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# Tracing the source of nurturing life: a hermeneutic interpretation of Zhuangzi's "Essence of Nurturing Life"

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This study addresses a critical gap in Daoist scholarship by revisiting the concept of “nurturing life” (養生) in *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life*, an idea often reduced to either medical pragmatism or mystical abstraction in contemporary interpretations. In light of rising global interest in holistic wellness, psychological resilience, and existential balance, this paper argues that Zhuangzi offers a philosophically rigorous and spiritually embodied model of life cultivation, distinct from both Confucian moralism and biomedical reductionism. Using hermeneutic textual analysis grounded in Daoist metaphysics, the study examines central parables, including Cook Ding, the marsh pheasant, and the Right Master, to uncover how Zhuangzi integrates physical finitude with intuitive freedom. The analysis also traces the philological evolution of 養生 across classical texts, such as *Shuowen Jiezi*, *Zuo Zhuan*, *Mencius*, and the *Dao De Jing*, revealing how Zhuangzi reconfigures the term from a ritual or ethical duty toward an existential alignment with the Dao. Rather than presenting nurturing life as a strategy for longevity, Zhuangzi frames it as a dynamic interplay between moderation, spontaneity, and self-acceptance. His view emphasizes attunement over control, serenity over striving, and resonance with natural rhythms over rigid prescriptions. This vision is further contextualized through comparative reference to Indian *Purushartha* and contemporary philosophies of flourishing. The findings position Zhuangzi not merely as a voice from antiquity, but as a relevant interlocutor in current discourses on health, meaning, and the art of living.

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## Introduction

The concept of “nurturing life” (養生) holds a prominent position in classical Chinese philosophy, particularly within the Daoist tradition. In contemporary discourse, this term is frequently associated with physical health practices, preventive care, and longevity. However, such understandings often overlook the deeper ethical and metaphysical underpinnings that shaped its original significance. Within this broader context, *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life* presents one of the most philosophically sophisticated articulations of life cultivation in early Daoist thought, blending paradoxical reflection, embodied insight, and a radical rethinking of health, harmony, and human flourishing (Turner, 2025; Fraser, 2013).

Despite its centrality, the concept of 養生 has been either marginalized or oversimplified in modern interpretations, reduced to lifestyle guidance or interpreted through narrow biomedical or mystical frameworks. This study addresses this interpretive gap by recovering Zhuangzi’s vision as a dynamic, existentially grounded paradigm that redefines life cultivation not as the pursuit of bodily preservation alone, but as a practice of spiritual alignment and ontological freedom. It asks: What is the philosophical essence of “nurturing life” in *Zhuangzi*, and how does this conception engage with both classical Chinese cosmology and contemporary concerns surrounding mental well-being, ecological crisis, and spiritual fatigue?

The urgency of this inquiry lies in its resonance with present-day debates on holistic health and human sustainability. As contemporary societies increasingly struggle with psychological burnout, moral disorientation, and alienation from natural rhythms, Zhuangzi’s vision offers a compelling alternative. His thought challenges optimization-driven paradigms by proposing a model of life based on moderation, acceptance, and harmonious responsiveness to the Dao.

Methodologically, this research employs hermeneutic textual analysis to interpret selected parables from *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life*, such as “Cook Ding,” the marsh pheasant, and the Right Master, illuminating how the text integrates physical finitude with spiritual attunement. In parallel, the study draws on foundational classical sources, including *Shuowen Jiezi*, *Zuo Zhuan*, *The Book of Mencius*, *Dao De Jing*, and *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon*, to trace the philological and conceptual evolution of 養生. Zhuangzi’s approach is then contrasted with Confucian, Mohist, and early medical views, emphasizing his distinctive endorsement of *wu wei* (non-coercive action), spontaneity, and metaphysical modesty.

Finally, the discussion expands cross-culturally by linking Zhuangzi’s thought with Indian philosophical frameworks such as *Purushartha*, as well as contemporary philosophies of flourishing. Rather than presenting Zhuangzi as a mystic recluse, this study positions him as a philosopher of enduring relevance whose model of life cultivation speaks directly to modern existential concerns and the search for meaningful equilibrium in times of crisis.

