

Explore the Role and Function of Bigu on Taoism Health Preservation

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Abstract

“Methods of health preservation or regime” pursued by Chinese Taoism sects strives for immortality in a fairyland. One of these methods is Bigu, who had its own take on the genre. Due to its excellent effect on curing diseases and prolonging life, Bigu has been considered as the only path to becoming an immortal. As a consequence, Bigu occupies an important position in all Taoism methods of health preservation.

Key words: Bigu; Taoism; Health preservation; Effect

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INTRUDUCTION

Bigu is one of the most spectacular cultural heritages in China, and has lasted for 2500 years. Its exact origin is quite hard to certify while this method is recorded in many ancient Chinese books. We define Bigu as refraining from eating grain or grain refrainment.

1. BIGU IS AN IMMORTAL STATE

The earliest record of the person who recommended Bigu in ancient history books is Zhang Liang in the Western Han Dynasty. In *Historical Records* written by Si Maqian, Liu Hou is recorded to have refrained from eating grain as

his serious diseases. Ge Hong said in his masterpiece that Zhang Liang has focused on self-cultivation, and refrain from eating grain for an entire year, then has received excellent effects. Thus it can be seen that Zhang Liang is not only a founding father of a country, but also a practitioner, beneficiary of health preservation method, Bigu.

There are several ancient sayings of the origin of Bigu, one of them is the ascetical saying. It is said that the great Buddha Shakyamuni has kept ascetic practices for 6 years, eat only one kind of hemp and one kind of wheat each day. According to Buddhism recordings, Buddha Shakyamuni does not resist on curing diseases through food refrainment.

Obviously, if the discussion is merely on the cultivation of oneself or curing diseases, food refrainment does not narrowly mean refrainment from any food.

Another saying of its origin is pursuing immortality. After Taoism is established, Taoists inherited Bigu as one of the most important paths of becoming immortality, which is why Bigu has almost become the particular saying or word of Taoists pursuing immortality.

Taoism emphases and focuses on happiness of nowadays and the importance of lives. Taoism aims at self-cultivation and health preservation. The Taoists who keep insisting on Bigu methods are outnumbered generation after generation in China.

At the beginning of the establishment of Taoism, its self-cultivation spirit and pursuing immortal aim is closely connected with famous mountains and hills. Besides old sayings of the Yellow Emperor cultivating himself on Mount Kongtong, Lao-zi giving lectures of morality on Mount Zhongnan, in *the Annals of San Guo, Biography of Zhang Lu*, records of Zhang Ling established his religion sect in Mount Heming can be found.

As to the requirements of clinking Chinese immortality alchemy pills, some of the alchemists believed that the key to success of clinking Chinese

immortality alchemy pills was to clinker on 28 famous mountains, such as Mount Hua, Mount Tai, Mount Huo etc.. Because inside these 28 famous mountains, lived real immortals and ground fairies, so the immortality alchemy pills have a higher possibility to be successfully made.

As a consequence, finding immortals or fairies must be connected with mountains. Of course, to successfully make immortality alchemy pills, the big islands or mountains surrounded by sea are also good choices, which provided necessary precondition for the process of Bigu.

Looking through the classic statements of the method of Bigu in traditional Chinese culture, whether self-reflection of Confucian school, vegetarian digestion of Buddhism school, or self-cultivation through Bigu of Taoism school, there is no strict requirements for the maintenance of usual diet after food refrainment. Gradual recovery of food digestion, regaining food through mind control (such as cultivators in food refrainment process required to participate in big ceremony or rituals) or decision of whether regain food digestion on the basis of cultivators' appetites are both allowed.

As a health preservation and life prolonging method, Bigu activates and develops the potentials of human bodies through psychological suggestions. At the same time, through hypnosis, Bigu leads subjects or practitioners into relaxation states of refraining food, drinking clear water, adjusting physical and psychological activities, clearing inner body garbage, expelling inner body toxin, fulfilling healthy physical and psychological trends, and then achieve the effects of preserving health and curing diseases.

