the loss of sexual virility and the idea that these can both be prevented by the use of the correct rejuvenation techniques features prominently in a variety of technical self-cultivation manuals excavated near the village of Mawangdui, modern-day Hunan Province, in the 1970s. As opposed to the *Inner Canon*, which was more theoretical in nature, the Mawangdui manuscripts contain detailed step-by-step descriptions of a wide variety of self-cultivation techniques. The only concrete reference to specific rejuvenation techniques found in the first chapter of the *Inner Canon* is a brief allusion to the circulation of *qi* through breathing exercises. In the excavated manuscripts, on the other hand, we find a plethora of techniques, ranging from guided meditation and calisthenics regimens intended to enhance the flow of *qi* inside the body to methods designed to counter the natural depletion of *qi* by acquiring it from external sources. Certain herbs, liquids, or even animals were

considered to be great sources of *qi* that can be used to prolong one's life and maintain a youthful appearance. However, in the Mawangdui texts, the main form of *qi* acquisition takes the form of ritualised sexual intercourse during which the male practitioner is able to solidify and extract the vital *qi* of his female counterpart and absorb it into his own body, thereby replenishing the *qi* that was lost due to the process of aging.<sup>4</sup>

Often referred to as 'rejecting aging and restoring vigour [*fuzhuang*]', this sexual technique reaffirms the fact that the prolongation of life in early China did not merely involve the quantitative extension of one's lifespan but also a qualitative component – the restoration of youth and vigour. Moreover, the recurrent references to the issue of erectile dysfunction and the loss of sexual virility suggest that the anxiety produced by the aging of the body played a significant role in the development of the culture of longevity. While information about the readership of the technical manuscripts is limited, their content suggests that it was comprised of educated, affluent, aging men who had the financial resources and free time to devote themselves to such rigorous regimens (Tavor 2016:52–5). The models of aging presented in these texts can thus be seen as part of a conscious strategy designed to increase the allure and attraction of rejuvenation practices. In the Mawangdui manuscript *Discussion of the Culminant Way of All under Heaven* [*Tianxia Zhidao Tan*], we find another example of an aging timetable. But, unlike the model espoused by Qi Bo, which covered the whole extent of male and female human life, this one focuses only on the negative aspects on aging for middle-aged men:

[In cultivating] *qi* there are eight proliferations and seven diminutions. If you are unable to utilize the eight proliferations and eliminate the seven diminutions, then, at the age of forty, your *yin qi* [i.e. sexual virility] will half itself; at fifty, your mobility will decline; at sixty, your hearing will no longer be acute and your vision will no longer be clear; at seventy, your lower [body] will wither and your upper [body] will unravel, your virility will be rendered useless, and mucus and tears will flow out [from your orifices]. (Harper 1998:428, with some alterations)

The general outline of this timetable follows the one presented in the *Inner Canon*. It posits middle age as the starting point of the male practitioner's physical and sexual decline and portrays impotence, the complete loss of virility, as the final stage in this process. It differs, however, in its firm characterisation of aging as the negative outcome of not following their regimen of sexual cultivation. Whereas Qi Bo opted to depict aging as a disease that can be *cured* through the right technique, the author of this passage takes the argument to the next step by suggesting that their regimen can actually *enhance* one's health, virility, and lifespan. The vigour of those who follow

these techniques, argues the author ‘will not wane ... they will live in a state of joy and happiness. Drinking and eating as they please, their skins glossy and taut, their *qi* and blood full and replete, and their body is light and lithe.’ (Harper 1998:429, with some alterations).<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary models of prolongevity tend to divide the biomedical project of life extension into three different types. In the *decelerated aging* model, the process of aging is simply delayed, thereby increasing the average life expectancy. Thanks to recent developments in healthcare, this process is already taking place in many technologically advanced and affluent societies. The second model, *compressed morbidity*, represents a more ambitious goal – extending youth at the expense of old age. In this scenario, humans will enjoy a youthful and vigorous life free of disease and disability, followed by a relatively short period of old age and a quick death. The third and most radical model, *arrested aging*, involves the reversal of aging in adults through a variety of biomedical rejuvenation technologies. As opposed to the compressed aging model, in which the period of youth is prolonged but the maximum lifespan of human beings is not increased, proponents of arrested aging argue that, with the right rejuvenation technology, we will be able to double the current life expectancy in the not so distant future (Post and Binstock 2004:2–4).