## Literature review

The “nurturing life” (養生) idea has well-established intellectual and philosophical origins in pre-Zhuangzian Chinese thinking, having been developed from physiological nourishment to a metaphysical and ethical ideal. Before Zhuangzi, the idea occurred in various classical texts throughout Confucian, Mohist, and pre-Daoist writings, but with differing focuses. This part charts the semantic development and philosophical metamorphoses of “nurturing life” throughout pre-Zhuangzian texts and shows how Zhuangzi reinterpreted it through an ego-centered spiritual lens (Zhao, 2014; Zhao, 2023).

**Historical and semantic foundations.** Etymologically, the term “nurturing life” derives from the classical definitions of “養” (*yang*) and “生” (*sheng*). According to *Shuowen Jiezi*, “yang” signifies the act of providing sustenance, composed of radicals for food (食) and sheep (羊), symbolizing nourishment and cultivation. “Sheng” indicates “to grow forward” and conveys a sense of vigor and emergence. The compound “養生” expresses meanings ranging from physical upkeep to spiritual-ethical flourishing (Wilms, 2010; Palmer, 2014).

Traditional writings, including *Zuo Zhuan*, *Book of Songs*, *Zhouyi*, and *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon*, exemplify the ancient views of life cultivation and health. These all encourage adaptation to the cycling of the seasons, emotional self-control, dietary moderation, and harmony with nature. To take an illustration, *The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon* promotes a harmonious regimen of aligning oneself with the cycling nature. Concurrently, *Zhouyi* encourages synchronizing human behavior with the flow of the Yin and Yang to attain balance and energy (Jiang et al., 2022; Xu and Tao).

**Philosophical context in early Confucianism and Mohism.** In Confucian ethics, notably in *The Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*, preserving life is based on morality and ritual. *Mencius* equates it with the welfare of the family and the state, positing that effective governance allows for physical and emotional nourishment. However, *Xunzi* criticizes over-indulgent life-preservation modes and posits that preserving life should be directed by ritual, righteousness, and intellectual culture. Here, life would be preserved by moral order and self-control rather than indulgence in comfort (Cline, 2014; Ivanhoe, 1991; Zou, 2020).

Mohist philosophy provides a socially oriented and utilitarian approach. *Mozi* equates the sage to a physician curing the ills of society. Life cultivation for *Mozi* includes avoiding extravagance and encouraging the common good through mutual support and simplicity. The social ethic reconfigures cultivating life as a public duty rather than a personal or metaphysical endeavor (Robins, 2012; Huili and Chengyong, 2022; Lee, 2021).

**Proto-Daoist framework and the *Dao De Jing*.** Even though the *Dao De Jing* never uses the term “nurturing life,” it sets the philosophical stage for later Daoist interpreters. The text espouses simplicity, inaction (*wu wei*), and following nature (*ziran*) with a call to interior stillness and spontaneous harmony leading along the Dao. Within this metaphysics, bodily health and mental calm are indistinguishable from harmony with the impersonal cosmic order—sometimes called Heaven (Tian, 天)—which in Daoist philosophy refers to the natural process of the universe’s unfolding, not to a theist God (Kohn, 2019; Judy, 2015).

**Zhuangzi’s reconfiguration of “Nurturing Life”.** Zhuangzi’s *Essence of Nurturing Life* chapter represents a significant turn from collectivist or ritual understandings of life cultivation toward a deeply phenomenological, spiritual, and philosophical model. Zhuangzi sees nurturing life as living in harmony with the Dao, developing intuitive abilities, letting go of attachment to outside forms, and accepting death. This can be found in the stories of Cook Ding, the marsh pheasant, and the Right Master; all highlight the bounds of control and the strength of embodied spontaneity (Chung, 2023; Sterckx, 2019).

In the storytelling of Cook Ding, for example, expertise is realized not through repetitive mechanisms but through the synthesis of skill and spirit, a metaphor for living life in resonance with the Dao. The Right Master story focuses on accepting physical imperfection as an individual’s predestination (*ming*). In

contrast, the marsh pheasant legend proposes spiritual freedom as the supreme mandate over material happiness. Both stories unveil how Zhuangzi's life-nourishment theory transcends body conservation to focus on existential consciousness and spiritual harmony (Zhu, 2024).

In addition, Zhuangzi criticizes conventional health activities based on technique rather than attunement. He equates genuine life cultivation with the recognition of finitude, the finesse of letting go, and the symbolic "passing on the torch" of the spirit. Maintaining life in his cosmology is not a resistance to death but a metamorphosis of life to a level of spiritual liberation from opposition (Kim, 2019).

