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Dialogues Between the Self and the World: The Philosophy of the Realistic Person and the Pursuit of High-Quality Longevity in Chinese Thought

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the classical Chinese philosophical notion of the "realistic person" and its relevance in the context of modern societal development, particularly as it pertains to the pursuit of high-quality longevity. Grounded in the rich traditions of Confucianism and Daoism, the concept of the realistic person is not merely an ethical archetype but rather a dynamic embodiment of self-cultivation, moral integrity, and harmonious living. By analyzing key philosophical doctrines—such as Ren, Li, and Wu Wei—this study reveals how ancient principles of personal and interpersonal cultivation remain profoundly relevant to contemporary discourses on health, aging, and psychological resilience. Furthermore, by incorporating insights from modern positive psychology and dialogical self-theory, the paper argues that the process of engaging in reflective self-dialogue is essential for achieving an integrated, meaningful life in an era increasingly defined by technological acceleration and existential uncertainty. The proposed dialogical model synthesizes internal moral inquiry with external social responsibility, offering a holistic approach to personal development that transcends a purely biomedical interpretation of longevity. Ultimately, this paper suggests that the reintegration of classical Chinese philosophical thought into contemporary frameworks of wellness and aging could provide both theoretical depth and practical tools for addressing the multifaceted challenges of individual flourishing and collective well-being in the 21st century.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy; realistic person; life philosophy; self-dialogue; self-growth; self-perfection; longevity; high-quality living

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1. Introduction

In an era characterized by accelerating technological innovation, demographic aging, and socio-cultural fragmentation, the timeless question of what constitutes a "good life" acquires renewed urgency. Biomedical sciences have made remarkable strides in extending human life expectancy through pharmacological and genetic interventions, yet the proliferation of longevity has not necessarily translated into a parallel increase in psychological well-being, existential fulfillment, or social integration. Indeed, the rise of "prolonged survival without quality" has prompted scholars and policymakers to reconsider the moral, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions of aging and human flourishing. At the same time, the growing integration of artificial intelligence into educational and cultural spheres—such as in the online teaching of Chinese as a foreign language—offers new possibilities for maintaining social connectedness and cognitive vitality across the lifespan. As recent studies suggest, AI-powered language learning platforms not only improve linguistic competence but also foster cross-cultural engagement and a renewed sense of purpose, particularly among older or geographically isolated learners. This underscores the need to approach longevity not merely as a biological extension, but as a

multidimensional life process that includes opportunities for continuous learning, meaningful dialogue, and moral self-cultivation [1,2].

Against this backdrop, Chinese philosophical traditions offer a profound alternative lens through which to understand human life, not as a purely biological continuum, but as a dynamic process of self-realization, ethical cultivation, and harmonious integration with the cosmos. Central to this tradition is the notion of the “realistic person,” an ideal-type situated between metaphysical abstraction and empirical reductionism. Unlike the disengaged individual of contemporary liberal society or the passive subject of biomedicine, the realistic person emerges as an ethically embedded, socially responsive, and spiritually evolving self.

2. The Realistic Person in Chinese Thought

The concept of the “realistic person” in Chinese philosophy occupies a unique epistemological and ethical position. It transcends the dualism between idealism and pragmatism, presenting the individual as a simultaneously self-cultivating and world-embedded being. This figure is neither an abstract metaphysical construct nor a solely rational agent divorced from context, but rather a processual self, continuously refined through moral action, social participation, and cosmological alignment.

Rooted primarily in Confucianism and Daoism, the realistic person embodies an integrative vision of human potential. In *The Analects*, Confucius emphasizes lifelong self-cultivation through rituals, moral learning, and virtuous conduct [3]. The gentleman-scholar becomes a symbolic prototype for the realistic person: morally resolute yet socially engaged, humble yet purposeful [4]. Mencius furthers this vision by positing that all humans are endowed with an innate moral sense—the four beginnings—that can be nurtured through reflection and virtuous habit [5]. This emphasis on nurtured nature offers a developmental view of ethics, aligning virtue cultivation with psychological growth.

