

Sensory integration: the body perception in *chan chuang* practice

Dongchen LI¹(ABCDEF) , Thomas A. GREEN²(DEF) , & Guodong ZHANG*¹(ADEF) 

¹ Institute of Sport Science, College of Physical Education, Southwest University (China)

² Department of Anthropology, Texas A&M University (USA)

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Abstract

Chan chuang, a psychophysical practice renowned for its beneficial effects, has been favored by martial artists and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners since ancient times. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, *chan chuang* has garnered increased attention and recognition. However, existing research primarily focuses on the efficacy of *chan chuang*, rather than exploring the practice itself. Consequently, there is a dearth of scientific and experiential guidance available to current practitioners of *chan chuang*. To address this gap, the present study employs an in-depth interview method within a qualitative research framework, conducting follow-up interviews with eight martial artists who regularly engage in *chan chuang* practice. By gaining insights into the physical and mental states of these practitioners, this paper aims to elucidate their embodied experiences of *chan chuang* from the perspective of “body perception”. The findings reveal that the practitioners’ perception of their bodies during *chan chuang* practice can be characterized by three key aspects: stillness, naturalness, and *qi*. The sense of stillness signifies a state of tranquility in both body and mind. The sense of naturalness represents a harmonious equilibrium of body and mind, at times even resulting in a loss of self-awareness. Finally, the sense of *qi* conveys a serene mental state accompanied by the smooth flow of life energy and blood. These three dimensions guide *chan chuang* practitioners toward attaining physical and mental well-being.

Keywords: Martial arts; *chan chuang*; body perception; body-mind integration; stillness; naturalness; *qi*.

Integración sensorial: la percepción corporal en la práctica del *chan chuang*

Resumen

El *chan chuang*, una práctica psicofísica reconocida por sus efectos beneficiosos, ha sido promovida desde la antigüedad por los practicantes de la medicina tradicional china y los artistas marciales. Con la irrupción de la pandemia por COVID-19, el *chan chuang* ha tenido una mayor atención y reconocimiento. Sin embargo, la investigación existente se ha centrado principalmente en la eficacia del *chan chuang*, en lugar de explorar la propia práctica en sí. Así, hay una escasez de orientación científica y experiencial disponible para sus actuales practicantes. Para abordar este vacío, el presente estudio emplea el método de entrevistas en profundidad, dentro de un marco de investigación cualitativo, realizando entrevistas de seguimiento con ocho artistas marciales que practican regularmente *chan chuang*. Al obtener información sobre los estados físicos y mentales de estos practicantes, este trabajo tiene como objetivo dilucidar sus experiencias corporales en el *chan chuang* desde la perspectiva de la “percepción del cuerpo”. Los resultados muestran que la percepción que tienen los practicantes de sus cuerpos durante la práctica del *chan chuang* se puede caracterizar por tres aspectos clave: quietud, naturalidad y *qi*. La sensación de quietud significa un estado de tranquilidad tanto en el cuerpo como en la mente. La sensación de

Integração sensorial: a percepção corporal na prática do *chan chuang*

Resumo

Chan chuang, uma prática psicofísica conhecida por seus efeitos benéficos, tem sido preferida por artistas marciais e praticantes de medicina tradicional chinesa, desde os tempos antigos. Com o início da pandemia da COVID-19, o *chan chuang* atraiu uma maior atenção e reconhecimento. No entanto, a pesquisa existente concentra-se, principalmente, na eficácia do *chan chuang*, em vez de explorar a prática em si. Consequentemente, há uma escassez de orientação científica e experimental disponível para os atuais praticantes de *chan chuang*. Para preencher essa lacuna, o presente estudo emprega um método de entrevista em profundidade, dentro de uma estrutura de pesquisa qualitativa, conduzindo entrevistas de acompanhamento com oito artistas marciais que se envolvem regularmente na prática de *chan chuang*. Ao obter *insights* sobre os estados físicos e mentais desses praticantes, este artigo visa elucidar as suas experiências corporificadas de *chan chuang* a partir da perspectiva da “percepção corporal”. Os resultados revelam que a percepção dos praticantes de seus corpos durante a prática de *chan chuang* pode ser caracterizada por três aspectos principais: quietude, naturalidade e *qi*. A sensação de quietude significa um estado de tranquilidade no corpo e na mente. A sensação de naturalidade representa um equilíbrio

* Corresponding author: Guodong Zhang (lygd777@swu.edu.cn)

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naturalidad representa un equilibrio armonioso del cuerpo y de la mente que, a veces, incluso resulta en una pérdida de la autoconciencia. Finalmente, la sensación de *qi* transmite un estado mental sereno, acompañado por el flujo suave de la sangre y de la energía vital. Estas tres dimensiones guían a los practicantes de *chan chuang* hacia el logro del bienestar físico y mental.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; *chan chuang*; percepción corporal; integración cuerpo-mente; quietud; naturalidad; *qi*.

armonioso entre corpo e a mente, às vezes até resultando na perda da autoconsciência. Finalmente, a sensação de *qi* transmite um estado mental sereno, acompanhado pelo fluxo suave de energia vital e sangue. Essas três dimensões guiam os praticantes de *chan chuang* para alcançar o bem-estar físico e mental.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; *chan chuang*; percepção corporal; integração corpo-mente; quietude; naturalidade; *qi*.

