



Concept of the human being in the Huangdi Neijing: Philosophical values and contemporary applications in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article examines the conceptualization of the human being in the *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), a classical text of traditional Chinese medicine that embodies profound philosophical insights. The *Neijing* portrays the human being as an integrated unity of body and mind, intrinsically connected to nature and the universe. From this, it emerges a philosophy of "yangsheng" (nurturing life), emphasizing a moderate lifestyle attuned to natural rhythms - a sustainable ecological humanism. In Vietnam, these values have found resonance and practical application across various domains, including traditional medicine, education, public health, and the promotion of environmentally conscious lifestyles. Beyond its historical and academic significances, the *Neijing* offers theoretical grounding for integrated medicine and contemporary eco-philosophy.

Keywords: human being, *Huangdi Neijing*, eastern philosophy, Vietnam

Introduction

The *Huangdi Neijing*, compiled around the 3rd century BCE, is a foundational text of traditional Chinese medicine. Far beyond laying the foundational framework for Eastern medical theory, this ancient work encapsulates profound philosophical insights into the nature of the human being and the cosmos^[1]. Unlike the dualistic approach of Western medicine, which often separates body from mind, and the human from their environment, the *Neijing* embraces a holistic paradigm that views human life as inherently integrated with the nature. As such, its conceptualization of the human being transcends medicine, articulating a distinctively Eastern philosophical anthropology that emphasizes the organic, inseparable relationship between the humans and the universe.

In the contemporary context, particularly in Vietnam, revisiting the philosophical values of the *Huangdi Neijing* is not merely an academic exercise. Rather, it presents a promising foundation for interdisciplinary applications across medicine, ethics, education, and sustainable development. As the humanity faces pressing global challenges such as climate change, ecological degradation, health crises, and psychosocial disorientation, a growing number of scholars and practitioners are turning back to ancient Eastern wisdom to seek more comprehensive and integrated solutions to contemporary problems, recognizing that it is in the ideas of *internal cultivation*, *the interaction of nature and human being*, and the *yin-yang-five phases* of the *Nei Jing* that we can find a strategy for dealing with modern crises with ancient yet ever-evolving wisdom about being, life, and the universe^[2].

From this perspective, studying the *Huangdi Neijing's* conception of the human being not only illuminates a distinctive philosophical model of Eastern thought but also contributes to rethinking core values in today's society. The time-honored insights preserved in this classical text may open new pathways for addressing the crises currently confronting Vietnam, where traditional medicine and Eastern philosophy remain deeply rooted in national identity. As such, the anthropological vision of the *Huangdi Neijing* deserves renewed scholarly attention – not only as a

historical relic, but also as a vital intellectual resource for guiding humanity's pursuit of balance, harmony, and sustainability in the modern age.

Study contents

1. Concept of the Human Being in the *Huangdi Neijing*

The *Huangdi Neijing* conceives the human being as a microcosm (*xiaotian di*), mirroring and resonating with the macrocosm (*datian di*). To the core of this worldview is the principle of the unity between Heaven and humanity (*tian ren he yi*), which affirms the intrinsic unity between the human body and the natural world. In this paradigm, human beings are inseparable from the universe, serving as a living embodiment of the Way of Heaven. According to the *Neijing*, the cosmos operates according to universal natural laws such as Yin–Yang, the Five Phases (*Wu Xing*) of generation and restriction, and *qi* (vital life energy). The human body is viewed as a microsystem that embodies the same principles that govern the universe at large^[3]. As stated in the *Lingshu* volume: 人與天地相應，與四時相合 – “Humans correspond to Heaven and Earth, in harmony with four seasons”^[4]. This suggests that the human body and life are fundamentally influenced by natural elements, including climate (characterised by wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness, and fire), circadian rhythms, and seasonal cycles. Thus, health and illness are not merely biological phenomena but are expressions of the degree to which a person is aligned or misaligned with cosmic timing (*tian shi*), terrestrial influences (*di qi*), and environmental context.