Reading early Chinese discourse on aging against the backdrop of these models reveals an interesting point. While the practitioners of longevity techniques often associated themselves with mythical figures who lived to an extremely old age, such as Ancestor Peng [Pengzu, often referred to as the Chinese Methuselah], and while the first chapter of the *Inner Canon* certainly alludes to a significant increase in life expectancy, from the fifty-year lifespan of the people of today back to the hundred-year lifespan of the people of high antiquity, the models found in the *Inner Canon* and the Mawangdui manuscripts tend to focus more on the restoration of youth and vigour through arrested aging techniques than on the quantitative prolongation of life. The prominence of sexual virility in particular suggests that early Chinese longevity culture was less about life extension and more about alleviating the anxiety and stress caused by the process of aging and its adverse side effects on the human, or more specifically male, body.

In the following centuries, the reversal of aging and the restoration of youth became one of the trademarks of an individual self-cultivational religiosity associated with the organised religion of Daoism. The use of ritualised intercourse for the supplementation of *qi* was set aside in favour of new techniques that stressed the adoption of certain dietary restrictions and the ingestion of herbal formulas. Ultimately, the pursuit of arrested aging became almost synonymous with Daoist religion. Some early Chinese Bud-



dhist sources, for example, devote a great deal of effort to distinguish their own dietary and meditational practices, designed to cultivate the mind, from the practices of the Daoists, designed to attain corporeal benefits such as rejuvenation (Arthur 2013).

The Buddhists, however, were not the first to criticise the culture of longevity. While proponents of individual rejuvenation practices advocated for a theory of aging that depicted it as a natural but ultimately reversible process, some of their contemporaries offered an alternative model, which highlighted the negative social implications of longevity culture and sought to present aging as an irreversible but ultimately positive process of social ascension that is marked and celebrated by ritual participation.<sup>6</sup>

### **Ritual and the celebration of aging**

The growing popularity of self-cultivation techniques among educated elites in the third century BCE was not embraced by all members of the intellectual community. The two preceding centuries saw the rise of an influential political and social movement that claimed that the only cure to the state of sociopolitical chaos that pervaded the Chinese Central Plains at that time was the implementation of a moral and just government. Commonly known as Confucians, advocates of this movement promoted a vision in which educated elites devoted their early years to the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of their own moral character and spent their adult lives educating others, serving in government, and providing spiritual guidance and ritual services to their community. The rise of the culture of longevity represented a clear and immediate threat to the Confucians, who were concerned that the allure of eternal youth would be enticing enough to shake the commitment of their target audience to a life of public service.

One response, suggested by the third century BCE thinker Xunzi, was to revise and repackage the old Confucian doctrine to make it more attractive to potential followers. In his writings, Xunzi explicitly addresses practitioners of rejuvenation practices, whom he calls followers of Ancestor Peng, by criticising the egotistical nature of longevity culture on one hand and questioning the efficacy of their self-cultivation regimens on the other. Stressing the corporal elements of ritual participation and its transformative effect on the physical, emotive, and cognitive make-up of the individual practitioner, Xunzi chooses to depict the Confucian regimen of self-cultivation as a socially responsible but also superior alternative to longevity practices such as sexual techniques, meditation, and calisthenics. Ritual participation, he argues, can provide the same physiological and spiritual

advantages as these techniques, but it can do so on a much wider level, thus ensuring both individual and communal advantages (Tavor 2013:313–30).

Xunzi's denouncement of the culture of longevity as socially irresponsible is echoed in the contemporary debate over enhancement and rejuvenation practices. While some see biomedical augmentation as simply the next logical step in human evolution, others warn against its potential environmental, economic, and sociopolitical implications. As natural resources are limited, they argue, longer lifespans might put an undue strain on global economy and welfare systems. In addition, since rejuvenation techniques are expensive, at least in the initial stages, it might lead to a growing gap between different socioeconomic groups, making good health and longevity the sole prerogative of the wealthy (Turner 2010:440–1). Despite some similarities in their socially motivated critique of longevity, however, the main crux of the early Chinese argument is quite different. The Confucian ideal society was, after all, far from egalitarian. While classical Confucian thinkers certainly stressed the moral duty of the government in ensuring the welfare of the people and caring for their education, they also promoted a vision of a ruler-centred highly stratified society that saw the preservation of ritual hierarchy as a vital means for the maintenance of the social order. Given the low literacy rates at that time, educated elites occupied a particularly central role in this society as moral leaders, political advisors, and educators. The allure of longevity thus represented a real danger for the early Confucians. In order to deter potential public servants from pursuing the dream of eternal youth, they had to offer an alternative theory of aging that depicted old age in a positive light, as a desirable goal accompanied by social prestige, as well as individual spiritual and physical advantages. They did so by utilising a familiar trope we already saw in the medical self-cultivation texts – a standardised timetable for aging that divides human existence into distinct life stages. But whereas the previous model depicted aging in the form of a bell curve, a gradual rise into the years of virility followed by a decline into old age, the model touted by the Confucians was one of linear progression. The *locus classicus* for this can be found in what has been dubbed as the 'spiritual autobiography' of Confucius, found in the *Analects* [*Lunyu*], one of the earliest and most authoritative texts of classical Confucianism:

