

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Study on the connotation of traditional Chinese Daoist medicine culture

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the connotation of Daoist medicine culture and investigate its relationship with modern medicine. Exploring the connotation of Daoist medicine culture is beneficial for advocating a healthy lifestyle, improving people's physical and mental health, promoting individual comprehensive development, and enhancing happiness. By drawing wisdom and experience from Daoist medicine, inheriting various medical methods such as herbal treatment, acupuncture, massage, and integrating the concept of integrated Chinese and Western medicine into modern medicine, not only can treatment effectiveness be improved, but also interdisciplinary communication and cooperation can be promoted, thus driving the innovation and development of medical knowledge.

**Keywords:** Taoism; Daoist medicine culture; Yin and Yang; Five Elements

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The origin of Taoism can be traced back to the pre-Qin period, and its ideology originated from ancient Chinese natural philosophy and Daoist thought. The "Tao Te Ching" written by Laozi, the founder of Taoism, is one of the most important classics of Taoism. In the early Han Dynasty, prophets of Taoism such as Pang De and Zhang Daoling spread their teachings, forming early Taoist organizations and sects.

Taoism advocates living in accordance with nature, harmonizing Yin and Yang, emphasizing physical and mental health, and internal balance. In ancient times, Daoist medicine integrated various medical theories and practices, such as herbal treatment, acupuncture, Qigong, etc., gradually forming a complete medical system. Developing Daoist medicine helps provide believers with more comprehensive and integrated health services, meeting people's needs for health.

## 1. History of Daoist medicine development

### 1.1. Pre-Qin period: Establishment of philosophical foundation

The ideological foundation of Chinese Daoist medicine originated from the Daoist philosophy of the pre-Qin period. The concepts of "Dao" proposed by Laozi in the "Tao Te Ching" and by Zhuangzi emphasized "harmony with nature". Daoists believe that the "Dao" is the eternal and unchanging law of nature, governing the

continuous vitality and balance of all things. The flow and balance of life force (Qi) determine the health of all things in the world. Cultivating Qi became the main practice for Daoists to cultivate themselves, which later became the core concept of Daoist medicine<sup>[1]</sup>. During the late Warring States period, Qi Yan and Zou Yian (Zou Yian) proposed the “Yin-Yang Theory” based on the “Qi Theory”. Yin and Yang are abstract concepts where Yin represents soft characteristics and Yang represents strong characteristics. Yin and Yang are mutually coordinated forces within things, governing the rise and fall of all things in the world. The “Five Elements Theory” developed on the basis of the “Yin-Yang Theory”, elaborating on the concept of the continuous cyclical transformation of the five basic elements—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. This theory could be used to formulate calendars based on celestial movements, mastering the myriad phenomena of the world<sup>[2,3]</sup>.

## **1.2. Han Dynasty: Preliminary formation of Daoist medicine**

The Han Dynasty was a crucial period for the development of Daoist medicine. Daoism emerged in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, a period marked by frequent wars and rampant epidemics. Daoism advocated spreading its teachings through medicine, embracing the ideology of promoting the Dao through medicine. This period witnessed the beginning of the integration of Daoism and medicine. “Huangdi Neijing” (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon) is a representative work of this period, recording the theoretical and practical experiences of ancient medical practitioners regarding human physiology, pathology, diagnosis, and treatment. The book is divided into two parts: “Suwen” (Basic Questions) and “Lingshu” (Spiritual Pivot). “Suwen” mainly covers the basic theories of the human body, including Yin-Yang, the Five Elements, Qi and Blood, meridians, and internal organs. It emphasizes the relationship between the human body and the natural environment, suggesting that the physiological and pathological conditions of the human body are caused by imbalances in Yin-Yang or the Five Elements<sup>[4]</sup>. The purpose of medical treatment is to restore health by adjusting the balance of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements. “Lingshu” focuses more on diagnosis and treatment, including acupuncture, massage, and herbal medicine. It discusses the causes, mechanisms, and principles of treating human diseases. It not only laid the theoretical foundation of traditional Chinese medicine but was also deeply influenced by Daoist ideology, such as the application of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements theory<sup>[5]</sup>. Additionally, Daoist cultivation methods, such as guiding techniques and alchemy, began to integrate with medical practices.