1. Introduction

Chinese martial arts have long emphasized the integration of internal and external exercises. Over time, practitioners, drawing upon Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist¹ traditions of rest and recuperation, have developed a practice known as *chan chuang* (站桩) (Zuo, 2021). Embedded within certain martial arts systems, *chan chuang* involves adopting a stationary posture and engaging in meditation, thereby mobilizing one's own *qi* (氣), maintaining external stillness of the limbs, unblocking internal meridians, and achieving the harmonization of *qi* and blood. *Qi*, in a broad sense, represents a fundamental component of the human body, sustaining vital activities. It flows continuously, governing and regulating the body's metabolism while preserving its life processes. The cessation of *qi* movement signifies the cessation of life (Liu, 2022). The proper circulation of *qi* guides the body from a state of relative disorder to order, unlocking the body's inner potential, and promoting health and physical fitness (Zhang, 2019; Zhao & Li, 2014; Chi & Bai, 2020). Various forms of *chan chuang* exist, tailored to specific martial arts styles. For instance, horse *chan chuang* focuses on strengthening the lower limbs in Shaolin martial arts, tai chi chuan [a.k.a., *taiji*, *taijiquan*] *chan chuang* emphasizes mental cultivation in tai chi chuan, and *meihua chan chuang* centers around the five elements in *meihuaquan*² ("plum blossom boxing" [梅花拳]).

Chan chuang, since its inception, has garnered significant acclaim among martial artists. Its appeal stems from the fact that it enables practitioners to enhance their martial arts skills and reap the benefits of internal cultivation. Within the Chinese martial arts community, it is widely recognized that true mastery of martial arts requires the integration of both internal and external power. Sun Lutang (孙禄堂, 1860-1933), a renowned grand master during the late Qing Dynasty and the Period of the Republic of China, advocated for the gradual concentration of one's consciousness and strength in the practice of martial arts. He emphasized the pursuit of a harmonious unity between intention and *qi*, reflecting the martial artist's quest for "internal power." In this context, *chan chuang* serves as the cornerstone for stance, boxing techniques, and internal power development. Through *chan chuang*, martial artists cultivate their leg strength, thereby achieving greater stability in their movements. Building upon this foundation, they can make progress and integrate their practiced movements into cohesive boxing techniques. To further advance their skills, martial artists must not solely focus on external performance but also prioritize internal performance through *chan chuang*. The transformative changes that *chan chuang* brings, such as the

¹ Confucianism, is the school of Confucianism founded by Confucius, which has long existed as the official ideology of China and is the mainstream ideological system, with its influence spreading to the Korean Peninsula, Japan, the South-Central Peninsula, and other regions; Buddhism is one of the five existing religions in China with a longer history and greater influence. It has a history of more than 2,000 years in China. Although Buddhism came from India, its maturation and development were completed in China, and it has both absorbed and enriched the traditional Chinese culture. Contemporary Chinese Buddhism is the inheritance and continuation of traditional Chinese Buddhism, and has developed and changed with the development of social history, politics and economy, science and culture, ideology and lifestyle. Taoism, is the only religion that originated in China and was founded by Chinese people, so it is also known as an indigenous religion. Taoism had a profound impact on the politics, economy and culture of our ancient times and was one of the three spiritual pillars of the ruling class.

² *Meihuaquan*: It is also known as "plum blossom boxing" or "plum blossom chan chuang". It is one of the traditional Chinese martial arts. For ease of practice, it is more widely practiced on the ground and is known as the "floor dry branch plum pile".



sensations of “smoothness”, “calmness”, “stability”, and enhanced power, are known only to the martial artists themselves (Liu & Sun, 2018). Thus, *chan chuang* assumes the role of the fundamental practice in martial arts, serving as a shortcut for advanced practitioners to advance and, in some cases, marking the culmination of a martial artist’s training journey. Wang Xiangzhai (王乡斋, 1885-1963), a renowned martial arts master, also emphasized that *chan chuang* represents a fundamental form of internal exercise. The subtle coordination between the body posture in *chan chuang* and the physiological tissues of the human body enables comprehensive rest and adjustment of both the body and mind (Yang, 2015). Figure 1 depicts a basic posture of *chan chuang*, providing a visual reference for practitioners.