The core of this worldview lies the doctrines of Yin – Yang and Five Phases (*Wu Xing*) – two fundamental principles that constitute the universe and life. Yin and Yang are conceptualized as opposing yet complementary forces, simultaneously in conflict and integration, manifesting throughout all realms of existence – from celestial phenomena and geography to the human body and psyche. Within the body scope, *Yin* governs quiescence, the interior, and descent – corresponding to the internal organs, blood, the abdomen, and lower body; whereas *Yang* governs activity, the exterior, and ascent – corresponding to vital

energy (*qi*), the skin and hair, the back, and upper body. These two vital forces operate in a dynamic equilibrium (*dong zhong you jing, jing zhong you dong* – motion within stillness, stillness within motion), ensuring the continuous transformation and vitality of the human organism. When the balance of *Yin and Yang* is disturbed – either by excess or deficiency – the life-sustaining *qi* becomes disordered, resulting in disease. As the *Neijing* asserts: 陰陽離決，精氣乃絕，魂魄散離，神明乃毀 – “When yin and yang are separated, the essence is exhausted, the soul departs, and the spirit dissipates” [5]. Likewise, 天熱則人冷，天寒則人溫 – “When Heaven is hot, man should be cool; when Heaven is cold, humans should be warm.” Similarly, the doctrine of Five Phases – Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water – represents five dynamic aspects of universal operation. It serves as a framework to explain generation and restriction, as well as flourishing and decline, in both nature and the human body. The *Huangdi Neijing* applies Five Phases to formulate the *zangxiang* (organ-manifestation) theory, where each phase corresponds to a primary organ: Wood corresponds to the Liver (*Gan*), Fire to the Heart (*Xin*), Earth to the Spleen (*Pi*), Metal to the Lung (*Fei*), and Water to the Kidney (*Shen*) [6]. These elements interact through cycles of mutual generation (*sheng*) and control (*ke*), establishing a complex network of physiological and ecological correspondence. The *Neijing* thus constructs the “*zang - xiang*” (organ-manifestation) theory on the basis of Five-Phase correlations, asserting that the organs function in response to seasonal and environmental shifts: Spring (Wood-Liver-Wind), Summer (Fire-Heart-Heat), Autumn (Metal-Lung-Dryness), Winter (Water-Kidney-Cold), and the transitional seasons (Earth-Spleen-Dampness) [7]. Proper physiological functioning, in this framework, requires alignment with these cyclical changes in nature.

Another core aspect of the human conception in the *Huangdi Neijing* is the unity of *xing* (form/body) and *shen* (spirit/mind). Rather than adopting a materialist or mystical dualism, the *Neijing* advocates for the “interpenetration of body and spirit,” emphasizing the organic integration of physical and mental-spiritual aspects of human life [8]. Humans are seen not merely as corporeal entities but as beings whose vitality depends on the dynamic interplay of form and consciousness. In this view, health entails equilibrium and vitality across both physical and spiritual dimensions. From as early as the pre-Qin period, Chinese thinkers had already recognized the human being as “the most spiritually endowed among all creatures,” possessing an existence dependent on both physical substance and spiritual essence. The *Huangdi Neijing* inherited and refined this tradition, affirming that a truly healthy individual possesses both “robust form and abundant spirit” [9]. To achieve this state, one must maintain internal balance in *yin-yang* and Five-Phase dynamics, and live in harmony with the external world. When internal *yin-yang* dynamics become imbalanced, or Five Phases fall out of alignment, physiological and psychological disorders emerge. Conversely, when *zhengqi* (upright, righteous vital energy) is strong and the spirit remains calm, pathogenic and external influences are kept at bay, and illness cannot take root.

