

► Why not moving forces you to live longer and be healthy

STILL LIFE

By Vera Penêda

In a world beset by movement, that stillness might be the secret to a longer life can make most of us quite jumpy. Yu Yongnian, 91, an internal martial arts practitioner and investigator, claims that a daily 40-minute session of body stillness will make you sweat your way to a longer life. Yu supports that the *zhanzhuang* (站桩) system – motionless postures to improve “all round force” – is the best practice to develop internal force and a healing therapy that prevents chronic diseases.

Slow force

Cheerful and wise, Yu sounds like a Chinese version of *Star Wars*’ master Yoda, only he has the strength of a panda bear. “Just by doing *zhanzhuang*, standing still, doing nothing, one can develop inner force? I couldn’t believe this,” says the master, sipping tea. Clear-minded, his patience is as long as his age when he explains 70 years of practice, experiments and investigation. His lifework is a pioneering input of scientific knowledge into *zhanzhuang*.

From Shandong Province, Yu was working in dentistry in Beijing when he became interested in martial arts. “I was 20 and didn’t have a specific problem but I wasn’t in good shape. I was sick and had fever regularly in winter and never really got on my feet. There was always something wrong with me,” he says.

He started practicing tai chi and *xingyiquan* (respectively, a soft and aggressive form of inner martial arts) alongside many of the old and sick folks at the hospital who couldn’t practice sports to shape up. “Sports in general are designed for young people and according to the belief that the more you move and sweat, the better you’ll get. In China though, many argue that the more you develop the muscles and push the body to the limit, the more your heart and circulatory system will grow weaker,” explains Yu, “which shortens life expectancy.”

Regular practice of soft and slow exercises strengthens the circulatory system, “that’s why tai chi practitioners often live longer.” Strong, agile animals like lions never outlive slow animals like the elephant and the turtle, he says. “The longest-lived animals can’t even be compared to trees like the giant cypresses in Beijing that are over 1,000 years old.”

Embrace the one

“It was my teacher Wang Xiangzhai who told me I should study *zhanzhuang*, ‘standing like a post.’” Yu is probably Wang’s last living apprentice, who revolutionized martial arts in the 20th century with his methods based on stillness. Unlike other martial arts, it doesn’t have routines. “I was a doctor and it was even more difficult to believe that *zhanzhuang* could heal.”

“Pull and push the tree, Wang told me, but I didn’t understand how I could possibly do that at a distance,” says Yu of his training at Taimiao, (now the Workers’ Cultural Palace near Tiananmen) in 1945, where about 120 people came every morning to do *zhanzhuang*. “*Bao yi wu li* – embrace the one without moving or leaving – that’s one big concept behind *zhanzhuang*.” To embrace the one is actually not so difficult but to relax and hold on to that for 40 minutes or an hour is another story. “All round force’ takes guidance and years of training,” he says, talking of many practitioners who gave up. “With practice, you feel more in sync with your body and

you’ll experience more internal changes.”

Zhanzhuang practice involves static postures, standing, sitting and lying. “The pulse determines the internal movement. Moving really slowly, the pulse remains stable and by standing still the pulse can go up 150 beats per minute,” he explains. Any person will normally experience respiratory problems with a 100-beats-per-minute pulse, but Yu says that, unlike other physical activities that reduce blood oxygen levels, *zhanzhuang* increases oxygenation. “That’s why, in a 20-minute *zhanzhuang* session, the more you sweat, the clearer your mind feels and there’s no respiratory acceleration.” *Zhanzhuang* proved good in the treatment of chronic diseases like hypertension, arthritis, coronary diseases and digestive problems as well as insomnia, says Yu, numbering cases of people who recovered movement in their limbs after two months of training.

Alternative power

Overwhelmed by the positive results, Yu focused on proving the healing potential, combining it with Chinese philosophy as well as medical knowledge.

“After Liberation, martial arts were forbidden allegedly for promoting social gatherings and superstition. *Zhanzhuang*’s combat faction lost strength,” says Yu as the group of enthusiasts who practiced it for *yangsheng* (health and longevity) grew up, prompting its therapeutical application at health centers all over the country.

It fell into decline mostly thanks to a mix-up with darker practices. “With a boom in *qigong* in the 70s many healing systems appeared, some were good, others were a pure con, like those that transmit *qi* and heal with the hands.” Yu recalls the times when people blindly believed in a mixture of magic and esoteric hocus pocus offered by quack doctors. “Then came along Li Hongzhi who created *Falun Gong*. He taught based on *zhanzhuang* principles with new concepts that promised spectacular results; all was fake and even dangerous.”

Zhanzhuang is currently used as therapy in only a few places. Although Yu’s success and research attributed scientific weight, its medical practice never became widespread. “Sports associations don’t recognize it as exercise because there’s no movement; health organizations disregard it as therapy because there’s no medicine intake,” says Yu.

“Nowadays it’s more of a personal training, at home, some schools, with TCM doctors or with masters in parks. Abroad it’s gaining a lot of enthusiasts.” Some of Yu’s students promote it in London and Paris. He hopes his books, videos and disciples rehabilitate *zhanzhuang*.

A fan of scientific and cultural documentaries, at 91 Yu also demonstrates exceptional memory. “I’m still alive. I feel good; I don’t think I’d be this good for so long if it wasn’t for *zhanzhuang*.” He’s permanently at it: “Once you internalize it, it’s a way of control over your body and mind,” he says. “When you have insomnia, try standing in the same position for 30 minutes. Your fingers and arms will start swelling, feel numb; your shoulders and neck will hurt. Believe me, soon you’ll feel like falling asleep.”

TCM doctor Karim Nimri, investigator and translator of Yu Yongnian’s books, contributed to this article.

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