

To What Extent Does Taoism Affect the Philosophical Foundations of Traditional Chinese
Medicine?

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Rationale and Preliminary Research:

As someone who grew up in Taiwan my entire life, my life has constantly revolved around the unique blends of three predominantly Asian religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. As someone who often times joins with my family for prayers, I wanted to learn more about where the popularity of Taoism emerged and how that influences the practice of Chinese medicine in Taiwan.

Taiwan is one of the most predominant places that practices Taoism.¹ The growth of Taoism on this island began at around the end of the Ming Dynasty period when a new Taoist headquarter was established.² Today, Taiwan has around more than 4,130 Taoist temples across the nation with around 247 gods being worshiped daily.³ Around 49.3% of its modern day population practices the Folklore religion⁴ while 12.4% of its population practices pure Taoism.⁵

Not only this, Chinese medicine has also played a major part in the lives of Taiwanese people. There are around 4,070 Chinese medicine institutions in Taiwan and 122 hospitals with a specified department in Chinese medicine.⁶ The practice of Chinese medicine has also been believed to increase the life expectancy of Taiwanese people, suggesting the Taiwanese population is quite reliant on the practice of Chinese medicine.⁷

Seeing how prevalent Taoism and Chinese medicine are in Taiwan, I wanted to understand just how these two correlate with each other, which leads to my question: To what extent does Taoism influence the philosophical foundations of Chinese medicine?

The sources I will be using include academic journal articles, the *Tao Te Ching*, and an interview with a professional Chinese Medicine doctor. For one of the research articles, I will be analyzing specific visual evidence. By conducting these investigations, I hope to find how Taoism reflects its philosophies into Chinese medicine.

¹ "Taiwan's Taoism, folk faiths march into the modern world," *Taiwan Today*, October/November 2020, accessed March 6, 2022, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=10,11,12&post=187630>.

² Murray A. Rubinstein, *Taiwan: A New History : A New History* (Print/E-mail/Save60pages, 1999), [Page 3], digital file.

Cheng Cheng-kung (Koxinga) escaped to Taiwan to establish a new Taoist headquarter after leading an unsuccessful coup against the Chinese empire.

³ Hermia Lin, "Daoism in Taiwan undergoes transformation," *Taiwan News*, October/November 2009, [Page 7], accessed March 3, 2022, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/1074531>.

⁴ Folklore religion is a combination of Buddhism, Taoism, and other traditional religions that it a popular practice in Taiwan.

⁵ "Taiwan's Taoism," [Page 2].

⁶ "Religions in Taiwan," *Life of Taiwan*, <https://lifeoftaiwan.com/about-taiwan/religion/>.

⁷ "Religions in Taiwan," *Life of Taiwan*.

Plan for study:

My research question is: To what extent does the philosophical foundations of Taoism affect the practice of Chinese Medicine?

My investigation will primarily focus on the progression of Chinese Medicine from ancient times to modern day and the way Taoism shapes it's philosophies. I will be analyzing an ancient diagram that illustrates the process of old TCM and as well as modern day practices of TCM in relation to Taoism. I will also be making a personal visit to my local Chinese medicinal clinic to conduct an interview with a TCM and ask for his insight on how Taoism may affect the way he performs healing methods on his patients. Regular patients or nurses at the doctor's clinic will also be interviewed to understand how their views are related to Taoist philosophies.

I will be comparing my research and interviewee's answers with the classic Taoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*, to find the connection TCM has between Taoism.

Summary of Significant Findings:

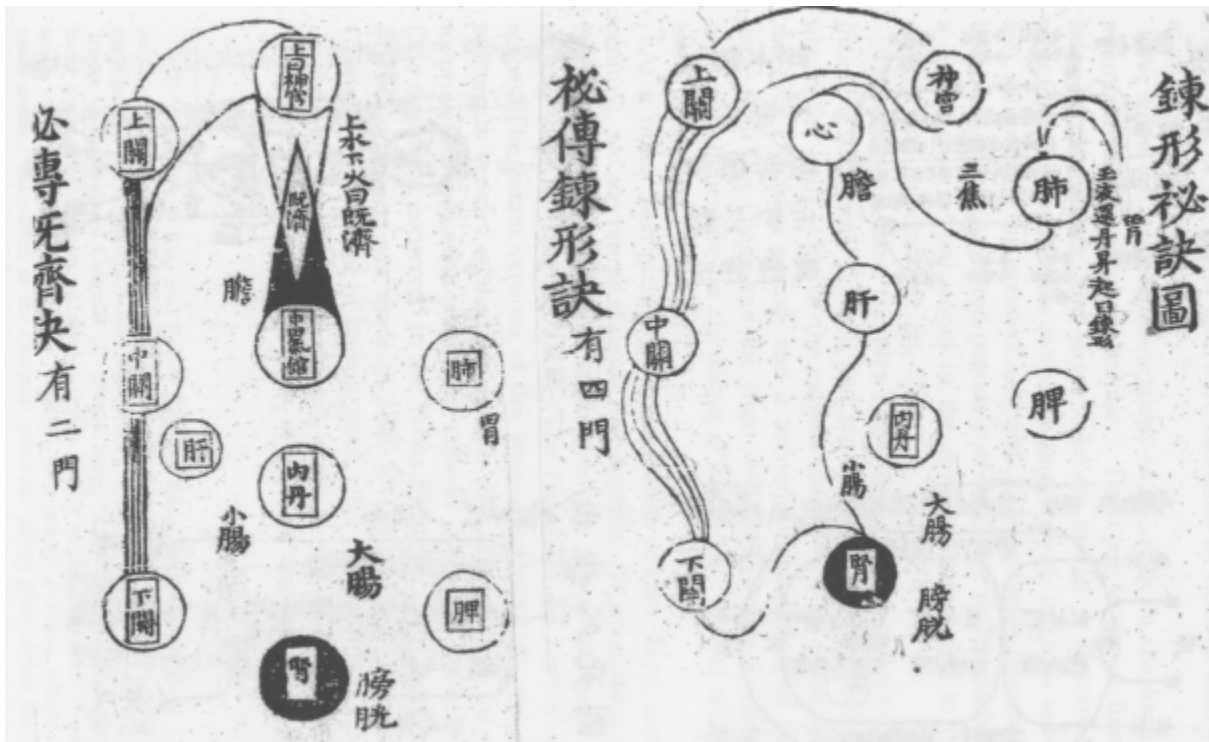


Fig. 1 - *Taiji Hunyuan zhixuan tu* [太極混元指玄圖] by Xiao Daoxun 蕭道存 (thirteenth century)

In the article *Visual Representations of the body in Chinese Medical and Taoist Texts...* explains images of the human body in reflection to Taoism values.

Dating back as early as the Song and Yuan Dynasty periods of China is this image called *Taiji Hunyuan zhixuan tu* [太極混元指玄圖] by Xiao Daoxun 蕭道存.⁸ In this picture it shows circled Chinese characters representing each part of the body. The contrasting color of black and white on the top left of the image represents the balance between Yin and Yang within the inner body. Certain lines are also present to indicate the connection between the spinal column and the body.⁹ One interesting thing to note about this picture is that no greater outline of the body is drawn around the symbolized organs.

In Taoism, the body is viewed as the ultimate center or medium of oneself to nature.¹⁰ Through this image, Taoism values of balance and connection with nature is present by not bounding the represented organs within a physical outline. Limited to their time's resources, people in the Song dynasty period utilized their knowledge of Taoism values to further their understanding of the physical form of the body and the ways of practicing Chinese medicine.

Moving ahead, I had also conducted an interview with Doctor Su from a Chinese Medicinal Clinic near my local area.¹¹ When asked what's the most critical part in maintaining good health, Dr. Su says it's by making sure "one practices maintaining a good harmony in life".¹² Some examples he explained included maintaining "a certain level of circadian rhythm everyday by regulating our pattern of eating, sleeping, and drinking".¹³ Taking certain Chinese medicines to level out the "Qi" in our body is also a way to help elevate the harmonious lifestyle within our bodies.¹⁴

Similarly, the *Tao Te Ching* also mentions that one of the most fundamental roots of Taoism is where one knows how to maintain "a good balance in their daily lives in accordance with nature".¹⁵ In order to live in the way of a proper Taoist, one must practice allowing the

⁸ Catherine Despeux and Penelope Barrett, "Visual Representations of the Body in Chinese Medical and Daoist Texts From the Song to the Qing Period (Tenth to Nineteenth Century).," in *Visual Representations of the Body in Chinese Medical and Daoist Texts From the Song to the Qing Period (Tenth to Nineteenth Century).*, excerpt from *Asian Medicine* 13, no. 1/2: 10-52, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15734218-00101003>.

⁹ Despeux and Barrett, "Visual Representations," in *Visual Representations*, 32.

¹⁰ Catherine Despeux, "Picturing the Body in Chinese Medical and Daoist Texts from the Song to the Qing Period (10th to 19th Centuries)," in *Imagining Chinese Medicine*, by Vivienne Lo, et al. (n.p.: Brill, 2018), 18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvbqs6ph.8>.

¹¹ Dr. Su, interview by the author, Neihu, Taipei, Taiwan, March 16, 2022.

¹² Dr. Su, interview by the author.

¹³ Dr. Su, interview by the author.

¹⁴ Roger Jahnke et al., "A comprehensive review of health benefits of qigong and tai chi. *American journal of health promotion*," National Library of Medicine, accessed March 9, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4278/ajhp.081013-LIT-248>.

¹⁵ 道德經 - Dao De Jing

energy of the “Tao” to flow through properly as the “Tao” is the energy that flows through all beings.¹⁶

Not only this, Dr. Su also specializes in certain healing treatments.¹⁷ When asked what the purpose behind performing these healing methods is, he said it was a way to help maintain the proper flow of the “qi” in our bodies.¹⁸ According to Ms. Cheng, a regular patient who often visits Dr. Su’s clinic, says the reason why she comes here so often is because she believes the way to achieve good health is by practicing a good health that extends towards her after life.¹⁹

Critical Reflection and Evaluation:

Prior to my research, I had a small understanding on how traditional Chinese medicine and Taoism could have connections to one another, but my findings suggests that Taoist values does affect the philosophical practices of Chinese Medicine.