Moreover, the *Huangdi Neijing* asserts that the primary causes of illness lie in the disruption of harmony between human beings and their natural environment, rather than in the actions of demons or supernatural forces. This perspective represents a rationalist advance in ancient thought: instead of attributing disease to spiritual entities,

the *Neijing* identifies natural causes such as unbalanced diet, irregular lifestyle, emotional instability, harsh climates, and aging as the key factors that disturb bodily equilibrium and lead to illness. As written in the *Lingshu*: “Humans correspond to Heaven and Earth, in harmony with the four seasons” [10]. This implies that the human body mirrors the transformations of nature: Spring and Summer belong to the *yang* phase, with the flourishing of all things boosting *yang qi* within the body; Autumn and Winter are aligned with *yin*, when the natural world retreats and *yin* energy becomes dominant. Humanity and nature are not two separate entities, but are in continuous mutual resonance and response. This worldview emphasizes the human capacity for self-regulation in health: individuals can actively prevent illness by adjusting their lifestyle in accordance with the rhythms of nature and society. This is the foundational principle of the *yangsheng* theory in the *Huangdi Neijing* – an art of living aimed at longevity and well-being through moderation and alignment with natural laws.

It becomes evident that the *Huangdi Neijing* offers a monistic conception of the human being: a unified whole of body and mind, simultaneously a constituent of the larger universe. Human life functions according to the same principles that govern Heaven and Earth; thus, knowledge of the human cannot be separated from knowledge of nature, and health must be cultivated in harmonious interaction with the environment. This view constitutes not only the philosophical foundation of traditional Eastern medicine, but also contains profound anthropological and ethical insights that remain highly relevant in the modern age.

2. Philosophical Values of the Human Conception in the *Neijing*

2.1 Harmonious Living with Nature – *Yangsheng* and the Ecological View of Human Existence

One of the core philosophical values embedded in the *Huangdi Neijing*'s conception of the human being is the principle of living in accordance with the nature. Unlike dominant trends in Western philosophical traditions - which have often emphasized the conquest, control, or transformation of nature - Eastern thought in general, and the *Neijing* in particular, emphasizes harmony and adaptation. Humanity is not positioned in opposition to nature, but is regarded as an inseparable component within the larger system of natural movement and transformation. As stated in the *Suwen*, Chapter "Discussion on Regulating the Spirit with the Four Seasons" (Tian Tiao Shen Lun): 聖人不治已病，治未病；不治已亂，治未亂。是故治未病者，養生之道也 — “The sage, in nourishing life, lives in accordance with yin and yang, aligns with the numerology of Heaven, eats and drinks with moderation, maintains regular habits, avoids overexertion – thus preserving both body and spirit and attaining longevity. This is the Dao.” [11]. This passage serves not only as practical health guidance, but also conveys a profound philosophy of life: human beings attain vitality and peace not by resisting nature, but by living in concert with it.

Seasonal recommendations for *yangsheng* (nourishing life) are presented in detail throughout the *Neijing*. For example: “In spring, when all things begin to grow, one should go to bed late and rise early, walk outdoors, maintain a joyful spirit, and avoid anger” [12]. These specific instructions reflect a worldview in which ideal human life flows with the rhythms of *yin-yang*, seasonal climate changes, and biological cycles. This outlook has its roots in Daoist cosmology, as expressed in the classical aphorism: “Man follows the Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows

the Dao, and the Dao follows Nature.” Such philosophy not only informs individual behavior but also constitutes an ecological worldview in which humanity is seen not as a dominating agent, but as an interconnected node in the greater web of life.

From a philosophical perspective, this is the re-establishment of the human position as a cell in the great universe, where true life is only established when humans know how to harmonize, not go against the laws of nature. In the modern era, when humanity is facing climate change, environmental crisis and psychophysiological disorders caused by industrial lifestyle, the idea of health preservation in accordance with the Tao of the *Huangdi Neijing* becomes even more urgent and enlightening.

The core of health preservation is not only to preserve the body, but also to regulate the mind – that is, *to calm the mind, calm the spirit, suppress desire, and nourish the spirit*. Recommendations such as “calm the mind and harmonize the spirit”, “not indulgent, not depressed”, are today affirmed by modern medicine as essential factors to prevent diseases caused by stress, anxiety disorders and depression. That shows: health preservation is not only the art of healthy living, but also a method of holistic care – from body to soul, from individual to community.