In 1973, the silk manuscript Grain Refrainment, Air Digestion unearthed in Mawangdui Han Tomb in Changsha are a special discussion over Bigu.

Whereas, in the dynasties of Qin and Han, the method of Bigu is quite popular among people. While Taoism is constructed, the method of Bigu is strongly recommended inside Taoism masters. Generations of Taoists inherited, developed and changed this method of health preservation, and put the method of Bigu in an important position in Taoism masterpieces.

As is recorded in one of the most important works of Taoism: *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*, ordinary people live on eating grain, then defecation appeared inside their bodies and hinders their pursuit for immortality.

Refraining from eating grain would be nearer to being immortal, and nearer to enter the world of celestials.

It is mentioned in *Chuang Tzu*: "On the Miao-ku-yi mountain, a divine lives there, who eats no grain, but lives on air and dew, riding on clouds with flying dragons, roams beyond the ocean."

In *Inner Canon of Yellow Emperor*, "Divines of ancient times can hold the balance of opposites of the universe in their hands: Yin and Yang, digest material essence, and live eternal lives between heaven and earth."

As is recorded in *Secrets of Magic Arts*: The key

method of Taoists pursuing lives prolonged is eating vegetarian food. In addition, most of real Taoists cultivators refrain from eating grain, and only eat fruits, some even refrain from eating grain eternally and not aware of hunger.

Perhaps the method of Bigu is the necessary path for pursuing to be immortals in a fairyland. As grain is composed of mostly slag while less juice, digesting grain is of no use to the clearance of the garbage inside human body organs such as intestines, stomach, and viscera.

While it is said in *Yun Ji Qi Qian*, the first step to pursuit immortality is insisting on the method of Bigu, whereas how would people survive without grain or food? The answer is the digesting of air, which means digesting energy and nutrition through air in nature to keep alive and engetic. As a consequence, the method of Bigu is the necessary path to be immortal.

2. BIGU IS A SELF-CONTAINED FACTION

In the research of Taoism sectarian division, Taoist priest Yi Xinying is famous for his unique and spectacular understanding of Taoism sectarian division. In his master work *Taoism Sect Division Form*, Bigu is listed in the fifth sect, which is referred to as "Bao He Sect", whose most famous representative is Zhang Liang etc.. Yi Xinying considers Bigu faction in a relatively independent position of all Taoism factions, and has a quite rich, profound and long history. Bigu faction emphases on "expiration and inspiration, air digestion, grain refrainment", in order to achieve the effects of curing diseases, prolonging lives and unlock potentials of human beings.

What should be paid notable attention to be that, expiration and inspiration, air digestion, is the precondition of the method, grain refrainment. Some efforts and basis of air digestion should be done in the first place, some kind of energy should be digested, then Bigu can be experimented.

The so called air digestion here, is a whole and complete system of technology, the subjects, time, methods, frequency of air digestion are all certified and included inside the system. This sect still exists today, with an easy but effective method of cultivation, which is not simply equals to control breathing exercises.

For example, to achieve the effect of being slim and losing weight, the cultivators should breathe for three times in a specific direction to a specific moment of each day. Insisting on digesting air to specific acupuncture points, more than one third of the food digestion amount can naturally be decreased. This method can promote health level without any other side effects.

Insisting on this method for more than three months, the weight of cultivators can be obviously decreased,

while their body figures can be naturally back to young status in their 20s.

Based on this method, with minor adjustment, the condition of refraining from eating food several days while not feeling hunger can be achieved. Compared with various methods of losing weight, this method can be considered as the best choice.

3. BIGU CAN CURE DISEASES AND PROLONG LIVES.

Taoist priests in ancient times believe health achieved and life prolonged through digesting air or even food refrainment. Because they believe digesting grain may lead to defecation plugged in their intestine, then diseases appeared out of the defecation, while Bigu can cure diseases and prolong lives.

