Article

When Film Mediatizes Taoism, What Does It Bring to Taoism?

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Abstract: Although Taoism is no longer what it was in its prime, Taoist culture still has great spiritual value in the present day and is well worth promoting worldwide. Taoist cinema plays a powerful role in the mass communication of Taoism. Current academic research on Taoist cinema has focused on analyzing how it can make good use of Taoism but has neglected to explore what cinema brings to Taoism in the cinematization process. This paper focuses on this thesis by considering the themes of the importance of the cinematization of Taoism for Taoism, the cultural transformation in the cinematization of Taoism, and the appropriate way to include Taoism in Taoist films. This paper indicates that Taoist cinema has communicated Taoist ideology, religious rituals and aesthetic styles to a global audience through the audiovisual language, and it has built a bridge between Taoism and the general public. In the cinematization of Taoism, in order to reflect the communication environment, communication media and audience influence, Taoist films have highlighted visual spectacles, entertainment and popularization, thus making them better accepted by audiences and achieving the expected communication effect. This paper argues that Taoist films express the sacred and exert a religious influence on the viewer through content rather than transcendental style.

Keywords: Taoism; film; mediatization; communication; transcendental style

1. Introduction

As global society enters a highly industrialized, technological and secularized world, the context for the spread and development of religion has long differed from what it was in the past. Taoism[1] is exactly that. It is facing a new context. As a religion that has had a profound impact on Chinese culture and national psychology, many Taoist ideas and teachings are still highly valuable today (Liu 1998). One question that must be considered regarding today's Taoism is how to find effective ways to enhance its appeal and influence in the current social context. Taoism must reach out to the people, as it did in its prime, to gain widespread acceptance and popularity among the public, to spread the wisdom of Taoism among the masses and to popularize its religious philosophy. Taoism should not be limited to itself; it should and must go to the people, and only by spreading it among the masses can we realize its religious values.

The use of art for communication is a common practice in almost all religions (Morgan 2000). In ancient times, religions were often spread through literature, painting, sculpture and theater. Since its birth in the late nineteenth century, film has become one of the most convenient forms of communication available to religions (May and Bird 1982). Almost all the currently popular major religions in the world have their own religious films.

Some of these religious films have been well studied. For example, the research of Terry Lindvall and others has fully explored Christian films (Grace 2009; Lindvall 2011; Burnette-Bletsch 2016). Buddhist films have also been studied in depth by scholars (Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff 2014; Suh 2015; Mullen 2016). Likewise, the study of Islamic films has made great progress, and Kevin Smets and others have analyzed them in more detail (Ramji 2003; Vis et al. 2011; Smets 2012).

Taoism has its own Taoist films, and related research on them has been conducted. Outside of China, research on Taoist films has focused mainly on exploring the Taoist

implications embedded in certain films. For example, Dániel Nagy analyzed the Taoist characteristics of *The Matrix* films. He claimed that Taoism forms the roots of *The Matrix*. The plot and the fundamental message of the trilogy correspond to the principles of Taoism at a higher level than it does to other religious or spiritual disciplines (Nagy 2018). Carl Wilson and Garrath T. Wilson provided an ecological commentary on *Howl's Moving Castle*, analyzing Taoism, Shintoism and technological ethics in the film (Wilson and Wilson 2015). Sam Crane argued that *Avatar* has several Taoist elements, which were no doubt quite consciously incorporated into the story (Crane 2010). Steven C. Combs noted that *The Tao of Steve* succeeds as an example of Taoist rhetoric because it presents Taoism paradoxically (Combs 2002). In general, because Taoism is not popular and very few Taoist films are available in other countries, they have attracted little attention and relatively little relevant research.

