

Tao Hongjing's Medical Health Preservation Philosophy

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Abstract: In the 21st century, the medical paradigm has transitioned from "disease medicine" to "health medicine," with the developmental trend shifting from "treating diseases" to maintaining a "healthy" state. Tao Hongjing, representing the field of health preservation studies during the Southern and Northern Dynasties in ancient China, contributed distinctive principles and methods to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) health preservation, constituting a crucial aspect of TCM health preservation academic thought. His concise and cost-effective health preservation theories and methods encapsulate profound health preservation insights and philosophical contemplation, earning commendation from successive generations of medical practitioners and holding remarkable research value. Against the backdrop of implementing the "Healthy China" strategy and advocating "universal health," Tao Hongjing's health preservation philosophy holds significant reference value for enhancing human health awareness and promoting harmonious social development, providing strong practical guidance. This paper focuses on Tao Hongjing's medical health preservation philosophy, utilizing works such as *Record of Nurturing Life for Longevity*, *Zhen Gao*, *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations*, *Records of Renowned Physicians*, and *Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion* (《养性延命录》《真诰》《本草经集注》《名医别录》《陶隐居集》) as research materials to thoroughly explore Tao Hongjing's medical health preservation methods and academic characteristics.

Keywords: Tao Hongjing, Medical Health Preservation Philosophy, Health Preservation Methods

1. Introduction

Tao Hongjing, also known as Tongming, later honored as Mr. Zhenbai, adopted the alias Huayang Yinju in his later years. He was a native of Moling in Danyang (present-day Nanjing, Jiangsu). Born in the third year of Emperor Xiaojian of the Southern Song Dynasty (456 AD), Tao Hongjing passed away in the second year of Emperor Wudi of the Liang Dynasty (536 AD) at the age of 81.

The Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties period was a crucial era in the rapid development of health preservation ideologies and methods in China, marking a milestone in the history of health preservation culture. Tao Hongjing, a prominent Taoist philosopher, alchemist, medical scholar, and literary figure of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, was a representative of the Shangqing School (上清派) of Taoism. He had profound achievements in the fields of medicine and health preservation. His notable works include *Efficacious Formulas for Practical Use*, *Zhen Gao*, *Record of Nurturing*

Life for Longevity, *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations*, *Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion*, *Supplementary Collection of One Hundred and One Formulas for Deficiency in Elbow Afterpains*, *Records of Renowned Physicians*, and *Summary of Medicinal Secrets*. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, traditional medicine experienced rapid development, and Tao Hongjing emerged as a representative figure in Taoist medicine. The health preservation principles and methods he proposed constitute an essential part of traditional Chinese medical health preservation ideology. His simple and cost-effective health preservation theories carry profound philosophical insights and have been highly regarded by subsequent generations of medical practitioners, possessing distinct research value.

This paper primarily seeks to study and draw inspiration from Tao Hongjing's medical health preservation principles and methods, offering significant guidance for the physical and mental well-being of contemporary society. The aim is to achieve a harmonious development between the health of the people and socioeconomic growth.

Drawing from existing medical and health-related works of Tao Hongjing, such as *Record of Nurturing Life for Longevity*, *Zhen Gao*, *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations*, *Records of Renowned Physicians*, and *Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion*, this paper analyzes the impact and limitations of Tao Hongjing's medical health preservation ideology on subsequent generations, providing a comprehensive exploration of Tao Hongjing's medical health preservation philosophy.

2. Tao Hongjing's Life and Works

2.1. Brief Biography

Tao Hongjing, a renowned Taoist philosopher, alchemist, medical scholar, and literary figure of the Liang Dynasty in the Southern Dynasties period, also stood as a representative figure of the Maoshan Taoist tradition. He possessed profound research and achievements in the fields of medicine and health preservation [1].