It is said in the ancient Chinese book *Huai-Nan-Tzu*:

Water digesters are excellent in swimming and avoiding cold, soil digesters are out of annoyances and full of intelligence, wood digesters are strong and full of energy, meat digesters have courage, are rough and doughty, air digesters are long lived like fairies and immortals, grain digesters are smart but easy to die at early ages, while digesters of nothing can immune to death and become immortals.

This might be the ancient conclusion the relationship between food and people, psychological and physical development by Chinese ancestors. People in later generations see “grain digesters are smart but easy to die at early ages” as quite correct statements, while the theoretical basis of Bigu is developed upon these statements.

Combining with the statements of “air digesters is long lived like fairies and immortals”, “digesters of nothing can be immune to death and become immortals”, the thought of Bigu having the effects and functions of health preservation and prolonging life is developed.

In Chinese history masterpieces, many historically relevant records can be found. In *Historical Records—Liu Hou Family*, “Liu Hou has caught many serious diseases, then he starts refraining from eating grain.” In *the Book of Liang, the Book of Wei*, Tao Hongjing, Kou Qian are both good at using Bigu methods to gain healthy aim are respectively recorded.

In *The History of Song Dynasty*, long-lived people like Chen Tuan are good at Bigu methods. As is revealed, insisting on Bigu methods can build healthy and stable states of human bodies.

In modern Chinese history, the most famous practice of Bigu is done by Master Hong Yi. His special practice of Bigu before he becomes a Buddhist, has now been concluded and compiled into *Diary of Food Refrainment*.

This diary has introduced his process of food refrainment, his daily routine life list and spiritual change aspect in detail. The experience of food refrainment by Master Hong Yi has lasted for 21 days, the effort of

beginning food decrease to total food refrainment has gone through 8 days. Total food refrainment has lasted for 7 days, while the later process of returning from total food refrainment back to daily usual diet lasted for 7 days.

In the process of decreasing and increasing food, Master Hong Yi has replaced food with porridge, so that his body can adjust to the change of diet gradually. In the process of total food refrainment, Master Hong Yi has refused all social entertainment activities, and his daily activities have become merely writing, engraving seals, and meditation. In the process of total food refrainment, he only drinks clear water.

According to his diary, in the process of total food refrainment, Master Hong Yi does not feel any physical discomfort, while his psychological activities are not affected by the nutrition digestion decrease. In turn, Master Hong Yi feels much more clear-minded, healthy and quick in reaction both physically and psychologically.

It should be noticed that the method of Bigu by Taoism does not mean that cultivators should refrain from eating anything.

Literally, Bigu means refraining from eating grain, which is approved by most of the modern researchers. But according to the scientific historical investigation, Bigu does not mean refrainment from each particle or kind of grain. At least in the beginning process of Bigu, cultivators should also digest grain, although grain is seen as merely an accessory food choice. Wu Gu is the umbrella name for all kinds of grain, and not restricted to only 5 kinds as literally noted. Wu Gu usually refers to grain kinds like hemp, beans, wheat, millet, rice etc.. We can see that, from this point, Bigu does not mean refraining from eating any kind or particle of grain.

It is recorded in some ancient books that some cultivators may take specific medicines. In *Sheng Nong's herbal classic*, 18 kinds of medicine baits are recorded in detail.

In *Bao Pu zi*, masterpiece by Ge Hong, an essay is a special discussion of “panacea”, in which 125 kinds of medicines are mentioned, mostly possess the function of “cultivation of temperament”, “disease eradication”. In *A Supplement to Recipes Worth A Thousand Gold* by Sun Simiao, 54 recipes of Bigu are recorded, in which 25 kinds of medicines are referred to.

These popular medicines preferred by Bigu cultivators are mostly warm and steady in effect, bitter in taste, such as polygonatum, poria, atractylodes, Chinese wolfberry, turpentine etc. These medicines have the nutrition needed by human bodies, and also possess the functions of curing diseases. The selection of Bigu medicines has active function for the further development of medication in later generations.