A recent study has further expanded on Zhuangzi's spiritual model of life-nourishment in relation to modern conceptions of well-being and metaphysical freedom, emphasizing how his vision of embodied spontaneity and transcendence from rigid norms continues to inspire contemporary discourse on holistic health, personal autonomy, and existential resilience (Li, Ortega, and White, 2023).

**Comparative philosophical context.** Though Zhuangzi's project has a Chinese Daoist school source, it has philosophical affinities with the wisdom traditions in general. The Purushartha system of the philosophy of India provides four aims of life: Dharma (righteous living), Artha (wealth), Kama (longing), and Moksha (liberation) (Lai, 2006). World responsibility in this system and seeking liberation occurs in cultivating life. Similarly, contemporary world philosophy books by Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, and the works of Charles Taylor explore the ethics of human flourishing through the balance of emotions, cultivation of self, and justice (Haq and Zia, 2013). Zhuangzi's metaphysical freedom and detachment are an Eastern analog to these viewpoints.

**Summary and positioning.** To summarize, the discussion of life cultivation progressed from state-oriented moralism and bodily caretaking to inward, metaphysical emancipation in Zhuangzi. Previous traditions understood life cultivation as a means to social harmony or physical vigor. Zhuangzi sets it instead as an inner-directed spiritual ethic of balance, self-knowledge, and harmony with the Dao. Therefore, his impact on the philosophy of health in China prefigures contemporary holistic models of health, in which bodily health cannot be separated from psychic balance and spiritual understanding.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic textual analysis to investigate the philosophical structure, thematic content, and interpretive significance of the concept of "nurturing life" (養生) as articulated in *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life* (Yangshengzhu). The approach is rooted in classical Chinese philosophy and Daoist metaphysics, aiming to uncover the conceptual dynamics and existential values embedded in Zhuangzi's reflections on life, health, and spiritual alignment.

**Hermeneutic framework and justification.** Hermeneutics, as a foundational method in philosophical and interpretive humanities, is particularly suited to the study of ancient Chinese philosophical texts. It emphasizes textual semantics, cultural-historical situatedness, and the dialogical relationship between the interpreter and the text. This research draws on Gadamerian hermeneutics, with a specific focus on *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (historically effected consciousness) and *Horizontverschmelzung* (fusion of horizons), enabling a layered

reading that bridges classical cosmological thought and contemporary wellness discourse.

The hermeneutic model applied here is not merely linguistic but ontological, seeking to grasp how the text *lives* in context and resists being reduced to doctrine. Through this framework, Zhuangzi's principles of *wu wei*, ontological modesty, and embodied spontaneity are not just interpreted but experienced as dynamic philosophical processes.

**Corpus and textual selection.** The primary textual corpus for this analysis is the chapter "Essence of Nurturing Life" (養生主) from the Inner Chapters of *Zhuangzi*, which provides the most direct and coherent exposition of Daoist health philosophy. Three key parables from this chapter form the central focus of analysis:

- The parable of Cook Ding
- The marsh pheasant anecdote
- The dialog of the Right Master (or Gongwen Xuan)

In addition, selected passages from related Inner Chapters (e.g., "Free and Easy Wandering" 逍遙遊, "Discussion on Making Things Equal" 齊物論) and Outer Chapters are drawn upon where conceptually relevant.

To ensure conceptual depth and classical fidelity, the analysis also engages with classical commentarial traditions, especially the commentary of Guo Xiang (郭象), whose redaction of the *Zhuangzi* shaped much of its received interpretation. Furthermore, comparative references from *Shuowen Jiezi*, *Zuo Zhuan*, *The Book of Mencius*, *Dao De Jing*, and *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* are included to contextualize philosophical nuances and the ethical-philosophical background of 養生.