Going beyond the personal level, the philosophy of “following nature” also contains a social ethical foundation – called ecological ethics. The idea of the *unity of nature* and man is not only the basis of comprehensive medicine, but also the argument for sustainable development models: humans can only settle down and establish their destiny when they exist in harmony within a balanced ecosystem.

In summary, the philosophical value of harmonious living with nature, as articulated in the *Huangdi Neijing*, extends far beyond traditional medical advice. It constitutes a deep ecological worldview and offers modern humanity a framework for living that is healthy, balanced, and environmentally responsible – qualities increasingly recognized as moral and philosophical imperatives in the age of globalization and climate crisis.

2.2 Influence on human thought in current philosophy

The concept of human being presented in the *Huangdi Neijing* is not only valuable within the framework of traditional medical theory but also has the power to spread to broader areas of modern philosophical thought, especially philosophical anthropology. With the core idea of the unity of nature and man, the coexistence of spirit and form, and mutual sympathy between the inside and outside, the *Neijing* establishes a monistic paradigm that harmonizes body, mind, and environment, between the individual and the whole, between the human body and the universe.

Firstly, in current efforts to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of philosophy – especially in postmodern and post-technocratic contexts – many Eastern scholars have called for a selective inheritance of classical wisdom traditions. Within this intellectual movement, the concept of the unity of Heaven and humanity, as refined and consistently developed in the *Huangdi Neijing*, is regarded as a theoretical model capable of redefining the human-nature relationship in the post-industrial age. As Ho Sy Quy (2006) noted, establishing a new environmental ethic must draw from ancient principles such as the triadic unity of Heaven – Earth – Human (*tian – di – ren xiang yu*), as a counterpoint to the dualistic and anthropocentric worldview of mechanical civilization.

Beyond the scope of environmental philosophy, the *Huangdi Neijing* also contributes to contemporary debates

in philosophical anthropology, particularly as a counterpoint to Cartesian dualism – a framework that has dominated Western thought since Descartes. Whereas Descartes posited a radical separation between *res extensa* (the extended substance) and *res cogitans* (the thinking substance)^[13], the *Neijing* approaches the human being as an integrated whole – composed of *xing* (physical form) and *shen* (spirit/consciousness) – constantly interacting. This holistic perspective opens up a monistic framework aligned with modern schools such as phenomenology, philosophy of embodiment, and deep ecology. These approaches share the belief that humans cannot be understood in isolation from their biological and social contexts. Much like Heidegger’s critique of modern civilization as alienating humans from the world, and his call to “dwell poetically” and attune to the natural rhythm of Being^[14], the *Huangdi Neijing*, centuries earlier, had already advocated for *shun tian er xing* – living in harmony with nature – as a prerequisite for well – being and longevity.

The *Neijing*’s philosophical foundation has also found resonance in modern medicine, particularly within emerging paradigms such as integrative medicine, holistic health, and patient-centred care. These movements mark a shift in medical consciousness away from a symptom-based model toward a systemic one that considers the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of the patient. This is precisely the guiding principle of the *Huangdi Neijing*, which emphasizes preventive care (*zhi wei bing*), root-cause treatment (*zhi ben*), and the regulation of emotions, qi, and lifestyle.

Many of the health-preserving techniques discussed in the *Neijing* – including meditation, qigong, dietary moderation – are now recognized by biomedical research for their efficacy in stress reduction, immune enhancement, and chronic disease prevention. Practices such as *tai chi* and *qigong* have been shown to improve mobility and mental stability in the elderly; meditation helps regulate the neuroendocrine-immune axis; and acupuncture, based on the meridian theory of the *Neijing*, is endorsed by the World Health Organization for various common ailments. These findings underscore the continuing relevance of the *Neijing*’s integrated model of care, which addresses the individual as a whole, encompassing mind, body, and context, in shaping 21st-century health and wellness strategies.