The Master said, 'At age fifteen I set my heart upon learning; at thirty I took my place in society; at forty I became free of doubts; at fifty I understood Heaven's Mandate; at sixty my ear was attuned; and at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without overstepping the bounds of propriety.' (Slingerland 2003:9)

Traditional commentaries to this passage divide these six life stages into three pairs. During the first decades of his life, Confucius submitted himself to a laborious regimen of moral self-cultivation in order to take his place in society and pursue a life of public service. The emphasis in this phase is on Confucius' commitment to educating himself in order to serve others. It is followed by the second phase, middle age, in which Confucius begins to feel comfortable with himself and to understand his role in the overall cosmic scheme. It is not until old age that Confucius achieves a real sense of fulfilment and ease. After decades of self-cultivation and ritual participation, the normative dictates of human society become like a second nature to him, allowing him to do as he pleases without the fear of transgressing social norms (Slingerland 2003:9). The passage was clearly intended to serve as an inspiration and source of comfort and guidance for those who wish to follow in the footsteps of Confucius. Unlike other self-cultivation regimens, the Confucian project offers minimal immediate gratifications or palpable individual benefits. Its success is thus reliant on convincing potential followers to switch their mentality into long-term thinking and assuring them that all the years of hard work in their youth will result in a comfortable and carefree existence in their old age, just like Confucius. Moreover, as opposed to the model promoted by their rivals, this timetable deals with anxiety caused by aging by presenting old age as a desired goal and not something that should be feared. The culture of longevity's glorification of youth is thus substituted with the exaltation of old age.

Constructing a discourse that paints the process of aging in a positive light and posits old age as a desired ideal is only one part of the equation. Any discourse must also be accompanied by practices and institutions that reinforce it, such as ritual. In early China, we find a number of elaborate theoretical models that stress ritual's role in inscribing social and moral values upon the individual and reshaping their innate nature through participation in daily ritual activities.

One of the best examples for that can be found in the *Book of Rites [Liji]*, a collection of essays compiled and edited in the early second century BCE. In addition to theoretical essays that discuss the origin, nature, and role of the Confucian ritual system, the text provides us with detailed descriptions of a wide variety of rituals, from funerary and mourning rituals to rites of passage such as wedding and capping. While it devotes much attention to the ritual role of the ruler, the royal family, and other functionaries in the court, it also includes descriptions of village and family rituals, such as ancestral sacrifices, hosting, and feasting. While the *Book of Rites* itself is prescriptive in nature and information about the actual practice of its intricate ritual system within all echelons of early Chinese society is limited, we

do know that it played a crucial role in shaping both the state and family ritual systems that prospered throughout Chinese history until the modern era.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the ideal ritual system depicted in the text played a significant role in the construction of an alternative discourse of aging aimed at educated elite readers. Throughout the pages of the *Book of Rites*, we find a cogent theory of aging that emphasises the vital role of the aged in society and stresses the role of ritual in delineating and celebrating the process of aging. The significance assigned to this process is attested by the fact that, just like in the *Inner Canon*, we find a timetable for aging in the very first chapter of the book, the ‘Summary of Rites’ [*Quli*]:

When one is ten years old, we say, ‘He is a boy;’ he begins attending school. When he is twenty, we say, ‘He is a youth;’ he undergoes the capping ritual. When he is thirty, we say, ‘He is at his vigor;’ he becomes the head of the household. When he is forty, we say, ‘He is in his prime;’ he takes office. When he is fifty, we say, ‘He is getting grey;’ he commits to the responsibilities of civil service. When he is sixty, we say, ‘He is an elder;’ he provides advice and instructions. When he is seventy, we say, ‘He is old;’ he delegates his duties to others. In his eighties and nineties, we say of him, ‘He is very old;’ He is comparable to a seven-year-old – though he may be charged with a crime, he is not subjected to penalty. At a hundred, he is called a centenarian and has to be provided for. (Legge 1885:65–6, with some alterations)