**Analytical procedures.** The hermeneutic procedure involves a tripartite interpretive structure:

1. Close Reading and Thematic Coding The selected parables are read repeatedly, identifying core philosophical motifs such as *the balance* between body and spirit, *non-coercive cultivation*, *freedom through attunement*, and *the transformation of skill into the Dao*. These themes are coded and analyzed in light of Daoist cosmology and existential ethics.
2. Philological and Historical-Philosophical Contextualization Key terms such as 養 (to nourish), 生 (life), and 主 (master/principle) are examined through their etymological development and contextual usage, drawing upon lexicons, classical dictionaries (e.g., *Shuowen Jiezi*), and Daoist medical texts. This allows a historically grounded interpretation that resists anachronism.
3. Dialogical Reframing within Contemporary Discourse The final layer situates Zhuangzi's vision of nurturing life in dialog with modern philosophical and wellness discourses, including Indian *Purushartha* and Western conceptions of flourishing (e.g., Nussbaum's capabilities approach and Sen's development ethics). The goal is not to transpose ancient wisdom into modern categories, but to show how Zhuangzi's principles resonate with ongoing questions of balance, selfhood, and sustainability.

**Validity and limitations.** As a qualitative hermeneutic inquiry, the study prioritizes internal consistency, philosophical coherence, and fidelity to classical context over empirical generalizability. However, it acknowledges two key limitations: (1) The analysis focuses primarily on *Zhuangzi: Yangshengzhu*, without extensive treatment of later Daoist texts or Buddhist-Daoist syntheses; (2) While Guo Xiang's commentary is included, a

broader comparative reception history, particularly modern interpretations across different cultures, is left for future study.

## Findings

**Interpretation of Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life.** The chapter 養生主 (*Yangshengzhu*, “Essence of Nurturing Life”) offers a foundational reflection on what it means to “nurture life” in the Daoist tradition. Rather than prescribing techniques for health or longevity, Zhuangzi reconfigures the concept as an ethical and metaphysical practice: a dynamic negotiation between bodily finitude and spiritual attunement. Through close hermeneutic reading, five thematic dimensions emerged, each revealing how Zhuangzi embeds existential insight within poetic narrative.

**The principle of moderation and the structure of life.** Zhuangzi begins with a caution against epistemological excess:

“吾生也有涯，而知也无涯。以有涯随无涯，殆已!”

*“My life has bounds, but knowledge is boundless. To pursue the boundless with the bounded, how dangerous!”* (Watson trans., *Yangshengzhu*)

This statement encapsulates the Daoist ethic of restraint (節) and invites reflection on the limits of human striving. The two characters 養 (to nourish) and 生 (to live/give birth) emphasize a dialectic: 養 implies cultivation and support (rooted in radicals for “sheep” and “food”), while 生 connotes emergence, vitality, and becoming. True *yangsheng* thus integrates the tangible (form) and intangible (spirit).

Zhuangzi conceptualizes life as comprising two realms (see Fig. 1). The body is the temporary vessel through which the spirit navigates; health is not an end in itself, but a condition for aligning with the Dao.

**Following the middle path: ethical moderation as nurturing practice.** A core aphorism in *Yangshengzhu* reads:

“為善無近名，為惡無近刑，緣督以為經，可以保身，可以全生。”

*“Do good without seeking fame, avoid evil without fearing punishment; follow the central thread as your principle, this preserves the body and completes life.”*

The phrase 緣督以為經 (“follow the Governor Vessel as guiding thread”) draws on medical imagery 督脈 being a central channel in traditional Chinese medicine, but metaphorically refers to 中道 (*zhong dao*), or the middle way. This ethical moderation echoes *wu wei* (non-coercive action) and Confucian *Zhongyong*, but departs from ritualized virtue by grounding balance in spontaneous responsiveness. Life cultivation thus becomes rhythmic, embodied, and quietly transformative.

**From skill to Dao: the parable of Cook Ding.** The parable of *Cook Ding* exemplifies Zhuangzi’s view of skill (技) as a vehicle for transcendent alignment. Initially, Cook Ding says:

“始臣之解牛之時，所見無非全牛也。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。如今之解牛，遇之以神，不以目視。” *“When I first began cutting up oxen, all I saw was the ox. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. Now I go at it with spirit rather than looking with the eyes.”* (Graham trans.)

This reveals a movement from mechanical effort (技) to embodied insight (知), culminating in spiritual flow (道). The knife no longer exerts force but glides along the ox’s natural structure:

“感而遂通，天理昭然。” *“Responding to what it encounters, the knife moves along with clarity.”*

Zhuangzi thus presents three phases of cultivation:

1. Skill (技) – external effort and repetition
2. Insight (知) – inner comprehension and practice
3. Dao (道) – spontaneous mastery and non-resistance (*wu wei*)

Cook Ding’s transformation exemplifies life cultivation as “cutting through complexity” without resistance, resonating with the metaphysical equilibrium described in Section 4.2.