In contrast but not in contradiction, Daoism offers a complementary conception of the realistic person. Daoist texts such as the *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* advocate for alignment with the natural world, spontaneity, and the shedding of artificial social constructs. Rather than promoting virtue as an externally imposed discipline, Daoism regards self-realization as emerging from inner attunement and the dissolution of ego-driven desires. Interestingly, this perspective resonates with emerging approaches in AI-supported lifelong learning, where personalized and minimally invasive guidance fosters organic growth rather than externally imposed instruction. For example, in the context of Chinese language acquisition for adult learners, AI systems enable a learning process that adapts to the user's pace and evolving needs, echoing the Daoist principle of cultivating without forcing [6,7]. The realistic person, from this vantage point, is one who harmonizes with the Dao, living a life of equanimity, fluidity, and organic integration.

These seemingly divergent philosophical strands—Confucian ethical rigor and Daoist natural spontaneity—converge in the ideal of the realistic person as a holistic self. Modern scholars have argued that this dual heritage enables Chinese thought to address both the structure and fluidity of human life [8]. The realistic person is not static but dialogical, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between inner virtue and outer conditions, between discipline and freedom. In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, this capacity for dialogical adaptability is particularly relevant. For instance, the integration of artificial intelligence into online Chinese language instruction for non-native speakers reflects both structural innovation and pedagogical flexibility. As Mo (2024) notes, AI-powered platforms must balance algorithmic precision with cultural sensitivity, offering learners not only linguistic competence but also intercultural understanding—an endeavor that mirrors the realistic person's pursuit of harmonizing stability with change [9].

Thus, the realistic person can be reinterpreted as a dialogical agent who navigates between moral structure and existential openness, offering a nuanced philosophical basis for personal development and socio-ecological harmony in contemporary life.

3. Self-Dialogue and the Path to Self-Perfection

The path to self-perfection in Chinese philosophy is not a solitary ascent toward a fixed ideal but a recursive, dialogical journey—a constant self-interrogation and harmonization between the inner moral compass and the outer world. This process, termed here as self-dialogue, emerges as a central mechanism in the transformation of the individual into the “realistic person.” It involves both reflective introspection and a dynamic engagement with the world, allowing the self to evolve in accordance with time, relational contexts, and existential depth.

In the Confucian framework, self-dialogue is an intrinsic element of moral cultivation. The Great Learning proposes a sequential path from the investigation of things to the extension of knowledge, sincerity of intention, rectification of the mind, and cultivation of the self, which ultimately leads to the regulation of family, governance of the state, and peace in the world [10]. Each stage is dialogically linked to the others, indicating a model of self-perfection that is outwardly generative and socially embedded. Self-dialogue here entails an ethical accountability to both oneself and society, wherein reflection becomes a tool for continuous realignment with moral propriety.

Mencius further emphasizes the dialogical nature of selfhood through his metaphor of “preserving the heart” and “nourishing the vital force” [5]. The heart is not merely a seat of cognition but a moral sense that must be cultivated through introspective practices—what we might now associate with moral mindfulness. In modern psychological terms, this aligns with the notion of metacognition and moral self-regulation. Here, self-dialogue is both a philosophical method and a psychological necessity for sustained self-actualization.

Daoist texts contribute a contrasting yet enriching perspective on the process of self-dialogue. Rather than focusing on moral rectitude, Daoist writings emphasize listening to the spontaneous rhythms of existence. The Zhuangzi, for instance, recounts conversations between sages that blur the line between inner voice and external dialogue, highlighting the permeability of the self and its embeddedness in the Dao. To “sit in forgetfulness” or “follow the sky” is to enter a mode of being in which self-dialogue becomes a dissolution of self-centeredness, enabling a more intuitive and holistic attunement to the world. This invites a vision of perfection that is not constructed but uncovered—through release rather than striving.