However, it is important to note that *chan chuang* should not be regarded as a complete equivalent of martial arts but rather as a distinct practice that has emerged through the amalgamation of various elements. It incorporates elements from Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional Chinese medicine. This integration is deeply connected to the educational environment that prevailed among ancient Chinese martial artists. Consequently, *chan chuang* possesses a rich connotation, and its efficacy is intricately intertwined with its traditional Chinese medicine foundation. Grounded in the principles of internal and external cultivation, innate and acquired behavior, *chan chuang* emphasizes the use of static postures to facilitate the harmonious flow of the body’s *qi* and blood. This practice enables practitioners to liberate themselves from the physical and mental burdens of daily life and work. Through *chan chuang*, they can experience a profound sense of tranquility and gradually attain a state of innate serenity and bliss. Consequently, the body can regain a state of relaxation and robust health. Within this process, *chan chuang* practitioners employ three essential blends: “body-keeping and body-right,” “mind-body unity and mind unity,” and “sinking and realizing emptiness.” These blends serve as a means for practitioners to achieve body perception, representing an ongoing process of integration and self-identification (Jiang & Zhang, 2021).

Once practitioners have acquired a grasp of the fundamental elements, they shift their focus from the physical aspect to the intention; seek strength in the absence of energy; find movement within stillness; seek stillness within movement; seek integration within emptiness; and seek forgetfulness within integration. By standing in a confined space, they endeavor to connect with nature and embrace a state of non-action.

The intangible essence of *chan chuang* has posed challenges for its effective dissemination among martial artists and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners. However, the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportune moment for reevaluating this issue, as evidenced by the surge in demand for home exercise and the rapid proliferation of online media platforms (Zhou, 2021). Contemporary research on *chan chuang* has primarily focused on two key areas. Firstly, scholars have conducted analyses of *chan chuang*’s functionality within the framework of “traditional health practices” and “internal martial arts.” Drawing on personal experiences and historical texts, these investigations have shed light on the fundamental role of *chan chuang* in cultivating martial arts skills such as *qi* cultivation, mental concentration, stillness formation, and intention cultivation (Zhu, 2004; Tian, 1990; Liu & Guo, 2007). Secondly, experimental research has explored *chan chuang* as an intervention method for improving human health. Scholars have examined its effects on various conditions, including spinal disorders (Feng & Chao, 2012), lumbar

Figure1. Basic posture of *chan chuang*.



disc herniation, and chronic diseases (Wu et al., 2021). Experimental subjects primarily comprise specific groups such as athletes, adolescents, and middle-aged and elderly individuals, enabling insights into the rehabilitative potential of *chan chuang*, particularly within the medical domain (Jiang et al., 2021).

In conclusion, while research on *chan chuang* is progressively gaining a more systematic and scientific approach, the majority of studies have focused on its efficacy, overlooking the examination of exercisers' physical and mental experiences during the practice. Consequently, the efficacy of *chan chuang* remains recognized but not comprehensively understood. Recent research on body perception has shifted its attention towards sensory aspects, transcending the boundaries of physiological and psychological realms (Deng, 2022). This paper aims to investigate the properties of body perception in *chan chuang*, seeking to elucidate the physical and mental sensations experienced by practitioners from the perspective of martial artists and decipher the diverse feelings encountered during the practice. Drawing upon the philosophical perspectives of Laozi and Zhuangzi regarding the body, this study will explore the intricate relationship between the mind, body, and the interconnectedness of humans and nature. By adopting the lens of Laozi and Zhuangzi's views of the body, the study will identify and synthesize the elements of body perception in *chan chuang*, providing an empirical and theoretical foundation for the scientific practice of *chan chuang* among the wider population.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

The research presented in this paper is situated within the framework of Chinese martial arts philosophy, drawing upon the theoretical foundations provided by Laozi and Zhuangzi's perspectives on the body. Their viewpoints emphasize the nurturing of the body and delve into the transformative changes that occur in both the body and mind when achieving a state of harmony between the two. Furthermore, they explore the subsequent shifts in an individual's perception of the surrounding environment after attaining such integration. The current study encompasses two key aspects: experience and environment.

Regarding experience, the body perception in *chan chuang* manifests as a multifaceted perception conveyed through various senses, accentuating a nuanced yet cohesive integration of the five senses. Although individual experiences may exhibit variation, shared patterns can be identified within a substantial volume of experiential data. In this study, common physical experiences are categorized into sensory items. By examining the sensory items reported by *chan chuang* practitioners themselves, a comprehensive exploration of the shared physical and mental sensations is conducted, facilitating a systematic analysis of the subjective experiences while problematizing personal encounters. On this basis, certain conclusions can be drawn.

Simultaneously, the cognitive process underlying *chan chuang* is shaped by the reciprocal interaction between the body and the external environment. "Body perception" arises from the subjective experiences of the body within its surroundings. Through prolonged practice, *chan chuang* practitioners develop a heightened awareness of their bodies, fostering a deep connection between their embodied selves and the environment. This symbiotic relationship enriches the body perception in *chan chuang*, as practitioners engage with specific spatial contexts and navigate the intricate interplay between themselves and their surroundings.

