

Fortune and the Pulse: Pulse Physiognomy in Mid and Late Imperial China

Abstract

This paper explores pulse physiognomy in mid and late imperial China and looks at how the traditional Chinese medical knowledge of pulses and bodily channels is systematically used for mantic practices. The pulse is perceived in these medical/mantic texts as a cosmic and numerological phenomenon, and such an understanding of the pulse is the foundation for this medical divination technique. Pulse physiognomy shows the multiple nature of medical knowledge in the traditional Chinese context and the cosmological understanding of medicine and human physiology.

Introduction

Physiognomy is the technique of predicting people's future by examining their physical bodies. It is a well-known mantic practice in Chinese history and is widely seen in many different cultures in the world. Physiognomy as a fortune-telling technique as well as a subject of academic discussion did not only happen in Chinese history but also in Europe. The efforts people made to link human physicality with our character and our soul were developed into a social institution. Keith Thomas has showed us that physiognomy, including palm reading and urination divination, was a popular way of decision making for people from a lower social station in late Medieval England.¹ However, in the medieval period and early renaissance the argument remained of whether physiognomy was a vagabond's trick or a form of medical science. The connection between human physique and the self strongly influenced and inspired literature, philosophy and social aesthetics. In the early modern European physiognomy, the body was seen as the materialisation of people's nature and the manifestation of one's spiritual qualities, such as the inclination towards good or evil, the purity or chastity of the soul, and so on.

Physiognomy in China

Chinese physiognomy is known as 'The Technique of Inspection' (*xiangshu* 相术). Early on, in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, the historical work of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.), we already see records of physiognomy practice. The Court Historian Shufu was sent by the Zhou court to attend the funeral of

the king of Lu. The Prince Duke Mu was told that the Historian Shufu was good at physiognomy, and asked him to inspect his two sons. Shufu said: 'Your son Gu will look after your life [for a long time], and your son Nan will bury you after you die (which means that Nan will outlive Gu). Your son Gu has a plump chin, and his descendants will spread in the kingdom of Lu.'² Shufu's prediction was accurate according to the texts. Early records show that during the Spring and Autumn period physiognomy was used in political consultancy, and the prediction of disease and longevity of the aristocrats. The rulers' personal future as reflected on their bodies was seen as influential to state affairs and the fate of a kingdom. Physiognomy was also applied to animals, especially horses, which constituted a very important military resource. The Taiwanese scholar Zhu Pingyi has shown that later, in the Han dynasty, physiognomy was used in many different occasions among the ruling class.³ From promotions in the official posts to marriages, people consulted physiognomists to throw light onto their own fortune and that of others. Even the emperor became the subject of such inspections. Historiography from the Han dynasty is replete with descriptions of the auspicious and inauspicious signs on the rulers' body.⁴ However, because of the dearth of material we have from early China, we can hardly know in detail what physiognomy was like back then.

The time from the Song to the Ming dynasty (960-1644), was another important period for the development of Chinese physiognomy, and this is the time that I mainly focus on in my research. The institutionalisation of the Imperial Examination (*keju*

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科舉) meant that educated men from a lower social station had the chance to participate in state affairs and enter the centre of power. Through this anonymous examination system, the selection of officials during the Song and Ming period attenuated the influence of the powerful aristocratic families in politics. New social conditions increased the contingency of life and people's uncertainty about the future.

At the same time, established religions such as Buddhism and Daoism influenced popular cosmology, medical theories, and the social elites' way of thinking. Both Liao and Benjamin Elman point out that under these circumstances, literati in both the Song and the Ming dynasties were obsessed with mantic and magical practices to cope with the feeling of uncertainty.^{5,6} Liao in particular studies the relationship between literati and fortune-tellers in the early Song period, arguing that divination techniques played a vital role in the communication between people from different social stations. Fortune-tellers as a special group of people had connections with various different communities and played an important role in blurring the boundary between what we know as high culture and low culture. Physiognomy also developed into a more sophisticated system in this time period. Starting from the Song dynasty it was widely used as a technique to inspect people's body in order to tell a person's political and financial prospects. In particular, a part of the body that was and still is most fervently discussed in Chinese medical discourse started to be the subject of physiognomy divination: the pulse.

This article examines the social history and cosmology of pulse physiognomy in the two extant Ming dynasty pulse physiognomy manuals to point out this technique's unique way of understanding the body; it also adumbrates the theoretical as well as social landscape of pulse physiognomy in mid and late imperial China. The core questions we shall ask are: how could fortune-tellers tell people's fortune via the inspection of the pulse? What is the relationship between pulse physiognomy and pulse diagnosis in China? These questions are important to what 'medical' means in a Chinese context.