Born into a scholarly family in Jiangnan, Tao Hongjing's grandfather, Tao Long, was conferred the title of Jin'an Marquis for his military service alongside Emperor Xiaowu. His father, Tao Zhenbao, was well-versed in medicine, widely knowledgeable, and held an official position as the Xiaochang magistrate in Jiangxia [2]. Tao Hongjing exhibited a unique inclination from a young age, regarding ignorance in any matter as a deep disgrace. (“一事不知,以为深耻”) At the age of four or five, he used reeds as pens, practicing writing in ash (“以荻为笔,画灰中学书”), and by the age of nine, he was proficient in Confucian classics such as *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Changes*, and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. (《礼记》《尚书》《周易》《春秋》) At the age of ten, he devoted day and night to studying Ge Hong's work, *Biographies of Divine Immortals*, (《神仙传》) kindling his interest in health preservation.

In adulthood, Tao Hongjing integrated the paths of medicine, Taoism, and health preservation, dedicating himself to profound research. In the second year of Emperor Yongming of the Qi Dynasty (484 AD), Tao Hongjing became a disciple of Sun Youyue. In the first year of Yongming (488 AD), he joined the Maoshan Taoist tradition and obtained a genuine copy of the *Qing Scriptures* (《清经》) from handwritten books by Yang Xi and Xu Mi. During the eighth year of Yongming (490 AD), Tao Hongjing traveled to Zhejiang and visited the Taoists Lou Huiming and Du Jingchan, acquiring ten volumes of relics from real immortals. In the tenth year of Yongming (492 AD), feeling discontent with his official career, Tao Hongjing resigned from his position, retired to Maoshan, and adopted the title of Huayang Jushi (Recluse of Huayang).

Living on Maoshan for over forty years, Tao Hongjing established his martial arts school, immersed himself in Daoist practices, wrote numerous articles, and pioneered Maoshan's

development. Maoshan, also known as Qushan, renowned for its picturesque scenery, is considered a sacred place for cultivation in Daoism. Taoism designates Mount Mao as the “spiritual sanctuary of Wu, the poetic and beautiful region of Jinling, a blessed land for cultivating the Dao, and the sacred abode for achieving divinity.” (“金陵吴句曲,修真福地,成神之灵墟”) Despite his retreat to Maoshan, Tao Hongjing maintained close communication with Emperor Xiao Yan of the Liang Dynasty. Emperor Wu of Liang once remarked, “In matters of great importance, especially those related to military expeditions, consultation is essential. Each month, numerous letters are exchanged, and people refer to this as ‘Mountain Correspondence.’” [3]. Despite invitations to build a Daoist institution, Tao Hongjing consistently declined. Tao Hongjing passed away in the second year of Emperor Wudi of the Liang Dynasty, posthumously honored as Mr. Zhenbai by the emperor.

Tao Hongjing was a polymath with extensive knowledge, delving into various fields such as astronomy, calendar calculation, geography, military strategy, pharmacology, medicine, craftsmanship, and even Confucian classics, poetry, calligraphy, and painting.

Historical records consistently praise Tao Hongjing, as seen in the *Book of Liang - Biography of Tao Hongjing*, (《梁书·陶弘景传》) which notes his passion for learning, curiosity, and wisdom even in old age, describing him as a man with a heart as pure as a child's. (“性好书,好奇事,惜时,虽已年老,但仍有一颗赤子之心。”) His expertise covered a wide range, including Yin-Yang principles, the Five Elements, celestial phenomena, geography, medicinal formulas, and medical texts [4]. In his memorial *In Praise of the Reclusive and Virtuous Master Tao*, (《隐居贞白先生陶君碑》) Prince Xiao Lun of Shao Ling in the Liang Dynasty appraised Tao Hongjing as follows: “His zeal for learning rivaled that of Zhang Hua, his expertise matched that of Ma Jun, his subtlety resembled that of Liu Xiang, and his cultivation of temperament mirrored that of Ge Hong.” (“张华之好学,马钧之之精,刘向之之微,葛洪之养性”) [5] Jiang Zong, in his preface to *Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion*, offered a comprehensive and affirmative evaluation of Tao Hongjing: “In ancient times, Liu Xiang comprehended the past and present, Ma Rong mastered books from all under heaven, Jing Fang observed the wind and rain, and Pei Kai understood yin and yang... Master Tao from Danyang is no exception. He possessed profound knowledge of the Purple Platform's green scrolls, green books, jade-inscribed secret texts, and extraordinary works from the Jade Altar. Every piece is meticulous, every detail refined; there is nothing he did not master, nothing he did not excel in. Truly, he was an extraordinary figure of his time.” (“昔刘向通古今,马融通天下书,京房察风雨,裴楷晓阴阳.....丹阳陶先生,亦是如此。”知紫台青简、青书、玉版秘文、瑶坛奇书,无一不精,无一不精,无所不精,无所不精,无所不用其极,非世之奇人也。)[6]