2.2. Interview

Firstly, the researcher conducted a comprehensive review of both domestic and international literature on body sensation and perception. In addition, consultations were held with experts who possessed extensive experience in *chan chuang*, facilitating the development of a preliminary outline for the study. Secondly, two participants were randomly selected to undergo a pre-interview process, which aimed to refine the interview questions based on emerging issues. Finally, further discussions were conducted with the experts to establish the final interview outline, encompassing the following areas: (1) the process of physical and mental changes during *chan chuang*; (2) physical and mental sensations experienced during *chan chuang*; (3) the long-term impact of *chan chuang* on individuals' lives; and (4) how to perceive the physical and mental experiences during *chan chuang*.



The researcher employed a one-to-one semi-structured open-ended interview approach to gather information regarding the *chan chuang* experience. Prior to the interviews, the researcher coordinated with the research subjects to arrange suitable locations and times, obtaining the participants' consent to record the entirety of the interviews. The interviews took place in parks, school playgrounds, and rural yards where the research participants typically engaged in *chan chuang*. To foster a relaxed and engaging interview atmosphere, the researcher utilized interview techniques such as active listening, timely questioning, prompt responses, question repetition, and meticulous documentation of keywords and expressions reflecting emotional attitudes. Each interview session lasted approximately 50 minutes.

Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the recordings, textual memos, and WeChat transcripts, resulting in a collection of over 40,000 words of *chan chuang* data. Irrelevant verbal exchanges and operational processes were excluded. The collected words underwent a layered analysis using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method for data analysis. The software ATLAS.ti 7.0 was employed to label and code recurring body perception texts in the data, grouping together body perceptions with similar meanings into distinct categories. The relationships between categories were examined both horizontally and vertically. To ensure data saturation, the researcher conducted several follow-up discussions via WeChat and telephone, and also collected essays and timely records of the research participants' experiences to supplement the data.

To enhance comprehension of the written materials, the researcher team personally engaged in *chan chuang* since June 2020, documenting their own experiences and maintaining timely records during their practice. The team also proactively sought discussions with experts in *chan chuang* for health, which significantly contributed to the understanding and processing of the research data. Finally, to ensure data credibility, the textual data underwent the "researcher pooling method" for verification. Two researchers independently transcribed the audio recordings verbatim and cross-checked the collated data with the eight research participants to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the data.

2.3. Participants

The participants in this study were selected from Wen County, Henan Province, the birthplace of Taijiquan in China, and Heze City, Shandong Province, which is known for its early adoption of martial arts in China. These regions possess a rich martial arts culture and a substantial number of health-conscious individuals, making them suitable for this study. The interviews were conducted between June 2020 and January 2022. Due to the limited visibility of *chan chuang*, a non-probability sampling method known as chain-link sampling was employed to select the participants. Initially, the researcher connected with long-time practitioners through geographical proximity. Subsequently, they established contact with individuals within the *chan chuang* community based on recommendations, ultimately selecting participants who met specific inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria consisted of the following: (i) a minimum of 2 years of consistent *chan chuang* practice with minimal interruptions; (ii) engagement in other forms of physical exercise infrequently; (iii) absence of significant physical ailments and sound psychological health. A total of eight participants, identified anonymously as Z1-Z8, were interviewed, their sessions recorded, and informed consent forms were obtained from each participant. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic information.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees.