The medical conceptualisation of the pulse in China

One specific and significant dimension of the body in traditional Chinese medical and physiological knowledge is the pulse (*mai* 脈) and its extension, the channels (*jing* 經). The Chinese conceptualisation of the pulse is perhaps the most important one in Chinese medicine, and is regarded as one of the most ancient medical innovations in China.⁷ The Ming physician and herbalist Li Shizhen said:

Both the study of medicine and the study of disease in this world take the understanding of the pulse as their priority. 世之醫病兩家，咸以脈為首務。⁸

Almost a third of the manuals listed in the *Catalogue of the Primary Texts in Chinese Medicine* (*Zhongguo zhongyi guji zongmu* 中國中醫古籍總目), published in Shanghai in 2007, are about the study of *mai* and body channels.⁹ The large volume of extant texts on this particular topic shows the importance of the pulse and people's evaluation of it. Paul Unschuld argues that, based on archaeological and historical evidence, the idea of the pulse as the unit of a systematic organic body and its energy flow must have appeared during the Han dynasty in China, when the idea of an organised and systematic cosmos, political state and somatic structure were linked to each other.¹⁰ In the excavated texts in the Mawangdui Early Han tomb, we already see the effort to use the concept of *mai* in a numerological context as the flowing channel of bodily *qi* in nourishing life practices.¹¹ In the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經), the pulse is defined as part of the microcosmic bodily system.¹²

According to this medical canon the pulse is the fundamental proof that our body and the cosmos share the same material foundation and have a similar morphological structure. The microcosm of the body is also influenced by the movement of the universe. The order of the pulses tallies with the order of the universe, and in this sense the order and structure of the pulses represent the course of the cosmic movement, which is similar to the relationship between the body and the cosmos represented in conventional physiognomy. Li Jianmin argues that a transformation of the medical body from a demonological framework to the correlative and systematic microcosm was preliminarily completed in the Han dynasty but may have occurred in the Warring States in a particular social reality.¹³ Kuriyama Shigehisa in his analysis of the early Chinese medical treaties concludes that the Chinese idea of *mai* is not just a 'tunnel' for body fluids and has a broader sense.¹⁴ It is a palpable mechanism that connects and organises different body parts. *Mai* is a combination of the pulse, the blood vessels, the movement of the yin and yang energies, and other forms of energy and fluid flows in the body. Kuriyama stresses the palpability, visibility and qualities of the pulse as central to what it can express about the whole body. By touching the six points on the two wrists of our body, the *cun* 寸, *guan* 關 and *chi* 尺, physicians are able to deduce and illustrate the pattern of bodily movement and the deep reasons for disease. In other words, the pulse expresses the body.

Pulse physiognomy: a medical divination

From the extant texts alone it is hard to know with any certainty what the relationships were between physiognomy, *qi* cultivation techniques, and medical and meditative practices during the Song and Ming periods. The pulse physiognomy technique known as the 'The Pulse of Ultimate Purity' (*Taisu mai* 太素脈) discussed below, however, provides us with a clue about how the

pulse as a medical subject was also used in divinatory techniques.

While the term 'pulse physiognomy' (*xiangmai* 相脈) appears in some Han texts, it only referred to a type of medical inspection that involved many cosmological elements.¹⁵ Later in the Song, Yuan and Ming contexts, pulse physiognomy was considered a skill similar to pulse diagnosis, but where the practitioner examined people's pulse to predict their fortune. Here we shall have a brief look at a famous pulse physiognomist from the Song dynasty. The Buddhist monk and physician Zhiyuan in the Northern Song period was known for his prestigious skill of telling fortune by testing one's pulse. He could also tell the fortune of the son by inspecting the pulse of the father.^{16,17} Zhiyuan also had a very close relationship with both the Song court and Tibetan elite monks, being involved in many political events on the border of the Song state and Tibet.¹⁸ Both Wang Gui and Wang Anshi (1021-1086), two court officials and close friends of Zhiyuan's, were amazed by his pulse physiognomy skills. Wang Gui thought that this was not an ancient technique but a new one, whereas Wang Anshi thought that it would not be surprising at all if archaic physicians already possessed this skill, because a seemingly similar way of performing physiognomy could be found in many historical records.¹⁹