Bridging ancient and modern perspectives, scholars have proposed that Chinese modes of self-cultivation offer a relational and ecological model of subjectivity [11]. Rather than seeking a final state of moral perfection, the dialogical self aims for resonance—a dynamic and adaptive attunement to social, natural, and cosmic rhythms. In this view, self-dialogue becomes a mediating structure between agency and receptivity, autonomy and relationality, intention and spontaneity. Recent developments in AI-assisted education provide a concrete illustration of this philosophical model in action. For example, adaptive learning systems designed to improve Chinese proficiency among non-native AP exam takers enable iterative cycles of self-correction, reflection, and goal refinement. These tools support not only cognitive achievement but also meta-cognitive awareness, which aligns closely with the classical Chinese emphasis on reflective self-cultivation through disciplined practice.

In sum, the path to self-perfection through self-dialogue redefines the self not as a static entity to be polished, but as a living process to be harmonized. The realistic person thus arises not from abstraction, but from the lived experience of reflecting, adjusting, and resonating with the world—philosophically grounded, psychologically sound, and existentially enriching.

4. Conceptual Integration: The Dialogical Self and Chinese Models of Longevity

To synthesize the philosophical dimensions of Confucianism and Daoism in the pursuit of holistic well-being, this study introduces a tripartite conceptual model—the Dialogical Self in Chinese Philosophy—that elucidates the dynamic process of cultivating longevity with quality. As visualized in Figure 1, the model draws on the dialectical progression between three interrelated domains: Dialogue with the Self, Self-Improvement, and Longevity with Quality.

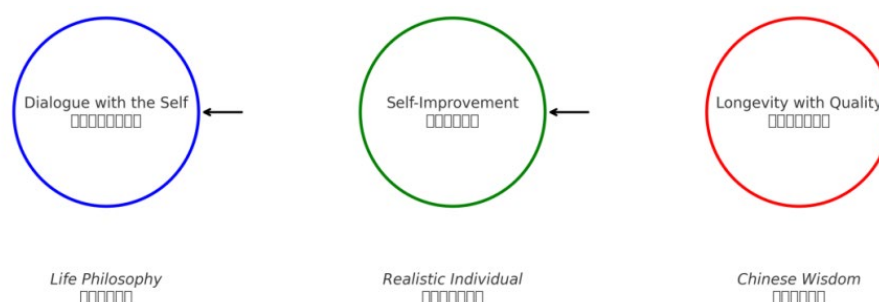


Figure 1. Philosophical Model of the Dialogical Self in Chinese Philosophy. English terms in Figure 1 reflect core constructs from Confucian and Daoist philosophies. See Appendix A for detailed explanations.

A diagram showing the integration of Confucian ethics, Daoist nature alignment, self-dialogue, and modern wellness practices.

The first domain, Dialogue with the Self, emerges from both Confucian and Daoist traditions, emphasizing introspection, emotional regulation, and ethical self-awareness. Daoist meditation and Confucian journaling rituals (e.g., daily self-examination) constitute practices through which individuals reflect upon and regulate desires, anxieties, and ambitions. This dialogue is foundational to forming a stable life philosophy that guides long-term behavioral and moral orientation [12].

The second domain, Self-Improvement, represents the operationalization of ethical and physical cultivation in the real world. It entails disciplined practices rooted in Confucian ritual and Daoist health preservation. In this phase, the individual integrates embodied rituals such as qigong and dietary mindfulness with ethical commitments to family and community. The realistic individual is thus not only socially engaged but also spiritually grounded.

The final domain, Longevity with Quality, reflects the culmination of this dialogical journey. It is not mere survival or physical extension of life, but a state wherein biological aging is harmonized with psychological resilience, ethical coherence, and existential meaning. This ideal resonates with traditional wisdom, wherein health is not a static goal but a dynamic balance of internal and external forces.