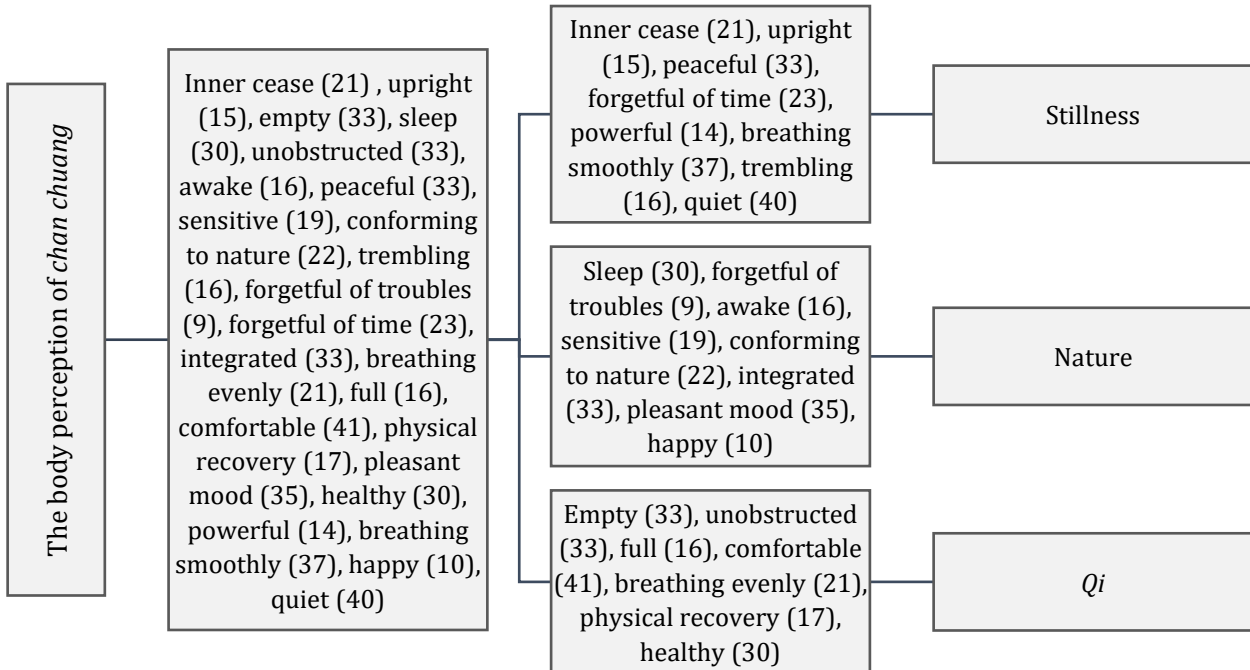
No.	Age (years)	Occupation	Gender	Length of standing time (years)
Z1	33	White collar	male	5
Z2	42	Teacher	female	6
Z3	40	Teacher	male	7
Z4	29	Engineer	female	5
Z5	32	Farming	male	5
Z6	32	Freelance	female	7
Z7	61	Retired teacher	male	21
Z8	55	Farming	female	18

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Three types of body perception

In our analysis, the body perception experienced during *chan chuang* can be classified into three distinct types: stillness, nature, and *qi* (Figure 2). Through the practice of *chan chuang*, practitioners transition from a state of guardedness to a state of stillness, leading to a reduction in anxiety and an enhanced sense of tranquility in both the body and mind. They envision their bodies as integral parts of nature, aligning their actions with the natural order and effortlessly engaging in *chan chuang* while harmonizing with the surrounding environment. Furthermore, practitioners experience a sense of selflessness in the state of non-action, cultivating *qi*, regulating their breath, and attaining a heightened awareness of *qi*'s presence within their bodies.

Figure 2. The Body Perception of *Chan Chuang*.



3.2. Sense of stillness

Stillness serves as the foundation for relaxation, allowing individuals to experience a state of calm and tranquility, thereby alleviating the burdens and anxieties associated with daily responsibilities. The concept of maintaining a neutral posture and entering stillness holds significant importance and is frequently emphasized in Chinese martial arts practices. The objective is to adopt a neutral posture that facilitates the attainment of stillness. “Maintaining a neutral posture” entails adhering to proper alignment, avoiding excesses, cultivating a clear and rational mindset, and eschewing blind faith and paranoia. Insights from expert interviews have revealed two distinct descriptions of “maintaining a neutral posture and entering stillness”: (1) remaining motionless, preserving posture and balance, and (2) stabilizing both the body and mind. Experienced practitioners employ “maintaining a neutral posture” as a foundation for validating the state of stillness. Through attentive perception and self-correction, they can identify and rectify unfavorable bodily manifestations such as “wandering eyes,” “angry face,” and “swaying body.” This process enables *chan chuang* practitioners to establish and maintain a neutral posture, ultimately entering a state of stillness and progressing from superficial representations to intricate internal integration of perception.

As practitioners delve deeper into the experience of stillness, the sensations become more profound. Posture and balance represent more rudimentary bodily and mental experiences, which do not encompass the deeper realms of physical and mental sensations. By solely adhering to a neutral posture, *chan chuang* practitioners operate within the primary level of stillness. For instance, Z1 mentioned, “The lower half of my body seems to disappear when I perform *chan chuang*,” while Z3 expressed, “I feel my feet rooted into the ground, and over time, the sensation has also changed.”

Through repetitive engagement with “maintaining a neutral posture,” practitioners traverse into a state of stillness. Standing between the sky and earth, their bodies assume a static posture, achieving a state of bodily and mental stability devoid of happiness or sorrow. The progression from initial sensations of “movement, warmth, numbness, and discomfort” to the perception of “floating, emptiness, and serenity” signifies a unification of senses (Wei, 2021). Stillness also extends to the realm of mindset. Z7 mentioned, “I have let go of things that I used to consider significant. I am less stressed than before, clearer in my thoughts. Previously, I felt burdened, but now I can get rid of those stuff and feel much happier.” The desires of *chan chuang* practitioners gradually dissipate, relinquishing attachments to external entities, temporarily dissolving their cravings. As Mencius stated, nurturing the heart involves cultivating few desires (Zhang, 2020). Constant desire often leads to exhaustion. Z6 articulated, “No time, no posture, letting go of everything, all sorts of moods and thoughts, even breathing. Just allowing the body to naturally find its most comfortable state and turning inward.” The sensation of the body calmly progressing, immersed and undisturbed by external stimuli, epitomizes a profound sense of stillness.