In fact it is only in Song books that we see for the first time the name *Taisu mai* as referring to a recognised physiognomy technique. However, Tang Jinzhong argues that although the name of this technique appears in the Song period, the same type of knowledge is already found in the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*, a medical canon that can be dated back to an earlier period and was systematised during the Song dynasty.²⁰ He also finds that a similar fortune-telling skill exists in traditional Tibetan pulse diagnosis. Yet, the only material Tang bases his argument on is the preface of a Ming dynasty Pulse of Ultimate Purity book, whose author ascribed this technique to the *Inner Canon*. Hence Tang's conclusion on the relationship between pulse physiognomy and the *Inner Canon* is simply a reiteration of what Ming pulse physiognomists thought. According to the Chinese scholar of the Republican period Dong Zhiren, it is possible that The Pulse of Ultimate Purity was established as an autonomous fortune-telling technique in the early Sui dynasty, but he reaches this conclusion only based on materials from the Qing dynasty that ascribe this technique to physicians from the Sui.²¹ The name *taisu mai* is mentioned in many different private diaries of Song and Ming scholars, and in various medical treatises of these periods. As mentioned above, we see this name for the first time in the late northern Song period, yet records of using pulse diagnosis to predict fortune can be seen in an earlier time, during the Tang period, without the name *taisu mai*.²² Contrary to what Dong advocates, the earliest extant written record is from the Tang dynasty, and there

is no evidence that this technique first appeared in the Sui period.

Pulse physiognomy was considered a skill similar to pulse diagnosis, but where the practitioner examined people's pulse to predict their fortune.

In general physiognomy seemed to be little concerned with the inspection of pulses, which is a crucial subject for medical prognosis and diagnosis. Most of the physiognomy manuals rather emphasise the morphological features of the body, like the shape of the nose, the structure of the bones, or the colour of one's countenance, or the subtle inspection of the spirit in the eyes. In the *Compendium of Divine Physiognomy* (*Shenxiang quanbian* 神相全編), a general physiognomy book produced in late Ming, out of 230 texts, only two are dedicated to the physiognomy of the pulse: 'Signs of Qi, Colour and Pulse [showing] Life and Death' (*Qise shengsi maihou* 氣色生死脈候), and 'Verses on the Signs of the Correspondence between Pulses and Complexion' (*Maise yinghou jue* 脈色應候訣).²³ Again, these two treatises focus on the colour of the pulse on the face, rather than the tangible qualities on the wrists, and combine the inspection of the pulse with the inspection of the facial structures. However, in a commentary within the Qing catalogue of physiognomy manuals, *The Physiognomy of Grand Qing* (*Daqing xiangfa* 大清相法), a particular type of physiognomy is referred to as 'The Pulse of Ultimate Purity' (*taisu mai* 太素脈),²⁴ and it is introduced as a systematic practice to predict a person's future from the examinations of their pulse, the *mai*.

The Pulse of Ultimate Purity is classified as part of the physiognomy tradition in *The Physiognomy of Grand Qing*. However, if we look at the perception of this technique before the Qing period, we will see a totally different story. Most of the collections that include the *taisu mai* manuals are collections of medical material rather than of physiognomy.²⁵ The late Ming physician Wu Kun (1552-1620), in his essay anthology *On Pulses* (*Maiyu* 脈語), said that pulse physiognomy is the hybrid of pulse diagnosis and physiognomy. He believed that it was a deviance in medical practice, and that it should not be used by doctors at all because its understanding of the pulse is purely numerological and divinatory, and not sufficiently clinical.²⁶ Wu Kun is correct about the fundamental intention in pulse physiognomy, at least based on what is said in the two extant manuals of pulse physiognomy. These are both titled *The Esoteric Verses of the Pulse of Ultimate Purity* (*taisu maijue* 太素脈訣)²⁷ but differ in content. One was compiled by the Ming physician Gong Tingxian (1522-1619), the other by late Ming physician Peng Yongguang. Both place the numerological understanding of the pulse and the method of predicting

the future based on pulse examination at the very front of their texts, and the proportion of these passages outweighs that of the sections related to medicine. Especially in the *Esoteric Verses* by Peng Yongguang, there is hardly any content directly related to medical healing or diagnosis.

The logic behind pulse physiognomy is that the physical body generates people's different types of sociality and different patterns of social life.