## **1.3. Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty: Golden age**

During the period from the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty, Daoist medicine reached its zenith. During this period, the religious rituals, cultivation methods, and medical theories of Daoism merged, forming a relatively complete medical system. The famous Daoist physician Ge Hong of the Eastern Jin Dynasty wrote “Baopuzi”, “Yuhuanfang”, “Zhouhou Beijifang”, and “Shenxian Fushi Yaofang”, which elaborated on Daoist ideology, cultivation methods, medicine, and health preservation. He emphasized the Daoist concept of returning to simplicity, harmony with nature, and advocated achieving spiritual liberation and physical health through inner cultivation and compliance with the laws of nature<sup>[6]</sup>.

The “Qianjin Fang” by the renowned Tang Dynasty physician Sun Simiao compiled various medical experiences and treatment methods before the Tang Dynasty, including herbal prescriptions, disease diagnosis, and treatment methods. It not only reflected the practices of Daoist medicine but also had a profound influence on the development of traditional Chinese medicine in later generations.

## **1.4. Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties: Continuing development and integration**

Starting from the Song Dynasty, Daoist medicine began to integrate more closely with other schools of traditional Chinese medicine, such as Confucian medicine and Buddhist medicine. During this period, Daoist

medicine emphasized the unity of spiritual cultivation and physical health, emphasizing the nurturing of the mind and the pursuit of longevity. At the same time, the development of Daoist pharmacology also reached new heights. The birth of medical classics such as Sun Simiao's "Beiji Qianjin Yao Fang" in the Song Dynasty and Li Shizhen's "Compendium of Materia Medica" in the Ming Dynasty played a crucial role in promoting Daoist medicine in later generations, becoming medical classics still in use today.

## **2. Cultural connotation of Daoist medicine**

Daoist medicine culture is a unique cultural form that integrates Daoist philosophy, religious concepts, and medical practices. It is not only a form of medicine but also a way of life and worldview. The cultural connotation of Daoist medicine generally includes the following three aspects:

### **2.1. Philosophical view of "correspondence between heaven and human"**

At the core of Daoist medicine culture is Daoist philosophy, especially the concept of "Dao" in Laozi's philosophy, which emphasizes the principle of harmony with nature and the philosophical notion of "non-action" or "wu wei." This philosophical ideology not only influences the medical practices of Daoist physicians but also impacts their lifestyles and worldviews.

The philosophy of Daoist medicine is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese Daoist thought and plays an important role in the theoretical system of traditional Chinese medicine. The main characteristics of Daoist medicine philosophy include: (1) Concept of Yin-Yang Harmony: Daoist medicine emphasizes the balance and harmony of Yin and Yang. In the cosmological view, Yin and Yang are two complementary and interdependent forces that constitute everything in the universe, representing the unity of opposites and dynamic balance. In the human body, imbalance of Yin and Yang can lead to illness, while harmonizing Yin and Yang is crucial for treatment and health preservation. In treatment, Daoist medicine advocates balancing Yin and Yang through adjustments in diet, lifestyle, exercise, as well as acupuncture, massage, and other methods to treat diseases and maintain health<sup>[7,8]</sup>. (2) Concept of nature and Dao: Daoist medicine emphasizes harmony with and adaptation to nature. In Daoist philosophy, the Dao is the fundamental law of the universe, emphasizing the idea of returning to simplicity and harmony with nature. Daoist medicine believes that only by harmonizing with nature can one achieve physical and mental health. (3) Concept of "Qi": Daoist medicine emphasizes the importance of Qi, considering it as the basic element constituting all things in the universe and the source of life in the human body. The flow and balance of Qi are crucial for health, while disturbances in Qi are often related to the occurrence of diseases<sup>[9]</sup>. (4) Theory of the Five Elements: The theory of the Five Elements is an important component of the theoretical system of Daoist medicine, which holds that everything in the universe is composed of five elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These elements interact with each other, showing the law of operation of the universe. In the human body, the Five Elements also interact with each other, and the occurrence of diseases is related to the imbalance of the Five Elements<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **2.2. Integration of spiritual cultivation and physical exercise**

Daoist physicians pursue not only physical health but also inner peace and harmony of the mind<sup>[1]</sup>. This pursuit is reflected in the emphasis on personal cultivation, moral integrity, and nurturing of the mind. In practice, Daoist medicine culture particularly emphasizes the combination of spiritual cultivation and physical exercise, advocating the practice of Tai Chi, Qigong, breathing techniques, and meditation.