When read against the backdrop of the previous three timetables, a few conclusions can be drawn from this passage. First, while it bears some resounding similarities to Confucius’ autobiography, such as the emphasis given to youth as preparation for an adulthood defined by public service and the association of old age with social and cultural prestige, this timetable highlights the social, rather than individual, aspects of aging. Whereas Confucius portrays aging as a personal journey of self-cultivation, the author of this chapter depicts it as a shared experience, a story of the changing relationship between an individual and his family and community. Secondly, as opposed to its medical counterparts, this model provides us with a social, rather than biological, timetable for aging. While each stage of life is assigned a biological age, it is also accompanied by a social designation, such as youth, elder, and centenarian, and a corresponding ritual stipulation that marks it. Becoming a ‘youth’, for example, is celebrated by the capping ceremony, a rite of passage that marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Third, it posits aging as a process of gradual social ascension and not one of physical decline. The stage of peak sexual virility and vigour, which occupied the zenith position in the bell curve model, is identified here as a preparatory stage that precedes the most crucial three decades in the life of an educated civil servant. Grey hair, which was identi-

fied as a symptom of *qi* deficiency in the medical texts, is depicted in this model as the mark of an authoritative and distinguished official whose life experience allows him to excel in his job and provide guidance and mentorship to his juniors. Finally, it is important to note that this long period of social involvement and commitment is recognised and recompensed during one's golden years. In a model that wishes to depict aging as an irreversible process, the physical benefits obtained through rejuvenation practices need to be replaced by alternative forms of reward offered by the community such as comfortable retirement, exemption from social and legal responsibilities, and guaranteed physical welfare.

The final component is especially important as it stresses the role of ritual as a safety mechanism designed to relieve the anxieties triggered by the aging process. The ritual veneration of old age is, of course, not unique to Chinese religion. The stipulation 'thou shall rise before the aged and show difference to the old' found in *Leviticus* 19:32 is one of the most well known ritual and ethical prescriptions in the Old Testament and has been the subject of much discussion in later commentaries. The *Mishnah*, for example, identifies 'the aged' as the age of sixty and 'old' as seventy and stresses that the ritual stipulation of difference is superior to the act of rising from one's seat when an aged person enters the room, suggesting that the older one becomes, the higher one ascends in the hierarchical ritual order (Dreyfus 1998:85–7). Similar ritual prescriptions can be found throughout the *Book of Rites*. The 'Royal Regulations' [*Wangzhi*] chapter, for example, contains a lengthy subsection titled 'The nourishing of the aged' that details the various ritual perquisites offered to the aged in court sacrifices based on the following theory of aging:

At fifty, one's health begins to decline; at sixty, he does not feel satisfied unless he eats meat; at seventy, he does not feel warm unless he wears silk; at eighty, he does not feel warm unless there be someone to share his bed; and at ninety, he does not feel warm even with that. (Legge 1885:241, with some alterations)

Unlike Confucius' autobiography, which glorifies aging by stressing the spiritual benefits one gains by growing old, this theory acknowledges the basic premise we encountered in the medical texts – aging is a process of gradual physical decline. It differs, however, in two main aspects: first, in its portrayal of aging as a natural and ultimately irreversible process, and secondly, in its emphasis on the role of the community in offering solutions to the adverse effects of growing old. Ritual, in this case, functions as a safety mechanism that ensures the welfare of the elderly and prevents their neglect once they are past their prime. Throughout the section, the author outlines a series of ritual perquisites offered to people over the age

of fifty: the aged are supplied with better food during court rituals, they are seated closer to the ruler and his family, and they receive the veneration of younger family members and court officials. In addition, age also offers certain ritual exemptions – they are no longer expected to participate in lengthy ceremonies, for example, or follow the strict and arduous rules of mourning practices.<sup>8</sup> The continuous practice of these rituals is thus crucial for maintaining social stability and harmony. It enforces the proper mental attitude towards the elderly while at the same time encouraging and developing the more abstract feeling of veneration and filial piety that became almost synonymous with the Confucian tradition throughout history.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

My main goal in this article was to draw attention to the role of aging, its impact on the human body, and the challenges and anxieties it produced on the development of two prominent features of Chinese religious culture – the individual quest for longevity and the social veneration of one's elders. Focusing on the third and second centuries BCE, which I identified as a seminal period in the history of religion in China, I provided a set of alternate variations on a shared literary trope, the aging timetable, and divided them into two types – models that depicted aging as an undesirable process of physical and cognitive degeneration that can be reversed with the aid of rejuvenation techniques, and models that depicted aging as an unalterable process of gradual social ascension that should be accepted, marked, and celebrated through ritual participation.