Paradoxically, most of the figures who commented on pulse physiognomy were doctors or medical theorists.²⁸ In general, physiognomic knowledge does contain a significant amount of traditional medical and physiological knowledge, yet the overlap between physiognomy and traditional medicine should not be overstated. The main common ground that physiognomy and traditional medicine share is a similar cosmology and the way the body is conceptualised, whereas *taisu mai* is deeply rooted in the medical understanding of the pulse. However, professional physicians and medical theorists' disagreement and even contempt show the resistance of the professional medical circle to this technique, because the major purpose of pulse physiognomy is to predict fortune. It is hard to say whether *taisu mai* belongs to the system of conventional physiognomy, nor would it fit in the category of conventional pulse diagnosis. As a technique applying divinatory knowledge to an extremely medical subject, the pulse, it is natural that most of the interest on pulse physiognomy was from doctors and physicians, and the same can be said about its practitioners. In comparison with facial and other bodily features, the pulse is more challenging to understand for people without a medical background; detecting and examining the pulse requires good medical training, and this makes pulse physiognomy easier for doctors to understand and learn. However, we cannot say that this makes pulse physiognomy 'less physiognomic'. This technique has been perceived as, applied as and known as a fortune-telling technique. The fundamental idea of predicting fortune based on the examination of the human physique stays the same in pulse physiognomy, as it is in conventional physiognomy. Thus we can say that pulse physiognomy is the combination of traditional medicine and physiognomy that is essentially divinatory, and was regarded as different from both conventional fortune-telling and medical diagnosis. It is also a contested technique among physicians and medical theorists.

The technicality of pulse physiognomy

The name *taisu*, the 'Ultimate Purity' is firstly seen in the late Eastern Han (25-220) text *Master Lie* (*Liezi* 列子):

In the past, the sage organised heaven and earth by yin and yang. If the formed beings were born from the formless, then where do heaven and earth come from? Thus [the sage] says: there are the Ultimate Simplicity, the Ultimate Initiation, the Ultimate Origin, and the Ultimate Purity. The Ultimate Simplicity is where qi is not yet seen; the Ultimate Initiation is where qi begins to emerge; the Ultimate Origin is where the forms begin to emerge; the Ultimate Purity is where qualities begin to emerge.

昔者聖人因陰陽以統天地。夫有形者生於無形，則天地安從生？故曰：有太易，有太初，有太始，有太素。太易者，未見氣也；太初者，氣之始也；太始者，形之始也；太素者，質之始。²⁹

This passage is quoted in the extant pulse physiognomy manual compiled by Gong Tingxian mentioned above.³⁰ This cosmogony is regarded as the fundamental idea for pulse physiognomy. The examination of the pulse is the examination of its physicality. According to both *Esoteric Verses*, qualities are differentiated into yin and yang, and the five phases, whose movements and interactions create the universe and the body. The yin yang power and the five phases constitute the five viscera, the six inner organs, as well as the pulses and channels in our body, and our bones and flesh. The cosmos and the pulses share the same physical and energetic ground as it is proposed in other physiognomy manuals.

The physicality of the cosmos and the body can be further divided into the Eight Trigrams (*bagua* 八卦), the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行), the Ten Heavenly Stems (*shi tiangan* 十天干), the Twelve Earthly Branches (*shier dizhi* 十二地支), and other different correlative systems of cosmic powers.³¹ This very organised and sophisticated system of correlations that describes the cosmic movement in the two Ming dynasty *Esoteric Poems* manuals is minutely embedded within the Song and Ming medical theory of 'The Five Circulatory Phases and Six Seasonal Qi' (*wuyun liuqi* 五運六氣). It is a system that dissects the energetic movement of the annual cycle into different types of phases and qi, in order to predict the dominant disease of a certain year in a given region.³² The Circulatory Qi theory is defined in the pulse physiognomy manuals as the fundamental basis of pulse physiognomy. The numerological aspect of the Circulatory Qi system is well adapted to the numerological properties of the pulse in the medical manuals.³³ The numerological movement of the cosmic power and that of the energy in the body follow the same pattern and are connected by qi. The mechanism of the pulse is correlated to cosmic changes.

This system of pulse correlation serves as an index for the predictions of fortune. Human beings come into being as the consequence of the movements and interactions of qi; from these movements different physical qualities of human being arise, and the difference ensues between

eminent individuals and humble ones, and different kinds of fortunes. Peng's manual says:

The birth and nature of a human being are formed by yin and yang; the eminent and lowly positions are distinguished by the qi that one receives. The five viscera and six internal organs discriminate the different demeanours. Fortune and misfortune in people's lives are miraculously revealed in such way.