**Embracing fate: self-acceptance and wholeness.** The story of the Right Minister (Gongwen Xuan) explores bodily disability and existential integrity. When asked about his amputation, the minister does not lament but responds:

“天也。”

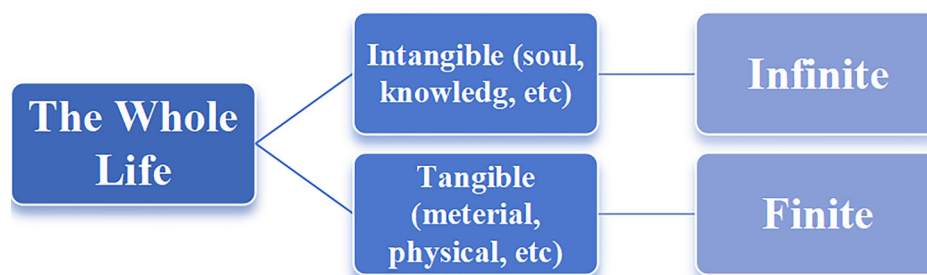
*“It is Heaven.”*

Zhuangzi transforms what might be viewed as a deficiency into an ontological possibility. Accepting fate (命) is not resignation but alignment. Through this lens, suffering is neither punishment nor injustice, but a pathway to transcendence. This insight parallels psychological models of resilience and post-traumatic growth, where acceptance becomes a source of agency.

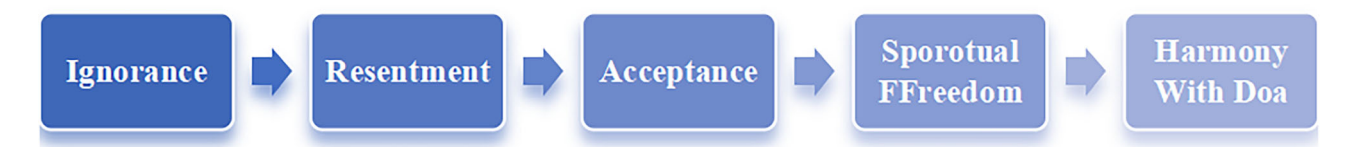
As visualized in Fig. 2, the minister’s journey from confusion to clarity and from resentment to serenity demonstrates Daoist self-cultivation through the reinterpretation of misfortune. Table 1 further contrasts Zhuangzi’s stance with other traditions, showing his departure from ritual or utilitarian ethics.

**The marsh pheasant: freedom over comfort.** In another fable, Zhuangzi compares the pheasant roaming free in the marsh to one confined and fed in a royal court. Though it labors to survive, the marsh pheasant prefers hardship to captivity:

“宁以濕濡之鱗，游乎江湖之上。”

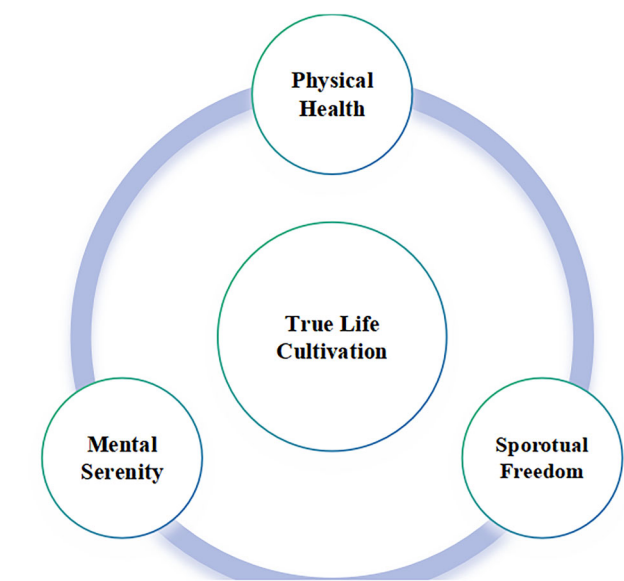


**Fig. 1** Life components and forms of existence.



**Fig. 2** Mental transformation through fate-acceptance (Right Minister).

Table 1 Comparative views on nurturing life in major classical Chinese philosophies.			
School	Core concept of life cultivation	Emphasis	Evaluation by Zhuangzi
Confucianism	Ritual, morality	Social duty, harmony	Too rigid/external
Mohism	Utilitarian ethics	Social welfare, universal care	Overemphasis on control
Early Daoism	Non-action, harmony	Natural alignment, spirit	Closely aligned
Zhuangzi	Metaphysical freedom	Individual spontaneity	Ideal model