As delineated above, the sense of stillness encompasses a multifaceted experience. Through the practice of maintaining a neutral posture and subsequently entering stillness, *chan chuang* practitioners transition from pure sensory perceptions to a holistic embodiment of unity between body and mind. Gradually, the control of the body shifts away from the acquired system, facilitating effects such as “peacefulness.” As the “sense of stillness” deepens, practitioners progressively shed their worries, embracing a profound sense of physical and mental gratification.

3.3. Sense of nature

The concept of the “sense of nature” within *chan chuang* practice encompasses the fusion of “nature” and “perception,” reflecting an individual’s thoughts within a specific spatial context. It entails self-cultivation and the ability to remain undisturbed by external stimuli (Yang, 2009). Furthermore, human beings are products of nature, and harmonizing with nature is essential for their development. As Laozi expressed, “The Tao is the laws of nature.” Nature, akin to the *tao*, reason, and natural principles, represents a profound concept that embodies ancient people’s adherence to the laws of nature (Qin & Ju, 2021). Following nature has long served as a guiding principle in Chinese health concepts, interwoven through the realms of heaven, earth, humans, and the *tao*. It is believed that “Man follows the laws of the earth, the earth follows the laws of the sky, the Tao is born, and the Tao gives birth to all things” (Li, 2022). People have also traditionally adhered to the practice of rising at sunrise and resting at sunset in their daily lives. Therefore, the naturalness of *chan chuang* implies that practitioners enter a state of “self-movement,” performing the practice without deliberate effort, resonating with nature, and aligning with the rhythms of all things to strengthen the body and soothe the mind.

The practitioner initially attains a state of tranquility, subsequently perceiving themselves as an integral part of their environment. For instance, Z6 expressed, “I stood quietly in my house and seriously practiced *chan chuang*,” while Z3 described, “The surrounding environment grows increasingly tranquil, and the sensation within my entire body becomes more apparent.” Z5 stated, “I am an individual, a complete individual, and I can clearly feel my presence.” As Sun Lutang noted in *A Description of the True Meaning of Fist*, when the practice of boxing reaches the stage of harmonious cultivation, true intention is transformed into a state of profound stillness, where the mind remains motionless, silent, and empty, perceiving and evading unforeseen occurrences (Sun, 2019). Z2 shared,

“My practice has become a routine. Gradually, I feel myself, perceive my environment, and eventually, I feel as if I am an inseparable part of it. Most importantly, *chan chuang* becomes like breathing. They believe that practice can be integrated into every moment, much like the earth’s natural self-sustenance.”

The practitioner’s sensations gradually harmonize with their surroundings, and certain experiences emerge spontaneously. Z4 described,

“Various things and experiences in my life, such as meetings, and work, suddenly flash through my mind unintentionally—without conscious contemplation. Then a feeling of floating, tenderness, and an electric current permeating through my bones immediately envelops my entire body. It is not a sudden

occurrence but rather a constant state of being. It is just that one momentarily returns to it and perceives it.”

Z5 shared, “The idea of *chan chuang* comes and goes. Sometimes I stand on the ground, and swiftly, I enter a state of relaxation. The feeling is akin to breathing and is even more comfortable than sleeping.” Z7 stated, “Whether standing, walking, or occasionally lying down, I naturally enter the state, and by the time I become aware, I am already refreshed.”

It is evident that *chan chuang* practitioners do not actively seek to control their bodies, yet a physical sense of standing emerges, akin to a sudden burst of inspiration that enlivens the heart. This feeling bears resemblance to the Taoist concept of “*wu wei*” [无为]—an action that aligns naturally, leaves no trace, transcends intentions, and follows the principles of nature, encompassing both action and non-action, desire and desirelessness (Yin, 2021). *Chan chuang* practitioners aim not for a specific intention but for alignment with nature. They seek to “dismember an ox as skillfully as a butcher” by seamlessly merging other sensory experiences with a state of self-forgetfulness and embracing the harmony between all things and oneself, the communication between nature and humans (Zhao & Li, 2022). The ox symbolizes the mind, while the posture represents the body, both attaining stillness and aligning with nature (Cai, 2021). Z8 emphasized, “When practicing *chan chuang*, one should not actively pursue a specific state of mind.” The stages of *chan chuang* practice are divided into “raw” (the initial stage), “mature” (the second stage), and “forgetting” (the third stage). “Forgetting” is described in the “Lyu Zu One-Hundred Character Tablet” as “nurturing the *qi* and relinquishing words to sustain it; thus, all practitioners must first nurture the *qi*” (He, 2017). Upon entering the stage of “forgetting,” the practitioner gradually reaches a state of self-oblivion in *chan chuang*, as “forgetting things nurtures the mind, forgetting emotions nurtures nature.” The transition from the method of “action” to the method of “non-action” involves cultivating a sense of surrender and embracing emptiness. The ultimate outcome is a state of “action and non-action” and “true intention during unawareness,” achieved through the practice of forgetting and attaining emptiness, stillness, and void.