人生資稟貫陰陽，受氣沖和分貴賤，五臟六腑別根基，平生災禍如神見。³⁴

Here, the logic behind pulse physiognomy is that the physical body generates people's different types of sociality and different patterns of social life. Our social life is determined by the configuration of the cosmic power in our body. Our sociality is a part of our physicality. Thus social stratification is essentially cosmological and physical. The nobility and humbleness of our life is reflected in the bodily configuration of qi, which is the pulse. This is a very common idea seen in the Song and Ming intellectual and popular discourse, and the Ming dynasty scholar as well as religious master Lin Zhao'en (1517-1598) expressed himself in very similar terms.³⁵ Thus the mantic aspect of the pulse can be seen as an extension of the well-established qi monism in traditional cosmology.³⁶ Sakade Yoshinobu argues that the oneness of qi as the preliminary power of the world is the general idea underlying most of the prognostication techniques in traditional China; the formed manifestation of the movement of qi as the material world and material objects are the trace of fate in time and space.³⁷ This is seen by William Matthews as a kind of 'homologism' in Chinese qi cosmology that takes all the myriad of things as homogeneous and transformable.³⁸ The cosmos and human beings are made of the same substance, qi, and the two are constantly influencing each other. Thus there is no human existence beyond the physical body in pulse physiognomy.

Because of the highly complex numerological cosmology of pulse physiognomy, the way of examining the pulse is different from conventional physiognomy. In the *Compendium*, the examination of the pulse is defined as a technique to inspect the visible qualities of the pulse on the face, as conventional physiognomy centralises the face as the most expressive part of the body. In contrast, pulse physiognomy applies the method of medical pulse diagnosis: to touch the six points on people's two wrists: *cun* 寸, *guan* 關 and *chi* 尺.³⁹ The six points are in correspondence with the twelve pulse channels of the five viscera and six inner organs (*wuzang liufu* 五臟六腑), and their correlative properties.



Figure 1: The cun, guan and chi correspondences⁴⁰

The palpability of the different pulses is the basis of mantic predictions. Different physical qualities of the pulse as ascertained through sensory contact provide different information about a person. In pulse physiognomy, the way to categorise the different qualities of the pulse is not the same as in the popular *Inner Canon* system. This unique way of differentiation is called 'Five Yin Pulses, Five Yang Pulses and Four Provisioning Pulses' (*wu yinmai, wu yangmai, si yingmai* 五陰脈, 五陽脈, 四營脈):

Five yang qualities: floating (*fu* 浮), slippery (*hua* 滑), solid (*shi* 實), tight (*xian* 弦), surging (*hong* 洪)

Five yin qualities: faint (*wei* 微), sinking (*chen* 沉), slow (*huan* 緩), logged (*se* 澀), concealed (*fu* 伏)

Four provisioning qualities: light (*qing* 輕), clear (*qing* 清) heavy (*zhong* 重), blurred (*zhuo* 濁)

Further explanations are given to illustrate the different qualities.⁴¹ The yin yang qualities should also be evaluated

on the basis of the particular pulse being examined. For example, the Heart pulse is a yang pulse among the pulses of the five viscera, thus it should preferably display yang qualities; the six organ pulses are all yang pulses compared to the five viscera pulses, so their yang qualities should be more marked than those of the viscera pulses; the reciprocal applies to the yin qualities. Because the yin yang attribution of the pulses to the organs and viscera is relative, the qualities are also relative. The four provisioning qualities are divided into positive ones and negative ones in general, rather than being attributed to specific viscera pulses. They are general qualities that can be found in all the pulses. The qualities are also assigned to the five phases system. If the phase of the qualities above and the phase of the pulse itself match well, then the result is auspicious, otherwise it is considered as inauspicious.⁴² This is a unique way of categorising pulse qualities that is not to be seen in any medical book.

The examination follows a fixed order. Firstly the examiner locates with precision the six points on the wrists, and through these points detects the status of pulses, of the viscera and organs. Then he matches them with the correlative systems: the five phases, the branches, trigrams, and so on and so forth. Then the examiner evaluates the balance between the pulses and the cosmic powers the pulses are correlated to. It is well known that the traditional Chinese cosmological system, especially the one we have here, is highly relational. Each element of the system has multiple relationships with other elements in variety of different ways. To take the five phases system as an example, phases have two types of relationships, the generating ones and the overcoming ones (*xiangsheng xiangke* 相生相剋). This means that a given phase always generates one particular phase while being overcome by another. These rules are also applicable to the pulses. The physical qualities of the pulse and the correlations should also be examined in the awareness of the seasonal conditions, the phase of the cosmic movement and the condition of the environment. The circulatory qi system is used in the examination to see the accordance between the situation of the pulse and that of the cosmos. The examination time is calculated in terms of the heavenly stems and earthly branches, and their five phases configurations. The quality of the pulse should be evaluated in relation to the branches system and the particular physical quality of the pulse is understood in light of the numerological property of the examination time. For example, during the spring, the wood phase dominates the season, the yang power starts to grow, and, accordingly, the Liver pulse is supposed to be strong, while the Spleen pulse should be slightly weaker. If in that year, the water phase is in charge, then the Liver pulse should be stronger than the Heart pulse. It is only in such an accordance that a person's body shows an auspicious status for his or her fortune, while disharmony may denote