Taoism has realized the existence of parasites in people in a quite early time. “San Shi Jiu Chong” is what Taoism called for the parasites inside human bodies, which are similar to the ascarid in modern medicine.

Taoism considers getting rid of three kinds of parasites as the precondition of pursuing immortal. If Bigu methods are used, the grain nutrition parasites needed can be cut off, so that the aim of getting rid of parasites can be achieved.

4. BIGU CAN KEEP PEOPLE SLIM IN FITNESS

Ge Hong recorded in *Bao Pu zi*: "I have seen people insisting on Bigu methods for many times, some of them have insisted for two or three years. They look light, healthy, slim, and able to resist cold."

It is noticeable that western researchers have issued study on "the relationship between diet and health" basing on the preciseness of modern science. Their research result has proven the correctness of consideration over Bigu in ancient China.

In 2007, Doctor Christ at the university of Illinois in Chicago, America, has done comparative study between the diet method of strict diet every other day and diet for years.

The method of strict diet every other day requires participants decide the amount and content of food on their first day of experiment, while on the next day, males should digest food lower than 600 calories while females should digest food lower than 500 calories.

In this research, the experiment subjects are all fat people. Doctor Christ divided them into different groups: The first group keeps their diet as required by ADF, while the other groups maintain their old diet habits. The comparative experiment has lasted for 8 weeks.

The result of experiment has proven ADF to be an effective diet control method. This method is useful to the lowering of excessive weight, and also lower the risk of catching cardiovascular diseases.

An interesting experiment result is, if experiment subjects keep their diet strictly as required by ADF, no matter high-fat diet or low-fat diet they choose on their days of not restricting calories digestion, no negative effects of increasing their risk of catching cardiovascular diseases are proven to be of existence.

In addition, earlier in 2006, Doctor Christ, James Johnson, Donald Robert, and Sujit Johnson has published their report of health effects caused by strict diet every other day. Their experiment subjects are healthy elderly people over 60 years old. In their research process over 3 years, they found out that if the calories of diet days are kept lower than 60% to 70% lower than the average level for a long time, then these old people could prolong their lives for over 40%.

However, basing on their observation, in the first two weeks, the health index of subjects who have participated in the experiment strict diet every other day has obviously improved.

In the process of Bigu, human bodies will intensively break down extra fatty tissue, lose weight, lower blood lipid, beautify human bodies and preserve health. Excessively overweight, not only affects the physical activities and figure beauty, but is also quite easy to cause many diseases, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, coronary heart disease (CHD), edema, fatty liver, amenorrhea, lumbar disease, etc..

Bigu could turn the excessive fat into substance of energy source (energy) to be used by human bodies. With the stimulation of Bigu, the adjustment function of human bodies would be further enhanced, metabolic activities will also be improved, so that the composition metabolism and decomposition metabolism can be placed in a status of dynamic balance. Eventually obesity and related syndrome caused by it can be rooted out, the effect of lipid-lowering and reducing weight thereby can be achieved.

Bigu is also an effective method of vigorous and graceful bodybuilding, because it can improve the digestion of human body energy, which may adjust fat human bodies to be slim, thin human bodies become fatter, body skin clean, clear and moist, the function of dual-directional regulation will be achieved.

CONCLUSION

The research in modern medication has proved that many diseases appeared due to the stay of garbage in the body. Slow fecal transit for a long time will cause chronic intoxication, thus cause many diseases and accelerate the decaying and death of human beings. Through the method of Bigu for a short time, the garbage and waste inside body intestines can enhance the digesting abilities of intestines and stomach, thus eradicates many potential disease risks. Insisting on the method of Bigu under short periods and scientific guidance is sure to act the function of disease curing and health preservation, but we do not recommend Bigu without any accessory guidance. Food refrainment for a long time will be harmful to the health of human beings, which may not have the effects of health preservation, on the contrary, may cause several kinds of diseases.

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