Together, these three spheres form a dialogical cycle: introspective life philosophy feeds into grounded self-discipline, which in turn gives rise to a meaningful, healthy longevity—thus completing a loop of virtuous cultivation. This model not only aligns with findings from longevity studies in Blue Zones and integrative medicine, but also provides a culturally rooted alternative to reductionist biomedical models by emphasizing process over prescription, harmony over control, and meaning over mere survival.

This model illustrates a cyclical and dialogical framework of longevity rooted in Chinese philosophical traditions. The left node, “Dialogue with the Self,” reflects the inner philosophical inquiry essential to Daoist stillness and Confucian self-examination. The central node, “Self-Improvement,” embodies the Confucian and Daoist practices of daily ritual, breathwork, moral cultivation, and body regulation. The right node, “Longevity with Quality,” represents the culmination of these efforts in a state of meaningful, healthy

aging, as informed by empirical research and classical wisdom. The directional flow suggests that sustained self-dialogue and discipline lead to health with purpose, completing a virtuous cycle of existential coherence and well-being.

5. Case Study: Elderly Art Practitioner in Hangzhou

This case study of Ms. Lin offers a poignant illustration of the Chinese paradigm of longevity with quality. At 91 years old, her lifestyle exemplifies how the integration of Confucian and Daoist philosophies can foster a meaningful, balanced, and healthy aging process. Ms. Lin's daily routines—such as qigong exercises, tea meditation, and traditional Chinese calligraphy—are not merely physical activities but are deeply imbued with the ethical and spiritual practices of Confucianism and Daoism. These rituals help her maintain physical vitality and psychological balance, embodying a holistic approach to aging.

In her professional life as an art educator, Ms. Lin emphasized Confucian values like ritual propriety (li) and benevolence (ren), which guided her pedagogy and interactions with students. These values, which prioritize moral self-cultivation, order, and intergenerational harmony, continued to inform her approach to life in retirement. However, she also embraced Daoist principles in her later years, transitioning to a lifestyle characterized by natural rhythms, contemplative solitude, and minimalism, in alignment with the *Dao De Jing*. Her current state, marked by “inner stillness, clarity of thought, and spiritual contentment,” is a reflection of the Daoist ideal of *ziran* (spontaneous naturalness), where the individual aligns harmoniously with the natural flow of life.

Psychological assessments further illuminate the connection between Ms. Lin's lifestyle and her well-being. High scores on dimensions like purpose in life, autonomy, and personal growth underscore the positive impact of her philosophical practices on her psychological health. These findings corroborate scholarly views on the importance of psychospiritual integration in holistic aging. Through cognitive clarity, emotional regulation, and existential peace, Ms. Lin's life exemplifies a process of aging that aligns with the Confucian and Daoist emphasis on moral development, self-cultivation, and spiritual contentment.

Additionally, her life echoes broader trends seen in East Asian studies of successful aging, where philosophical engagement and embodied rituals—such as calligraphy and breathwork—are central to the lived experience of aging. These practices, far from being mere leisure activities, are powerful enactments of cultural wisdom that contribute to mental and physical well-being.

In summary, Ms. Lin's case exemplifies the principles of the dialogical self-cultivation model presented in Figure 1. She embodies the cyclical progression from dialogue with the self to self-improvement, ultimately achieving longevity with quality—a life characterized by not just the extension of years but the deepening of psychological, ethical, and existential fulfillment.

6. Conclusion

As global societies grapple with the challenges and opportunities brought by aging populations, it becomes increasingly important to broaden our understanding of what constitutes aging well. Chinese philosophy, particularly through the concepts of the realistic person, dialogical self, and holistic life practices, offers a unique and insightful perspective on achieving high-quality longevity. By integrating ancient philosophical wisdom with contemporary psychological theories, we can develop more comprehensive frameworks that inform not only personal well-being but also educational systems, public policy, and community-based practices aimed at enhancing the experience of aging in meaningful and sustainable ways.

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