**Fig. 3** Dimensions of holistic wellness in Zhuangzi’s thought.

*“Better to drag my tail in the mud than be fed in a golden cage.”*

This prioritization of spiritual freedom over comfort embodies Zhuangzi’s core principle: life is not optimized through control, but instead realized through liberty. Figure 3 maps this idea into a triadic model: physical vitality, mental equanimity, and spiritual autonomy, whose intersection yields authentic *yangsheng*.

The pheasant embodies a Daoist refusal to commodify life. This resonates with Indian *moksha* (liberation from attachment) and Stoic *eudaimonia* (inner control over outer condition). Zhuangzi’s phrase,

“至德者，忘德。”

*“He who embodies ultimate virtue forgets virtue,”*

suggests that moral action, at its highest, becomes spontaneous and unselfconscious.

**Death and the Dao: passing the flame.** Zhuangzi closes *Yangshengzhu* with reflections on death. Upon the passing of Lao Dan, he writes:

“生也死之徒，死也生之始。”

*“Life is the follower of death; death is the beginning of life.”*

Death, in this cosmology, is not cessation but transformation. To nurture life is to prepare the spirit for its next movement. The image of “passing the flame,” letting life continue like fire from torch to torch, replaces mourning with affirmation. In Zhuangzi’s framework, resisting death is equivalent to resisting the Dao; embracing it is equivalent to harmonizing with cosmic rhythm.

**Discussion**

The explication of *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life* presented in this study reveals six central themes that together redefine the concept of *yangsheng* (養生) as a Daoist philosophy of embodied attunement. These findings are: (1) the ontological balance between body and spirit; (2) the ethical primacy of the *Middle Way* (中道) as a principle of moderation; (3) the transformation from technical skill (技) to intuitive Dao (道), exemplified in the parable of Cook Ding; (4) self-acceptance and fate-embrace as sources of existential resilience; (5) the prioritization of spiritual freedom over material comfort, illustrated by the marsh pheasant; and (6) the metaphysical reinterpretation of death as continuity rather than cessation.

Together, these themes enrich our understanding of Daoist health philosophy by situating its central principles, such as harmony with nature, spirit-body integration, and detachment from instrumental striving, within a framework of lived spiritual responsiveness. Differently from earlier interpretations that often isolate Zhuangzi’s metaphors from their cosmological and ethical contexts (Nelson, 2023; Zandbergen, 2025), this study offers a hermeneutic reading that frames life cultivation not as a form of retreat, but as a generative and embodied alignment with the Dao.

**Critical engagement with previous scholarship.** Earlier scholars, notably Raphals (1994) and Raphals and Angier (2021), focused on Zhuangzi’s retreat from social-political life and his critique of rationalism. While valid, these perspectives overlook the positive ethical aspects in *Essence of Nurturing Life*, notably Zhuangzi’s advice on moderation, balance, and avoiding extremes. An opposing perspective, favorably embracing skill and somatic practice in Zhuangzi’s metaphors, most notably the Cook Ding parable relating these to embodied cognition and tacit knowledge, has been highlighted by Gai (2023). Our analysis follows Raphals’ observation but integrates this body mastery thematically with spiritual freedom (逍遥) to provide a continuum of technical skill to metaphysical understanding.

In addition, Harte (2024) proposes contextualizing Chinese philosophy in terms of its performativity, not propositional logic. This research follows their approach by highlighting the interpretative nature of self-cultivation practice in Zhuangzi, where cultivating life occurs through inner alignment with the Dao rather than cognitive assertion.

**Theoretical implications.** The results of this paper highlight Zhuangzi: *Essence of Nurturing Life*, which provides more than metaphorical descriptions; it proffers a proto-systematic ontology of life and health based upon Daoist metaphysics. The difference between the finite (the body) and the infinite (the spirit), the central path (Zhong Dao 中道), and the development from skill (ji 技) to Dao (dao 道) together provide an ethics paradigm of health deeply intertwined with existential clarity (see Table 1 for comparative models).