bad fortune.⁴³ This is the point where the pulse is put into the more complex numerological system and technically related to the movement of the universe. Figure 2 is from Peng's manual and shows how different pulses are correlated to the different numerological elements.



Figure 2: The Figure of Mastering Diagnosis (*Zhenfa zhizhang tu* 診法指掌圖)⁴⁴

The details of person's condition should also be considered in the examination of the pulse. The first one is the person's age, because different pulses dominate different life stages, and a person should have a particular pulse examined more carefully depending on their age.⁴⁵ Different physical qualities of the pulse also foreshadow what is going to happen in a person's future years. In this way, our personal lifespan and life patterns are located and specified in the bodily space. When making predictions, the spatial structure of the body and the physical qualities are the index of an individual's temporal changes. The daily bodily conditions of the person are also decisive. Thus the pulse should be examined early in the morning, when a person's qi is settled and calm. Both manuals claim that 'whenever performing pulse physiognomy, the pulse must be examined between 3 and 5 o'clock in the morning at the crack of dawn, for it be precise. If the examination is done in a rush, and the examined person's qi and blood are not settled, or one's heart is confused, then the examination will not be accurate.'⁴⁶

The third aspect to be taken into consideration is pulsation disorders. An irregular pulse is a body disorder that is considered inauspicious and directly related to death. The pulse rates of the viscera pulses are counted, and the frequency of the pulse is related to the five-phase numerology. These numbers with their numerological properties are then related to the stem and branch system, which are the calendric signs used to describe the movement of the cosmos. Thus the number of the pulse rate can be transformed into a specific date, and according

to the manuals, this is the date of the person's death. Both manuals offer very detailed descriptions of how the pulse measuring method works in a numerological manner.

We can conclude that pulse physiognomy examines the pulse comprehensively. It even takes the environmental conditions into account and interprets the pulse in light of the numerological nature of the universe. The potential of the pulse as an index to people's fortune lies in the divinatory understanding of the physical qualities of the pulse rather than on solely medical grounds.

Male and female pulses are also conceptually distinguished in the manuals. Most of the rules in Song and Ming physiognomy manuals are more applicable to men, and the physiognomy of women is often highlighted as a separate type of technique. Women's fortunes are defined in terms of their influence on their husband and children. Their successful role in their families and the propriety of their behaviours are also vital in their fortune. Women's fortune are seen as the unique consequence of women's physical constitution, which is defined as essentially different from men. In physiognomic inspections, the first and the most practical difference between male and female bodies is the different emphasises on the left and right sides of the body. Unlike men's fortune, women's fortune inhabits in the right side of their body.⁴⁷ Thus when inspecting women's body, the physical features on the right side outweigh those on the left. This general physiognomic understanding of gender also applies to pulse inspections. In the *Esoteric Verses* compiled by Gong Tingxian, we can find the distinction between the pulse in the male and female bodies and the fortunes that resides in them:

In general, [when inspecting pulses], the man's Liver pulse should be heavily pressed to search for [the sign of] the trigram zhen. In this way [the fortune of] his early years will be seen. Touch moderately to inspect the dominant [fortune of] his middle age. [Touch] the right guan point and the Spleen pulse to decide the dominant [fortune of] his old age. It should be heavily pressed. The woman's Lung pulse should be heavily pressed to search for [the sign of] the trigram dui. In this way [the fortune of] her early years will be decided. Touch moderately to inspect the dominant [fortune of] her middle age. [Touch] the Spleen pulse to decide the dominant [fortune of] her old age ... In general it is auspicious for men's [pulse] to run in the qi circulation of the southeast. [This represents the trigrams of] *li*, *xun*, *zhen*, and *kun*. Their qi circulation generate each other, and there will be no overcoming and blocks. It is auspicious for women's [pulse] to run in the [qi] circulation of the northwest. [This represents the trigrams of] *qian*, *dui*, *kan*, and *gen*. Ideally their qi should be solemn and restrained. If a man has the circulation of the northwest, it means mishap. [In his]

career and life there will be many failures.