Professor Luis Carlos Matos and his colleagues explain that TCM’s main theory is heavily rooted in the idea of the “ying” and the “yang”. In Chinese medicine, certain organs and parts of the body are divided as the “ying (clean)” organs and the “yang (dirty)” organs.²⁰ The image *Taiji Hunyuan zhixuan tu* as explained above is also heavily focused on the concept of yin and yang.²¹ Similarly, Lao Tzu mentions in the *Tao Te Ching* that “all things carry Yin yet embrace Yang. They blend their life breaths to produce harmony”.²² Lao Tzu’s statement shows a clear connection between TCM and the Taoist philosophy as the core of both beliefs are all based on this symbol of balance.

TCM also believes in the idea of “judging the interior from the exterior”.²³ Often times Chinese doctors examine the body’s outward appearance and use it as reference for symptoms to diagnose the patient. This idea is similar to the Taoist belief of symbolizing “the human body as a country”.²⁴ Taoists believe the beauty of the human outer body is similar to the image of mountains and valleys that signifies the landscape of a country. If the outer aspect of our bodies

¹⁶ Woodward, April, HO Law, and Scott Buckler, “A Triad of Taoism: Exploring the Mind, Body and Spirit through Taoist Philosophical Perspectives,” *Transpersonal Psychology Review*, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=a9h&AN=148197996&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹⁷ Dr. Su specializes in acupuncture, fixing pressure point, and cupping therapy.

¹⁸ “A Triad of Taoism”, 289

¹⁹ Ms. Cheng, interview by the author, Neihu, Taipei, Taiwan, March 16, 2022.

²⁰ Luis Carlos Matos, Jorga Pereira Machado, and Fernando Jorge Monteiro, "Understanding Traditional Chinese Medicine Therapeutics: An Overview of the Basics and Clinical Applications," *Research Gate*, <https://doi:10.3390/healthcare9039257.org/>.

²¹ *Asian Medicine*, 28

²² 道德經 - Dao De Jing

²³ Matos, Machado, and Monteiro, "Understanding Traditional," 7.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 8

are flawed or not beautiful then the inner aspect won't be able to govern the body properly as a whole.²⁵

Not only is "qi" an important aspect of TCM the "jing" (energy), "shen" (human spirit) is also heavily emphasized.²⁶ Oftentimes in western medicine patients would be diagnosed with "kidney deficiency syndrome" for a failing kidney. However, in TCM they believe the dwindle in the Taoist "jing" within a person's kidney is the reason behind kidney deficiency.²⁷ In a scientific perspective, TCM can oftentimes be seen as superficial or pseudoscience-like. However, the way Taoist philosophy influences TCM can sometimes be seen as a strong justification of why this practice is so prevalent.

Though Dr. Su may be Taoist, I have also noticed that a lot of the patients at Dr. Su's clinic were Buddhists. Ms. Cheng said she believes visiting Dr. Su weekly will help her feel more connected to the Buddha. It seems like Ms. Lee wasn't a reliable source in understanding Taoism and traditional Chinese medicine as she never mentioned about Taoist related ideas.

In conclusion, I believe my research suggests that Taoism does in fact have a heavy influence on the philosophical foundations of Chinese medicine. Dr. Su's insights to my questions and as well as evidence from different article journals suggests my conclusion. If more future research was conducted then I would like to consider interviewing Taoist priest and visit local Taoist temples to discuss their views on Chinese medicine.

²⁵ Schipper, Kristofer. "The Taoist Body." *History of Religions* 17, no. 3/4 (1978): 355-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062436>.

²⁶ "Jing Qi Shen," *New World Encyclopedia*, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Jing_Qi_Shen#:~:text=Jing%20Qi%20Shen%20\(%E7%B2%BE%E6%B0%A3,a%20divine%20or%20human%20spirit.](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Jing_Qi_Shen#:~:text=Jing%20Qi%20Shen%20(%E7%B2%BE%E6%B0%A3,a%20divine%20or%20human%20spirit.)

²⁷ Lisa Raphals, "Chinese Philosophy and Chinese Medicine," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-phil-medicine/>.

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<https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=232c5195-911d-418e-888b-77e5c0856d50%40redis>.

道德經 - *Dao De Jing*. Chinese Text Project, n.d. Accessed March 8, 2022. <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>.

Interview Questions

1. In what way do you think Taoism has influenced your life? Does Taoism have an emphasis on health?
2. How do you think Taoism affects the way you treat patients?
3. Are most of your patients here a devoted Taoist?
4. Where/how did you learn these healing practices?
5. To what extent do you believe that Taoism and Chinese medicine are related to one another?
6. What is the most important Taoist ritual you participate in?