Moreover, the influence of the *Neijing* is evident in emergent cultural movements such as “green living,” “slow living,” and minimalism – all of which represent a cultural return to values of balance, simplicity, and inner cultivation. The philosophy of *yangsheng* (nourishing life) in the *Neijing* offers modern individuals a pathway out of the overstimulation and alienation of technocratic society – promoting instead a lifestyle based on emotional moderation, inner reflection, and harmonious alignment with natural and social rhythms. This can be understood as a deep cultural response to contemporary crises of meaning, widespread stress, and ecological degradation.

In summary, the human conception articulated in the *Huangdi Neijing* is gradually permeating multiple currents of modern thought, from ecological philosophy and philosophical embodiment to holistic medicine and the cultural ethics of balance. In an age increasingly defined by global crises, the philosophical legacy of the Eastern tradition – and the *Neijing* in particular – offers not only historical insight but also forward – looking potential for guiding the search for a more integrated and sustainable human future.

3. Application of the *Huangdi Neijing's* Humanistic Philosophy in Contemporary Vietnam

In Vietnam, the humanistic ideas in the *Huangdi Neijing* are not only present as a legacy of traditional medicine, but are also gradually reborn in efforts to apply them to modern life - ranging from medicine, health education, cultural life to philosophical research. Under the light of the theory of the unification of nature and man, yin and yang, and the theory of internal organs, the *Neijing* is not simply an ancient medical book, but an anthropological paradigm with the potential to guide a balanced life, health preservation and sustainable development in the new era.

Vietnam's Eastern medical tradition has been profoundly influenced by Chinese medicine, with the *Huangdi Neijing* serving as a foundational source of theory, methodology, and medical ethics. Since the medieval period, Vietnamese physician-scholars such as Tue Tinh and Hai Thuong Lan Ong absorbed and innovated upon the principles of the *Neijing*, integrating them into the foundations of indigenous medical systems. For example, Hai Thuong Lan Ong not only inherited the concept of *prenatal essence* but also emphasized the role of *postnatal* factors - such as nutrition, environment, and emotional well-being - in sustaining health, while upholding medical ethics as a central tenet of clinical practice^[15].

In contemporary Vietnam, the *Huangdi Neijing* remains a core text for both the teaching and practice of Traditional Vietnamese Medicine (TVM) in medical institutions nationwide. Foundational doctrines such as *yin-yang*, *the five phases (wuxing)*, *organ systems (zang-fu)*, and *meridian theory* are taught in accordance with the *Neijing*, helping shape a holistic understanding of the human being as a biopsychosocial entity. Major hospitals, such as the National Hospital of Traditional Medicine, have implemented integrative treatment models that combine Eastern and Western medical practices, applying acupuncture, massage, dietary therapy, and herbal medicine alongside modern treatments for chronic illnesses, rehabilitation, and elderly care. These models align with the *Neijing's* therapeutic principles: regulating qi and blood, balancing yin and yang, and modifying lifestyle, emotions, and physical activity to promote healing.

In terms of policy, the Vietnamese government has made a strategic plan for the development of traditional medicine through 2030, emphasizing the integration of Eastern medical theory and techniques with modern scientific achievements. The Ministry of Health has encouraged critical scientific evaluation of traditional formulas and therapies - such as biomedical analyses of acupuncture mechanisms, pharmacological testing of medicinal herbs, and clinical assessments of health-preserving practices based on the *Neijing*^[16]. Some experimental studies have confirmed the *Neijing's* empirical validity - for example, the seasonal variation in human biorhythms and the proven effectiveness of acupuncture in managing chronic pain, as recognized by the World Health Organization.

