

Mapping the Inner Landscape: The *Neijing Tu* and Daoist Visions of the Body

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Abstract

This visual essay examines the *Neijing Tu* (Chart of the Inner Landscape), which is a nineteenth-century Daoist diagram that represents the human body as sacred geography. Through visual analysis of its mountain metaphor and cosmological symbolism, it explores how historical body imagery encodes culturally specific models of wellness and invites health information professionals to reflect on the role of visual systems in communicating health knowledge.

內經圖



The *Neijing Tu* (内经图) is a Daoist diagram that visualizes internal alchemy (*neidan*) through a symbolic mapping of the human body¹. Often translated as the "Chart of the Inner Landscape," it reimagines the body as a microcosm of the cosmos, where mountains align with vertebrae, rivers with meridians, and internal organs with celestial realms. The spine is depicted as a semi-elliptical ridge, with a watercourse flowing from the head, figured as Mount Kunlun, the mythic axis of the universe². This body map integrates Daoist cosmology with traditional Chinese medical physiology, reflecting the historical interconnection between internal cultivation practices and the development of Chinese medicine.

Health is understood as the harmonious circulation of *qi*, or vital energy, achieved by reenacting heaven and earth within the body through a process of cosmological alignment that Joseph Needham describes as "microsomography"³. This study examines the engraved stele dated 1886 at Beijing's White Cloud Temple, a widely circulated version of the *Neijing Tu*. Through close visual analysis and historical contextualization, it considers how landscape metaphors encode an esoteric yet systematic model of embodiment. The diagram functions as both an instructional guide and a contemplative map, incorporating Daoist medico-philosophical concepts such as *taiji* (yin-yang), the *dantian* (elixir fields), and the circulation of *qi* through the *Ren* and *Du* vessels⁴.

Visual systems function as epistemological frameworks that shape how knowledge is organized and interpreted. The objective of this work is to examine how classical Daoist body imagery can expand contemporary understandings of wellness and the communication of health knowledge⁵. By engaging the *Neijing Tu* as both artwork and epistemological framework, the project highlights alternative ways of visualizing the body beyond biomedical conventions. In contemporary China, the *Neijing Tu* continues to inform practices of internal alchemy and health cultivation, demonstrating the enduring influence of Daoist conceptions of the body on Chinese medicine and health practices. Engaging such imagery broadens interpretive approaches to human physiology and underscores the importance of culturally situated knowledge systems in the communication of health information across diverse populations.

CRedit Statement

Shanny Rann conceptualized the project, analyzed the visual material, and wrote the manuscript.

Image Credit

Wikimedia Commons. Faithful photographic reproduction of the *Neijing Tu* engraved stele (1886), White Cloud Temple, Beijing. Public domain under PD-Art (PD-US-expired).

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