大抵男子以肝部沉取震卦，以看其初年。中取以看其中主。右關脾脈以斷其末主。沉取方是。女子以肺部沉取兌卦，以決初年。中取以斷中主。脾部沉取以斷其末主 ... 大抵男子宜行東南氣運，離巽震坤是也。取其氣運相生，不尅不滯。女子宜行西北，乾兌坎艮是也。取其氣肅斂為宜。倘若男子得西北之運，為晦滯。行事多有成敗。⁴⁸

The physiological distinction between the male and the female body is a boundary between their different patterns of fortune. Crossing such a physiological boundary means that their social life will be impaired. However, this physiological boundary of the social roles of gender is not permanent. After a certain age, the dominant pulse and viscera in their fortune will become the same, hence the pulse qualities, which means that for both male and female the Spleen pulse will be in charge of their fortune in their later years. Thus, in this sense, the division of gender in social life is only a phase of the bodily change. This is similar to the transformation of the female body in inner alchemy, in which the female body of yin blood should be transformed into the yang form of power, and, by such a transformation, the gender barrier is overcome and replaced by immortality.⁴⁹ T. J. Hinrichs points out that it is during the Song dynasty that women's physiology starts to be treated differently from men's on a theoretical level, as the female body is conceptualised as a physical being dominated by the yin power, the blood, as opposed to the male body, which is dominated by the yang power, jing and qi.⁵⁰

A problem in Chinese physiognomy is that if our life rests on the fixed relationship between the body and fortune, where is the role of virtue and moral progress? In the manuals, heart and virtue are not ignored but highly valued. The heart (*xin* 心), at the same time referring to both the organ and the seat of moral consciousness, is seen as the visible aspect of virtue, and the origin of the exterior physical form. Both a person's virtue and physical form are derived from the heart.⁵¹ The heart matters to the cultivation of virtue in evaluating fortune:

On the Sage and the Commoners says: The heart is the lord of the body, and the origin of the five phases. *Ma Yi* says: before inspecting the appearance and the form, one should first inspect the field of the heart. This is telling the knack of physiognomy. The esoteric poem says: the heart is the commander of the body. If the heart commander is upright, then how can the form not be right? If the form is not right, then it does not matter. Like the king Fuxi with a human head and the body of a snake, and the king Shennong with a human head and the body of an ox, they all became the sage kings of three eras. The knack is crystal clear.

聖凡論雲：心為身主，五形之先，麻衣雲：未觀形貌，

先相心田，此二者方寸之說也。秘訣雲：心者，身之帥，心帥以正，則形孰不正？形有不正者，無論矣，即如伏羲人首蛇身，神農人身牛首，為三代之聖君，方寸之論彰彰明矣。⁵²

Many Ming physicians used pulse physiognomy to diagnose diseases as well as tell people's fortunes.

The heart is both the organ and the virtuous nature of human beings. This is very similar to some conceptualisations of the heart in medieval Europe, where the heart organ is seen as the centrality of intelligence and compassion over the brain, and where virtue cultivation can strengthen the heart.⁵³ The manuals do not distinguish between the heart organ and heart as the intelligence and mind of a person. After all, this physiognomic 'heart' is not at all purely spiritual, for the heart is also the material and physical origin of the visible body. The physical form of the body is believed to be generated by the heart. However, we cannot assume that this is a form of somatic embodiment, in which the body is the materialisation of the consciousness and social interactions. The theory of embodiment suggests that the physical body is inferior to the 'anti-flesh' cultural and social consciousness, which means that the body is subsumed into the social and cultural semiotics.⁵⁴ However, the physiognomic heart is closer to the Ming neo-Confucian idea of the heart, which is the all-encompassing facility capable of comprehending and interacting with both human mind and the material world.⁵⁵ In the physiognomy of the pulse, the pulses and body channels are defined as the internal composition of the heart, thus the inspection of the pulses is also called 'to observe the heart' (*chaxin* 察心):

Those who are good at [examining] the pulse ... can then observe the heart ... The Ultimate Way is subtle, and its change is endless. One should be familiar with its origin, the external side of form and the internal side of qi, and in this way the physiognomy is complete.