As a versatile figure of the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Tao Hongjing made significant contributions to the paths of medicine and health preservation. According to historical examination by Mr. Wei Shimin, Tao Hongjing authored a total of 77 works, with rich contributions in the field of medicine, including works like *Record of Nurturing Life for Longevity*, *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations*, *Tao's Secluded Materia Medica*, *Efficacious Formulas for Practical Use*, *Records of Renowned Physicians*, *Summary of Medicinal Secrets*, *Regulations and Methods for Compounding Elixir Medicines*, and *Supplementary Collection of One Hundred and One Formulas for Deficiency in Elbow Afterpains*. [7]. Therefore, his academic thoughts, achievements, and contributions in the field of medicine are indeed noteworthy.

In summary, Tao Hongjing, born into nobility and receiving excellent educational training, left behind numerous enduring works. Influenced by his family's teachings, he developed a deep understanding of medical knowledge.

2.2. Medical-related Works

Tao Hongjing's extant medical and health preservation works include *Records of Renowned Physicians*, *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations*, *Record of Nurturing Life for Longevity*, Taoist classic *Zhen Gao*, and later compilations of Tao's literary works such as *Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion*.

Record of Nurturing Life for Longevity is a representative work of early Chinese health preservation theories, divided into six sections [8][9]. The first half comprises sections on *Precepts*, *Dietary Precepts*, and *Prayers for Blessings*, (《戒律》《食戒》《祈福祈福》) illustrating the principles of health preservation by providing examples of adhering to the way of nature, emphasizing the importance of correct health preservation, and detailing many precautions in daily diet and life. The second half includes chapters on "Therapeutic Inhalation," "Guiding and Massaging," and "Female Health," describing methods for therapeutic inhalation, guiding and massaging techniques, and the timing and details of bedroom arts, including ancient health preservation methods such as the long-lost "Five Animal Frolics" and the "Six-Character Secret of Breathing."

Zhen Gao is a significant Taoist scripture compiled and annotated by Tao Hongjing [10]. The title *Zhen Gao* refers to "the edicts uttered by true individuals." (《真诰》者,真人口授之诰也。)[11]. In the preface of *Zhen Gao*, Tao Hongjing explains the reason for its title and cites Kong Anguo, who said, 'An edict is a proclamation of grand righteousness to the world.' (《诰,以大义告于天下者是也》)[12]. This positioning of *Zhen Gao* emphasizes its alignment with the classics, as Tao Hongjing asserts, "The creation of 'Zhen Gao' aligns with the classics." (《真诰之作,其纬于经者乎。》)[8]. Therefore, the book *Zhen Gao* exists as an explanation of the teachings of the Shangqing school of Daoism. Tao Hongjing likened it to a "latitude" in the context of this work.

The main content of *Zhen Gao* originates from the Xingning period of the Eastern Jin Dynasty when Yang Xi, a native of Wu County, acted as a medium, and many immortals descended to convey edicts to the father and son Xu Mi and Xu Xie in Jurong. These edicts were recorded by Yang Xi or transmitted orally by him and recorded by the two Xus. Tao Hongjing considered these edicts precious and of high religious value. As both Yang Xi and the Xus were skilled calligraphers, particularly Yang Xi, who excelled in calligraphy, the written edicts were of significant calligraphic value. Therefore, Tao Hongjing collected them from various sources, introduced their descent times and recording situations, annotated the people and content mentioned therein, and compiled this book, *Zhen Gao*.

Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion, also known as *Hua Yang Tao's Secluded Collection*, (《华阳陶隐居集》) was compiled during the Chen Dynasty in the Southern Dynasties period, lost during the Tang and Song Dynasties, and later reconstructed during the Southern Song Dynasty in the Shaoxing period. Scholar Wang Jingzhou believes that the collection *The Collected Works of Mr. Zhenbai, Tao's Seclusion* (《贞白先生陶隐居文集》) produced in the thirteenth year of Shaoxing (113 AD) is the most extensive surviving original. There are also other editions of "Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion," including Daoist collections, Maoshi Jigu Studio editions, Ming Dynasty editions by Xiao Sixin, and editions in *Seventy-Two Anthologies*. (《七十二家集》)[9]. Additionally, the preface of this book includes medical and health-related content such as prefaces to *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations*, *Summary of Medicinal Secrets*, *Supplementary Collection of One Hundred and One Formulas for Deficiency in Elbow Afterpains*, and *Record of Nurturing Life for Longevity*, making it an important documentary source for the Southern and Northern Dynasties period.

Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations (abbreviated as "Annotations") is Tao Hongjing's annotation of the *Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica*. [13]. Based on *Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica*, Tao continuously innovated and improved, summarizing the theories of traditional Chinese medicine systematically. The innovative aspects of Tao Hongjing's theory of medicinal herbs in *Compendium of Materia Medica Annotations* mainly include three aspects: Firstly, he further revised the traditional classification methods of medicinal herbs, clarified the natural properties of medicinal herbs, and pioneered a development model for Chinese medicine centered on the origin of medicinal herbs [10]. Secondly, he proposed attention to the dosage and application of medicinal herbs, stating, "There is a distinction between light and heavy, all must be distinguished." ("又有轻重之分,皆须辨之。") Proper usage leads to immediate relief upon ingestion, ensuring longevity and well-being. Thirdly, he established the concept of "universal medicines for all ailments," classifying them according to their "principal functions" and listing over eighty commonly used medicines, such as those for "treating wind-induced dizziness, facial wind ailments, and wind-induced leg disorders." ("治风眩、头面风、中风足") [11]. Although the original book was lost, it has been preserved due to extensive citations in subsequent medical literature and the discovery of partial scrolls in the Dunhuang Caves. The preface is included in the later compilation of *Collected Works of Tao's Seclusion*. Tao Hongjing wrote this book not only to cure diseases but also to prolong life, as stated in his preface: "The *Daoist Scriptures of Immortal Formulas*, through ingesting food and abstaining from grains, can extend life and enhance vitality, leading to transformation and ascension." ("《道经仙方》,服食断谷,延年益寿,连飞丹化石,云腾飞升,都是以药道为先。") [12].

3. Tao Hongjing's Daoist Cultural Influence on Medical and Health Preservation Thought

Daoism and Taoist philosophy advocate the attitude of "valuing life" as a fundamental approach to life, emphasizing that the essence of "Dao" lies in cherishing human life. The core idea of Daoism is "ascension," which places importance on "cultivation of truth" ("xiuzhen"). Cultivation of truth is the primary means of ascension in Daoism and constitutes its fundamental category. Consequently, Daoism places great emphasis on life, seeks longevity, values the efficacy of medicines, and actively adopts methods such as "health preservation," "avoidance of worldly affairs," "clearing the mind," and "disease prevention" to promote well-being and extend life.

3.1. Daoist Medicine

The emergence and development of Daoist medical thought are closely tied to Daoism's advocated perspectives on life and the universe. Daoist philosophy posits that everything between heaven and earth originates from "qi" (气/炁), which is the vital force or essence of "wuji" (无极), meaning limitless. Ge Hong, in his work "Inner Chapters of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity - On Ultimate Principles," elucidates this concept: "A woman governs it through qi, governs it through people." [14]. Chen Tuan stated, "Yin and yang are yin and yang; yin and yang are boundless. Without differentiation between yin and yang, the universe initially formed. Yin and yang harmonized, myriad energies were complete. Thus, this is the taiji, resembling my appearance before birth." (From *Yu Quan* (《玉铉》)) [15]. The human body imitates various natural patterns, and the methods of using medicine to treat illnesses in Daoism are built upon the theory of the body's connection with nature.