While I chose to present the proponents of individual self-cultivation regimens and the Confucian designers of the ritual system as rivals, it is important to note that, throughout Chinese history, longevity pursuits and the culture of filial piety continued to exist side by side as important facets of Chinese religious life. Life prolongation regimens remained popular among the elite and stories of immortality seekers continued to inspire generations of readers. In the twentieth century, cultivational practices such as Qigong have become popular not only in China but all around the globe. In addition, mainland China is currently one of the leading forces in genetic engineering research, with numerous studies dedicated to life prolongation conducted in its universities and laboratories. At the same time, the ethical ideal of filial piety and the institution of ancestor veneration became a hallmark of Chinese religion, featuring prominently not only in Confucian rituals but also in Chinese forms of Buddhism (Palmer 2007; Chan and Tan 2004).

The modern era, however, saw a decline in the status of Confucian ideals in general and filial piety in particular. Decades on, anti-Confucian persecution in the second half of the twentieth century, alongside vast economic and demographic changes in contemporary Chinese society, have challenged the traditional family unit and the notion of elder veneration. Accelerated by medical advancements contributing to the prolongation of the average lifespan, the welfare of the aged has become a serious problem for the current regime, prompting it to look for solutions from its own history. In July 2013, the Chinese government enacted a law aimed at compelling adult children to visit their aging parents. Titled ‘Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People’, the law contains nine clauses that lay out the duties of children and their obligation to tend to the needs of the elderly. This legislative action was also accompanied by a targeted mass-media campaign promoting the social value of filial piety and updating traditional stories of filial piety to better suit the sensibilities of young readers (Wong 2013; Jacobs and Century 2012). These measures demonstrate that aging continues to play an important role in the negotiation between individual and communal concerns in Chinese society. Understanding the history of this tension is extremely useful as it provides us with a richer and more nuanced portrait of this ongoing debate. In addition, it can be used as a valuable case study for unravelling the intricate relationship between religion and aging and the role of embodied experience in shaping religious and cultural institutions, ideologies, and practices.

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### Notes

- 1 For a survey on aging in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, see Thursby (2000), pp. 155–180. The only two book-length historical studies dedicated to the study of aging in the context of Asian religions are Tilak (1989) and Drott (2016).
- 2 Henri Maspero (1981) was one of the first scholars to argue that Daoism ‘is above all a religion the end of which is to lead the faithful into ... a long life which need have no end’ (p. 319). The most detailed study of early longevity practices in the context of manuscript culture is Harper (1998).
- 3 Unschuld and Tessenow (2011) also provide a brief overview of the dating, authorship, and historical significance of this text in their introduction, pp. 9–12.
- 4 See, for example, Harper (1998), pp. 388–9, 410–11. See also Goldin (2006), pp. 285–308. The dating and authorship of these texts are a matter of continuing scholarly debate, but textual analysis suggest they were written at the end of the third century or beginning of the second century BCE, around the same time as *The*

- Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* and the *Book of Rites*, which will be discussed in the following section. See Harper (1998), pp. 19–20.
- 5 For more on the move from cure to enhancement in the history of Western medicine, see Wiesing (2008), pp. 9–24.
  - 6 One of the best examples appears in *Spreading the Light of Buddhism* [Hongming Ji], an early sixth century CE anthology of apologetic literature compiled by the Buddhist monk Sengyou that was preserved in the *Taishō Tripitaka*, the definitive edition of the *Chinese Buddhist Canon*. See: T 2102 52:0089b.
  - 7 For more about early Chinese theories of ritual, see Tavor (2013). On the textual history of the *Book of Rites*, see Ing (2012), pp. 5–7, 219–23.
  - 8 See, for example, the ‘Family Regulations’ [Neize] chapter in Legge (1885), pp. 464–6.
  - 9 One of most well-known arguments for the veneration of the elderly as a crucial feature of filial piety and an integral component of the harmonious Confucian society can be found in the works of Mencius, a central figure in classical Confucianism alongside Confucius and Xunzi. See Mencius 6B7 and 7A22, in Van Norden (2008), pp. 165, 177.

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