善脈者 ... 然而可以心察...至道玄微，變化無窮，熟知其源，形表氣裏，而為相成也。⁵⁶

By tracing the physical features of the pulse, a physiognomist can observe a person's heart. The physical form and the qi (*xingbiao qili* 形表氣裏) are the two sides of the heart. Elisabeth Hsu points out that this term already appears in the excavated texts of medicine and life nourishing from the Han period, and in these texts the heart is the essential foundation of medical personhood; to be human is to have a sentient heart.⁵⁷ In the physiognomy manuals, the heart is also vital to human being's personhood. As we have seen, it is the source and

habitat of virtue, and the origin of the physical form of a person. This is the reason why we cannot easily assert that the body is the embodiment of the heart. Because the body is part of the heart, and the heart has its own physical and tangible dimensions, the body. The heart is the centre and master of the body. As the body inhabits the space between heaven and earth, and resembles them, the same can be said about the heart. Inhabiting the human body, which resembles heaven and earth, the heart controls the whole body. Therefore, the heart is not in a parallel dimension relative to the body but lies in this material world. The virtues of the heart are reflected in one's pulses, and the medical way of understanding the pulse is also the way of understanding virtue.

Transformation of medical and mantic knowledge

Despite Wu Kun's criticism of pulse physiognomy from a medical stance, most of the pulse physiognomy masters we know were local physicians in China. Many Ming physicians used pulse physiognomy to diagnose diseases as well as tell people's fortunes.⁵⁸ In the manuals, we see a mixture of the two knowledge systems, and the mantic function of the pulse is seen as a broader extension of its medical nature. That is to say, the physiological conditions of the pulses determine a person's sociality, and reflect the pattern of the temporal movement of a person's life. From this point of view, the body is not at all the subject of social imposition but the reverse is true. Not only is the pulse used to detect people's health, but also to predict various changes in time. It is perhaps an extreme type of 'embodiment', if embodiment, in Csordas's sense, means that our self is a process in which our body orientates itself in the material world.⁵⁹ Then Chinese pulse physiognomy shows a step further to announce that the self is the body and nothing else. Even the social aspect of human existence, which ostensibly goes beyond human physiology, is actually part of it. Our actions, encounters, and reactions in our social relations are not activities posterior to our physiology, but our physiology already predestines our social life and the process of making 'self'.

This explains why many physicians mastered the technique of the Pulse of Ultimate Purity. Not only because pulse physiognomy requires professional medical knowledge, but also because if medical knowledge and the prediction of social life are fundamentally the same, then medical knowledge already contains the potential for prognostications. The two manuals we have today do not distinguish what is 'medical' and what is 'mantic' as we define them today, but simply take prognostication as part of what the physicians (*yi* 醫) should learn. Telling fortune is the natural consequence of mastering Chinese medical knowledge rather than something that requires a completely heterogeneous learning process. Because human life is phenomenological in such ways, any knowledge about

the physical body is directly also knowledge about the world. Therefore, pulse physiognomy is also an extreme version of Chinese physiognomy, revealing the 'oneness' between medical and mantic knowledge systems that conventional physiognomy does not explicitly explain. The very technical nature of understanding the pulse makes pulse physiognomy a bridge between the big picture of cosmology and the practical action of touching the pulse.

Conclusion

Pulse physiognomy as a mantic skill to predict a person's fortune based on the medical examination of the pulses and bodily channels stands in Chinese history as an autonomous technique. It is the technique to predict people's fortune by examining the pulse points, as it is done in medical diagnosis. As a technique that highly values both the social aspect of human life and the physical one, pulse physiognomy unifies the two into the physicality of the body. The physicality of the body is both social and medical. Using the correlative and numerological systems to analyse the physical qualities of the pulse, pulse physiognomy treats people's social life as part of the body's physical potential. Because of its close relationship with traditional Chinese pulse diagnosis, the manuals of this technique were collected, preserved and studied by doctors and people with medical backgrounds, and it was regarded as a hybrid of physiognomy and medicine. However, this combination is not simply a mechanical add-up of the two. The cosmological and prognostic potential of medical knowledge in China makes it possible for the pulse to be inspected as mantic sign. The pulse physiognomy in mid and late imperial China shows the multiple nature of medical knowledge in different kinds of social practices.

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 - 39 Gong, *Op. cit.* (note 30), p.34
 - 40 *Ibid.*, p.27
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 - 43 Gong, *Op. cit.* (note 30), pp.15-18
 - 44 Peng, *Op. cit.* (note 33), p.412
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 - 46 Peng, *Op. cit.* (note 33), p.402
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 - 49 Despeux, See C. & Kohn, L. (2003). *Women in Daoism*. Three Pines Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp.223-225
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