This approach offers an interpretive alternative to Western philosophical and medical models of mind-brain mind-body dichotomies. Zhuangzi's thinking sees neither the material nor the immaterial but a fluid, interdependent relationship between form and spirit. This accords with modern embodied cognition theories (Foglia and Wilson, 2013), focused on lived experience as biological and meaningful. This triadic conception of well-being, combining the physical, the mental, and the spiritual, is visually synthesized in Fig. 3, showing how, in Zhuangzi's thinking, health transcends biological functioning and becomes existential coherence.

In addition, the Daoist interpretation of de (potency or virtue) and wu wei (non-coercive action) implies a relational health ethics that does not promote a prescriptive health regimen but invites responsive adaptation to inner and external rhythms.

**Practical implications for modern wellness.** Zhuangzi's conception of nourishing life has considerable contemporary importance to health and well-being paradigms, particularly in the increasing criticism of biomedical reductionism. Spiritual self-regulation, natural rhythm, and self-acceptance as the basis for health contradict contemporary well-being cultures emphasizing optimization and production. These interwoven aspects, bodily health, mental calm, and spiritual autonomy, are the core of Zhuangzi's worldview and are synoptically represented graphically in Fig. 3, reaffirming a holistic human flourishing paradigm.

For example, the marsh pheasant valuing freedom amid scarcity over captivity amid abundance subverts prevalent paradigms of control or commodification. Instead, it aligns with models of health centered on mindfulness, emphasizing inner quiet, presence, and relational responsiveness (Browning and Veit, 2021).

In psychological situations, Zhuangzi's advice to accept what must be endured and not become too emotionally invested in the unalterable provides a Daoist model of resilience (see Fig. 2: the shift from ignorance to harmony). This model differs from acceptance in the Stoic tradition, as from equanimity in the Buddhist tradition, but differs nonetheless in not codifying or moralizing suffering. It provides for an embodied calm founded on living by the Dao.

**Contribution to Chinese philosophy and Daoist studies.** This article contributes to the Chinese philosophical tradition by demonstrating how Zhuangzi's concept of life cultivation transcends medicine, Daoism, and metaphysics. It testifies to the lived nature of Daoist philosophy in the face of bodily constraints, the cycles of nature, and the pursuit of existential equanimity.

The book bridges modern scholarship to restore pre-Qin philosophical writings as living sources of moral innovation rather than traditional doctrinal relics through the union of philological strictness and cognitive synthesis. It further expands the latitude of interpretation for Zhuangzi by explaining its application to cross-cultural life, health, and consciousness discourses. This further enriches Daoist scholarship. She advocates for cross-cultural philosophical exchanges regarding the meaning of a superbly lived life and world traditions prioritizing harmony, humility, and spiritual emancipation as unavoidable aspects of human flourishing.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the philosophical core of *yangsheng* (養生), or "nurturing life," as developed in *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life*, arguing that it constitutes not a regimen of physical longevity but a multifaceted ethic of existential harmony. The hermeneutic analysis of parables and classical terms across philological, ethical, and metaphysical layers has yielded six interwoven insights: (1) the dialectical unity of body and spirit; (2) ethical moderation through the Middle Way (中道); (3) transformation from mechanical skill (技) to embodied Dao (道); (4) radical self-acceptance and non-resistance to fate; (5) prioritization of freedom over comfort; and (6) death as continuity within the Dao, rather than an end.

By recovering these dimensions, the study reframes *yangsheng* as a dynamic process of inner alignment, grounded in non-coercive cultivation (*wu wei* 無為), attunement to natural rhythms, and spiritual clarity. Unlike reductionist models of wellness that emphasize optimization or control, Zhuangzi's framework offers a vision of health based on balance, spontaneity, and existential depth, one that is profoundly resonant in an age marked by burnout, alienation, and ecological unease.

In sum, *Zhuangzi: Essence of Nurturing Life* is not merely a historical relic of Daoist metaphysics, but a living philosophy of human flourishing. It invites us to release attachments, embrace impermanence, and cultivate wholeness not through mastery, but through surrender to the unfolding Dao. Such a perspective offers both theoretical enrichment to Daoist studies and practical insight into the art of living well across cultures and in times of crisis.

## Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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## Author contributions

WG and HC contributed to the design and implementation of the research. WG wrote the main manuscript text and prepared all figures and tables. All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

This study did not involve human participants or animals, and hence ethical approval was not applicable.

## Informed consent

Not applicable, as this study did not involve human participants requiring informed consent.

## Additional information

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