In contemporary Vietnamese culture, the philosophy of health preservation from the *Huangdi Neijing* is experiencing a strong revival through forms of self-care such as herbal medicine, qigong, tai chi, and moderate living. Nearly 50% of the population uses herbal medicine to prevent COVID-19, reflecting a trend of returning to values of harmony and sustainability^[17]. Folk therapeutic models such as qigong, meditation, and spiritual rituals play a large role in Vietnamese traditional medical culture.

In academic settings, the *Huangdi Neijing* is increasingly approached not only as a medical text but also as a classical philosophical work, particularly in programs on Eastern philosophy in Vietnamese universities. Doctrines such as

yin-yang, the five elements, and the unity of Heaven and humanity (*tian ren he yi*) are taught as foundational to monistic thinking and ecological ethics, helping students connect abstract philosophical reasoning with practical life applications.

Nonetheless, applying the *Huangdi Neijing's* teachings in modern contexts presents several challenges. Firstly, the complexity of its classical language and the abstract nature of concepts like *jing*, *qi*, *shen*, and *wuxing* can lead to misinterpretation or pseudoscientific misuse. Interpreting these principles requires a scientifically grounded and interdisciplinary approach - one that preserves the original spirit while avoiding superstition or oversimplification. Secondly, the integration of Eastern and Western medicine demands alignment in both understanding and practice, avoiding tokenistic combinations that lack clinical effectiveness. Moreover, many modern lifestyle habits, such as physical inactivity, poor diet, and emotional imbalance, run counter to traditional health principles, making public health education a critical task for reviving the values advocated in the *Neijing*.

In general, it can be affirmed that the application of the *Huangdi Neijing* in contemporary Vietnamese society does not stop at the medical field, but also extends to the culture of living and philosophy of life. The acquisition and modernization of this traditional knowledge - if carried out in a dialectical, flexible and scientific manner - will contribute to building a comprehensive health care model, improving the quality of life, and shaping a balanced lifestyle between people, society and nature. The *Huangdi Neijing*, with the spirit of "living in harmony with nature, nourishing the body and calming the mind", continues to inspire a society moving towards sustainable development.

Conclusion

The *Huangdi Neijing* is a classic work that summarizes the wisdom of ancient Eastern philosophy, not only containing profound medical theories but also shining with timeless wisdom about humans and the universe. From the perspective of the *Neijing*, humans appear as a microcosm of unified body, mind and spirit, closely connected to the macrocosm of nature. This comprehensive concept brings profound lessons: about living in accordance with natural laws to protect health and happiness; about the importance of balance and moderation in personal life; and about the inseparable relationship between humans and the surrounding environment. In the modern context - when humanity is facing ecological crisis, psychological pressure and civilizational disorder - the philosophy of the *Neijing* is not only not outdated, but on the contrary, becomes more urgent. People today are looking back to ancient principles as an effort to restore an unbalanced way of life: reduce consumption, increase sedentary; limit intervention, promote harmony; not against nature, but living with it. This is the lasting value that the *Neijing* brings - not as a "relic of knowledge", but as a "living source of thought".

For Vietnam, where Asian tradition and modern development intersect, the inheritance and application of the quintessence of the *Huangdi Neijing* has special significance. It contributes to preserving the cultural identity - national medicine, while opening up a direction for a sustainable medicine and lifestyle. Practice has proven that when the principles of balance and harmony of the *Neijing* are applied (in preventive medicine, in combination therapy, in community health education), they bring practical effects to human life. The ancient philosophy of "unity of heaven and man" reminds us of the sacred connection between humans and the universe, thereby building a sense of respect for nature, respect for the body and one's own spiritual life.

It can be said that the concept of human beings in the *Huangdi Neijing* contains profound humanistic philosophical values and a timeless vision. Studying and applying this concept not only helps us better understand the heritage of Eastern thought, but also suggests solutions to current social problems. In the context of a turbulent world, returning to eternal principles such as balance, harmony and naturalness is to find the roots to orient the future. The *Huangdi Neijing* is thus still alive with us today as a precious bridge between ancient wisdom and modern life, contributing to the model of comprehensive and harmonious human development that we are aiming for.

Note

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