Tai Chi is a form of exercise that enhances flexibility, balance, and strength through slow and fluid movements, emphasizing the integration of internal and external, and the harmony of movement and stillness. Practitioners also cultivate a calm mindset, enhance concentration, and regulate emotions during practice. Long-term practice can improve cardiovascular health, promote blood circulation, and enhance the immune system. Qigong practice focuses on regulating breathing and concentrating the mind, adjusting

breathing through techniques such as deep breathing and exhalation to enhance the circulation of Qi and blood in the body. It can strengthen the body's immunity, regulate the flow of internal energy, prevent the occurrence of diseases, and promote physical and mental health<sup>[11]</sup>. Meditation is considered an effective method for stress relief, helping to relax the mind and body, alleviate anxiety and stress, and improve emotional stability and psychological resilience<sup>[12]</sup>.

Moderate physical exercise helps improve the function of the immune system, promote metabolism, reduce the risk of illness, enhance the body's resistance, improve digestion, control weight, and prevent chronic diseases. Spiritual exercise can help individuals gain deeper insight into their inner world, values, and belief systems, enhancing self-awareness and self-understanding.

In conclusion, spiritual and physical exercise complement each other, promoting overall health and well-being. Considering both physical and mental health, regular moderate physical and mental exercise is an important part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

### **2.3. Pharmacology and alchemy**

Pharmacology and alchemy are another important component of Daoist medicine culture. Daoist physicians use various herbs and minerals to treat diseases. At the same time, alchemy (the process of making elixirs) is considered an important method of self-cultivation aimed at enhancing vitality and achieving immortality. Alchemy is based on the philosophical concepts of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, which recognize the opposition and balance of Yin and Yang in all things in nature, as well as the relationships of generation and inhibition among the Five Elements<sup>[2]</sup>. By selecting herbs with specific properties and effects and using specific refining methods to produce elixirs for consumption, Daoist physicians aim to harmonize the Yin-Yang and the Five Elements of the body, achieving the goal of adjusting the balance of Yin and Yang in the body to promote physical and mental health and longevity<sup>[7]</sup>. In addition, the core idea of inner alchemy is to open the meridians, harmonize the flow of Qi, and refine the essence through specific breathing techniques, body postures, meditation, and other cultivation methods, ultimately aiming to strengthen the body and prolong life. However, it is worth noting that alchemy is not recognized as a health practice by modern science, and its effectiveness and safety are subject to controversy, so caution should be exercised.

## **3. Influence of Daoist medicine culture on Asian culture**

Daoist medicine has had a wide-ranging and profound impact on Chinese society. It not only plays a role in medical practice but also permeates cultural, philosophical, and social aspects. Daoist medicine emphasizes holistic health and provides health security for individuals and society through traditional therapies such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, and Qigong. Additionally, Daoist medical concepts such as the balance of Yin and Yang and the theory of the Five Elements are ubiquitous in Chinese culture, influencing people's ways of thinking, values, and behavioral norms. Furthermore, as a unique medical system, it has profoundly influenced medical cultures in Asia, especially in East Asia.