In conclusion, the “sense of nature” within *chan chuang* practice emerges as practitioners connect with themselves and merge with nature. They transition from “action” to “non-action,” let go of external objects, and eventually experience a trace-free, automatic and natural feeling.

3.4. The sense of *qi*

The sense of *qi* in *chan chuang* is a unique experience that regulates the mind and nourishes the *qi* (Li & Zhang, 2018). Once *qi* is gathered, it circulates and fills the body. Over time, there is a gradual sense of convergence in the *dantian*³ [丹田] initially subtle and ethereal, but eventually becoming more evident, resembling a spindle-like twitch. This process allows practitioners to eliminate stagnant *qi* and tension, returning to the original state of *qi*, and experiencing the synchronization of the body and mind with nature, as well as the flow of *qi* and blood, leading to physical and mental restoration.

Traditional Chinese martial arts view martial arts as a combination of intention, *qi*, form, and the internal and external aspects of the body (Li, Piao & Chen, 2000). “*Qi*” serves as the intermediary between the mind and body (Han, Hu & Qiao, 2021), giving rise to practices aimed at nurturing *qi*, regulating *qi*, and replenishing *qi*. The “sense of *qi*” in the perspectives of Laozi and Zhuangzi on the body refers to the sensation of unifying form, *qi*, and mind into a holistic life experience, where form and spirit merge and the body and mind become a unified whole (Yang, 2011).

As for practitioners’ insights into the experience of *qi*, Z7 describes,

“At this point, the body loses its sense of location. A distinct feeling of ‘fullness’ arises in the middle Dantian, not in the stomach, but in the upper half of the chest—a sensation of *qi* fullness—accompanied by a throbbing in the lower Dantian and the beating of the heart.”

³ *Dantian*: It generally refers to the lower *dantian*, behind the umbilicus and in front of the kidneys, also known as the *huangting*, which is protected by the spine. The *dantian*, like the other meridians, is a concrete object, not an unreal and unknowable concept.



Z1 explains, “During prolonged standing, I sense strength in my legs, and while practicing *chan chuang*, it feels as if there is a gentle steam under my feet with every step, creating a heightened sense of relaxation in my body.” Z2 shares, “For me, when *qi* flows in my body, I become attuned to the ‘*qi* pulse,’ the rhythm of breath and heartbeat. The body rises and falls, and a comforting warmth permeates through.” Z3 expresses,

“The sensation of *qi* gradually spreads throughout my body, transforming from nothingness to a tangible presence. Previously, I had cold hands and feet, but with consistent *chan chuang* practice, the heat generated by *qi* makes my entire body warm and comfortable.”

As practitioners delve deeper into the experience of “*qi*,” they gradually align their vibrational frequency with that of heaven and earth, guided by the “*qi* pulse.” The body’s pulsation gradually synchronizes with the rhythm of nature, creating a state of resonance. Z2 shares, “As the wind passes through my body, I feel a permeability, neither cold nor hot, becoming one with the wind itself.” In this permeable state, there is no resistance to external stimuli, and the body and mind adapt to a state of openness.

Initially, practitioners become aware of the presence of *qi* and subsequently perceive its movement within the body. During the Zhou Dynasty, *qi* was regarded as the substance filling the space between heaven and earth, referred to as “Yuan *qi*” [元炁]. *Qi* was also considered a fundamental component of the human body, often mentioned alongside blood as blood and *qi* (Xu et al., 2020). Z3 explains,

“The body maintains a delicate balance point. Initially, it may be challenging to locate *qi*, but with patience, *qi* adjusts itself. Once accurately directed, it swiftly arrives. Subsequently, walking becomes comfortable, and a sense of harmony with nature gradually emerges, leading to overall body comfort.”

According to *The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*, “All diseases originate from *qi*” (Cao & Liu, 2022). The text suggests that physical and mental illnesses are often connected to *qi* imbalances, such as *qi* elevation, *qi* descent, *qi* disturbance, and *qi* stagnation. Z5 describes,

“I can clearly hear the ticking of a clock, and it is only when the entire hour strikes that I realize how much time has passed. During this time, my body feels uplifted, with *qi* continuously rising from my legs to the crown of my head.”

When the heart is at peace and practitioners maintain a tranquil mind while practicing *chan chuang*, they effectively nurture and unblock *qi* and blood circulation. Simultaneously, by focusing on lowering the body’s center of gravity, *qi* can flow smoothly, and *qi* can be adequately stored, leading to gradual stabilization of the breath. Consequently, the sensation of *qi* in the body becomes a restorative experience, facilitating a journey towards improved health.