Laozi proposed the viewpoint of "Man models himself on the earth, the earth models itself on heaven, heaven models itself on the Dao, and the Dao models itself on the universe." ("人法地,地法天,天法道,道法天地") [16]. Therefore, to "model oneself on nature," one should act according to the laws of nature. Daoist medicine advocates that humans are a microcosm, a part of the universe, and

an essential element bestowed upon humanity by the heavens. To follow the connection and laws between humans and nature, achieving the harmony of "Heaven corresponds to humanity," is necessary for "longevity and enduring vision," leading to a peaceful and enjoyable old age. Otherwise, it may result in illness and unbearable suffering.

Daoist medicine, derived from the understanding of the principles governing all things in nature, explores and grasps human life activities, drawing conclusions about psychological, physiological, and pathological aspects. For example, the six natural climates of cold, heat, dampness, dryness, fire, and wind in nature do not normally cause human illnesses. However, if they are excessive, deficient, or not properly responded to, they can transform into the Six Evils ("liuyin"), disrupting the body's regulation and adaptability. This disruption can also promote the reproduction and spread of pathogenic bacteria, becoming a cause of various diseases. This analogy not only effectively illustrates the connection between humans and nature but also finds extensive application in health care. Daoism places great emphasis on disease prevention and treatment, traditionally valuing health preservation to achieve the goals of strengthening the body, preventing and treating diseases. Daoist health preservation methods primarily include dietary practices, qi cultivation, guided breathing, fasting practices, and bedroom arts.

3.2. Tao Hongjing's Medical Philosophy

Differing from Ge Hong's ultimate pursuit of immortality, which is more mystical, Tao Hongjing's health preservation philosophy is pragmatic, emphasizing longevity, health, and quality of life. For instance, his representative work *Record of Nurturing Vitality and Extending Life* contains minimal speculation and descriptions about transcending to immortality. Instead, it focuses more on practical and achievable health preservation methods, playing a pivotal role in inheriting and promoting theories related to traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) health preservation. In Tao Hongjing's works such as *Annotations on the Classic of Materia Medica* and *Record of Famous Physicians*, he documented extensive information about medicinal substances, covering their origins, collection, preparation, and even usage. This compilation serves as a summary of Daoist dietary health preservation. In "Record of Nurturing Vitality and Extending Life," Tao Hongjing outlined a distinctive method of breathing exercises, emphasizing the exhalation process. (一种特殊的吐纳之法,就是呼,呼,呼,呼) [17]. Simultaneously, he collected various guidance methods from predecessors, summarizing and refining Hua Tuo's "Five Animal Frolics," providing detailed explanations for each specific movement. This significantly enriched and developed the guidance techniques during that period.

Treatise of the Divine Command (《神仙敕令》) was compiled by Tao Hongjing and represents his personal perspective. This article divides the path of health preservation into three levels. The lowest level involves solely consuming herbal medicines without practicing bedroom arts, guidance techniques, or engaging in chivalrous acts, yet still achieving eternal life. However, without the path of the Golden Elixir ("jindan"), one cannot ultimately become an immortal. Moving up, the Golden Elixir becomes the focus. Despite half a lifetime dedicated to alchemical practice, Tao Hongjing never successfully entered its profound realm. Even with his extraordinary intelligence and innate advantages, the difficulty remains formidable, let alone for others. *Great Daoist Canon* represents a method superior to the Golden Elixir, with an extremely high level of difficulty for mastery. Therefore, for ordinary individuals, becoming an immortal is an extremely challenging and almost impossible endeavor. The more practical approaches include meditation, the middle way, guidance techniques, the practice of the Lesser Yin, and dietary practices.

Tao Hongjing believed that understanding principles is paramount for maintaining health. Despite the various methods available, the essence remains the same for these three approaches. By adhering to common sense and persisting over the long term, positive effects can be achieved.

4. Conclusion

Due to historical and societal influences, Tao Hongjing's medical and health preservation philosophy inevitably carries certain limitations. Nevertheless, it has exerted a profound and lasting impact on the development of subsequent medical and health preservation studies. Against the backdrop of contemporary advocacy for "universal health," Tao Hongjing's medical and health preservation ideas retain practical value, warranting further exploration and inheritance.

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