### **3.1. Influence on Japanese and Korean medicine**

Chinese Daoist medicine has significantly influenced Japanese medicine. With the introduction of Tang Dynasty culture into Japan, Daoist medical theories and practices began to be accepted and absorbed. Particularly in acupuncture, massage, Qigong, guided imagery, and medicinal therapies, traditional Japanese medicine was heavily influenced by Chinese Daoist medicine<sup>[13]</sup>. For instance, Japanese techniques such as guided imagery, massage therapy, and moxibustion were developed based on Daoist medical principles, leading to the formation of distinctive schools of acupuncture and massage techniques. Daoist classical literature and medical works were translated into Japanese, becoming an integral part of Japanese medical literature. These classical texts had a profound impact on medical education, theoretical research, and clinical

practice in Japan<sup>[14]</sup>. Similarly, Daoist medicine also influenced the medical system on the Korean Peninsula. While traditional Korean medicine incorporated elements from Confucian and Buddhist medicine, it also integrated elements from Daoist medicine. Particularly in the understanding and application of “Qi”, traditional Korean medicine was deeply influenced by Daoist medicine<sup>[15]</sup>. Additionally, the Daoist concept of longevity and alchemical practices also influenced Korean pharmacology.

### **3.2. Influence on Southeast Asian medicine**

In Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam and Thailand, the influence of Chinese Daoist medicine is also significant. Traditional medicine in these regions not only absorbed the theoretical framework of Daoist medicine, such as the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements but also drew from its medicinal therapies and alchemical practices. Concepts such as “harmonizing Yin-Yang” in Vietnam and “energy balancing” therapy in Thailand demonstrate the influence of Daoist medicine<sup>[5,16]</sup>.

The influence of Chinese Daoist medicine extends far beyond its place of origin, exerting a profound impact on the medical culture of the entire Asian region. This influence is evident not only in specific medical techniques and therapies but also in the overall understanding of health, disease, and treatment.

## **4. Insights of Daoist medicine culture for modern medicine**

Daoist medicine culture offers many insights for modern medicine, especially in terms of holistic perspective, preventive concepts, treatment methods, and the patient-doctor relationship. Here are some specific insights:

### **4.1. Holistic perspective**

Daoist medicine emphasizes the wholeness and unity of the human body, viewing all aspects of the body as interconnected and interdependent. This aligns with the comprehensive healthcare concept in modern medicine, suggesting that we should not only consider diseases as localized issues but also comprehensively assess the patient’s physical, psychological, and social factors.

### **4.2. Preventive concepts**

Daoist medicine stresses the importance of prevention over treatment, advocating for methods such as adjusting lifestyle, exercising, and maintaining inner peace to prevent the occurrence of diseases. This corresponds to the health management concept in modern medicine, reminding us to focus on maintaining and promoting health rather than solely treating existing diseases.

### **4.3. Patient-doctor relationship**

Rooted in a human-centric approach, Daoist medicine emphasizes equality and trust between patients and doctors, emphasizing listening to patients’ needs and understanding their feelings. This aligns with the patient-centered healthcare concept in modern medicine, suggesting that we should respect patients’ rights and opinions, and establish good patient-doctor relationships<sup>[17]</sup>.

### **4.4. Integrated treatment approach**

Daoist medicine advocates for integrated treatment, including the combined use of methods such as herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage, and Qigong. This corresponds to the integrated healthcare model in modern medicine, reminding healthcare providers to fully utilize different treatment methods to achieve the best therapeutic outcomes. Modern medical practice has also increasingly recognized the application of natural therapies and integrated medicine, especially in the treatment and rehabilitation of chronic diseases.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Daoist medicine is an important component of traditional Chinese medicine, representing

the wisdom of medicine accumulated over thousands of years. Daoist medicine culture provides valuable insights for modern medicine, including holistic perspective, preventive concepts, natural therapies, patient-doctor relationships, and integrated treatment. These insights offer valuable ideas and experiences, promoting the development and progress of modern medicine.

Particularly in contemporary society, where people face increasing stress and threats to their health, the emphasis of Daoist medicine on harmonizing Yin-Yang, aligning with nature, advocating for healthy lifestyles, and preventive healthcare concepts holds significant importance for improving the health of contemporary individuals.

## Author contributions

Conceptualization, ZT and QH; methodology, JZ; software, ZT and LW; validation, QH, ZT and JZ; formal analysis, JZ; investigation, XL; resources, QH; data curation, ZT; writing—original draft preparation, JZ; writing—review and editing, XL; visualization, QH; supervision, XL; project administration, QH; funding acquisition, JZ. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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