3.5. The relationship between the three types of body perception

The bodily sensory items exhibit a non-linear logical relation rather than a linear one. When individuals engage in reading activities, their sense of engagement and resonance is based on the reintegration of the body’s sensory system, rather than treating them as separate senses. Furthermore, in specific body practices, certain context-based body sensations, such as “distress” and “suffering,” cannot be objectively expressed in a specific form but are experienced as unified and culturally meaningful sensations (Sun, 2020). A similar unified relationship is observed within the various physical sensations of *chan chuang*.

According to the *Book of Rites*, “Stillness is the beginning of perception and is the norm for the individual when he or she is not bound by anything.” The sense of stillness not only serves as a basis for assessing entry into a particular state but also acts as a guidance for *chan chuang* practitioners through the interconnected array of bodily sensations. Laozi and Zhuangzi’s view of the body emphasizes that stillness is a natural state at birth, while the desire to move arises when one interacts with external stimuli (Du, Li & Zhang, 2008). As the external world abounds with stimuli, the individual’s sense of stillness is disrupted. In this context, *chan chuang* practitioners, grounded in the concepts of desire and stillness, perceive nature according to Laozi and Zhuangzi’s perspectives on the body, thereby experiencing a sense of nature that attunes itself to external

stimuli. Through this embodied experience of nature, the mind and body align with the natural state. In a state of non-attachment, non-action, and non-self, individuals cultivate themselves through *chan chuang* practice. As Laozi states, “Can we gather the essence to be as soft and pliable as an infant, and can we cleanse our minds of distractions and gaze deeply into them without fault?” This return to an infant-like state entails dissolving acquired thoughts and rediscovering the fundamental experiential essence of the mind and body.

The concept of the “sense of *qi*” differs from the “sense of stillness” and “sense of nature” in its complexity. Similar to the “sense of nature,” the notion of *qi* is deeply rooted in oriental culture. Immersion in the experiential realm of *qi*, as constructed by Laozi and Zhuangzi, enables practitioners to enter a state of “emptiness,” perceiving themselves as an integral part of the external world and reaping the benefits of *chan chuang* practice (Lu, 2009). Simultaneously, this “sense of *qi*” is connected to the concept of “*zong qi*” in traditional Chinese medicine. By standing in a particular posture and nourishing their spirit, individuals experience the “sense of *qi*,” which subtly influences their overall well-being.

The sense of stillness, nature, and *qi* intertwine and mutually influence one another. However, existing research has not definitively determined the extent to which the sense of stillness is intertwined with the sense of nature and *qi*. Similarly, the relationship between the sense of nature and the sense of *qi* remains unclear. During the exercise process, the three physical senses are not experienced in isolation. Practitioners of stance exercises may concurrently perceive sensations of stillness and *qi*, coexistence of natural and *qi* sensations, and a constant sense of stillness. These interconnected perceptions of stillness, nature, and *qi* form a network that guides practitioners towards health and wellbeing.

4. Conclusions

The body perception in *chan chuang* can be classified into three categories: the sense of stillness, the sense of nature, and the sense of *qi*. These three aspects are intertwined, creating a complex physical and mental experience. In the face of special circumstances like an epidemic, *chan chuang* has the potential to mitigate adverse reactions such as restlessness and depleted *qi* and blood circulation. The physical embodiment of meditation and stillness, the mindful connection with nature, and the rejuvenation through *qi* sensation all demonstrate the significant role of *chan chuang*. Body perception acts as a positive signal, guiding practitioners in their exercise routines and offering an effective strategy for the physical and mental well-being of individuals in home isolation during epidemic normalization.

Future research on *chan chuang*'s sensation can incorporate theories of embodied cognition, positive thinking, and Zen Buddhism to explore the transformative effects on individuals' attitudes towards their surroundings following the practice of standing stance. A comprehensive examination of body perception as a trinity of form, mind, and energy will delve into the transition from studying “body perception” in isolation to the broader concept of “perception.” This investigation will consider the perspectives of exercisers within the context of “common sensation” by Yujiro Nakamura and the notion of “sensation” in traditional Chinese culture; both emphasize the study of sensations at a holistic level, which is a form of overall judgment (Zhang, 2009). Additionally, the divergent views on body perception between Chinese and Western medicine and the potential integration of medical and cultivation perspectives warrant further exploration and discussion.

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Author's biographical data

Dongchen Li (China) is Master's student at College of Physical Education, Southwest University. He develops research in martial arts studies and multiculturalism. E-mail: ldchen2021@163.com

Thomas A. Green (USA) is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Texas A&M University and Research Associate in Institute of Sport Science at Southwest University of China. E-mail: greenta1117@gmail.com

Guodong Zhang (China) is Professor and Director of the Institute of Sport Science, College of Physical Education, Southwest University, China. E-mail: lygd777@swu.edu.cn