Because the main body of Taoism and Taoist films is in China, most research on Taoist films has been conducted in China, and relevant results have been published (Wen 2011; Yi 2014; Chen 2015; Yu 2015; Pan 2016; Zhou 2016; Chen 2020). Zhongmou Zhou believed that, in order to develop and grow, Taoist films should draw from the rich Taoist cultural tradition, build up cultural confidence, develop a charming imagination and create a new path for "Oriental magic films" outside the Western magic blockbusters (Zhou 2016). In view of the dilemma faced by Chinese martial arts movies, Xuhan Shi believed that Taoist culture and chivalry are closely related to each other. It is necessary to deepen creators' understanding of Taoist culture and Taoist thought in order to fill the empty spiritual world in martial arts movies, allowing those expressing the Taoist spirit to reach a high level of integration of form and content (Shi 2020). Linxia Chen pointed out that Taoist culture emphasizes the pursuit of happiness according to the nature of nature. Its emphasis on the supreme man, the true man and the divine man; its transcendence and unhindered access to the world; and its dashing movement between heaven and earth constitute the ideal of personality and the realm of life that modern people admire immensely. To illustrate Taoist culture through Taoist films, one must have a rich understanding of it (Chen 2015). Fangming Yuan, on the other hand, believed that the contribution of Taoism to Taoist cinema lies in its provision of ideological connotations, plot materials and religious elements, and religious cultural knowledge (Yuan 2019). It is easy to see that Chinese scholars have focused their research on how Taoist films should make good use of Taoism, and in their view, the ideal Taoist film should be a work that exudes a strong Taoist flavor from its content to its form.

However, these studies on Taoist cinema have overlooked a crucial issue: Taoist cinema is cinema first and Taoist cinema second. Cinematicity is the primary nature of Taoist cinema, and only on the basis of fully realized cinematicity can Taoist cinema achieve the spread of Taoism. Therefore, I believe that the study of Taoist cinema must focus on what film brings to Taoism in the process of its cinematization. What cultural transformations are highlighted by this process? In what ways should Taoism be incorporated in Taoist cinema to fit the media properties of cinema? In short, we need to pay sufficient attention to media considerations in the cinematization of Taoism. The cinematization of Taoism is, in essence, a media transmission of Taoism through film. Because film is an act of communication, it is bound to be restricted and limited by the laws of communication, and it is necessary to conform to the laws of communication as much as possible in order to communicate effectively.

It is along these lines that this paper analyzes and answers these questions to provide an alternative path for understanding the mediatization of Taoism.

2. Taoism and Taoist Films

Among the five major religions in China (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism), Taoism is the only one that originated in China and was founded by Chinese people, so it is also known as China's indigenous religion. It was formed in the second century AD and has a history of more than 1800 years. Daoling Zhang, the founder of the

Five Dou Mi Tao in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, is considered the founder of Taoism in China, and he is called "Zhang Tian Shi". During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, through the efforts and reforms of Hong Ge, Qianzhi Kou, Xiujing Lu, Hongjing Tao and others, Taoism became one of the orthodox religions in China, alongside Buddhism. Taoism inherited the ideas of the "Taoist school". The term "Taoist school" refers to the school of thought represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi among the hundred schools of thought of the pre-Qin dynasty, or the school of Huanglao, which prevailed during the Qin and Han dynasties. In their ideology and theory, they considered "Tao" the highest category and advocated respecting Tao and Te, following the example of nature, ruling the country, cultivating oneself through the law of purity and inaction and dealing with the belief in ghosts and gods and with the relationship between human beings and nature. Thus, they are called the "Taoist school". Taoism inherited this idea and holds Laozi as its ancestor, the *Tao Te Ching* as its main classic and the Tao as its most fundamental belief, from which all doctrines and teachings are derived. Taoism holds that the Tao is all-encompassing and omnipresent, and that it is the beginning of everything. It can be said that Taoism was gradually formed on the basis of the ancient Chinese concept of the worship of ghosts and gods, with the "Taoist school" of thought as the theoretical basis and the fusion of theories of gods, immortals and magic (Bureau of Religion 2005).

Taoism involves taking Tao as the highest belief, respecting Tao and Te and practicing internal and external cultivation and the talismanic arts. It holds that the Tao is the origin of all things in heaven and earth, and that the universe, Yin and Yang, and all things are born from the Tao, i.e., "The Tao produced One; One produced Two; Two produced Three; Three produced All things" (Laozi 2016). Thus, society and life should follow the Tao and finally return to nature, i.e., it should follow that "Man takes his law from Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is" (Laozi 2016). People and all things are born from the Tao and nurtured by Te, so the Tao should be respected and valued. Moreover, Taoism holds that the Tao can be cultivated, and one can become immortal if one attains it. Taoism regards life as extremely important, and monasticism means immortality. It advocates that, through cultivation, the length of life can be extended, and the quality of life can be improved, so as to achieve eternal life. Taoism advocates a pure and non-contentious attitude toward worldly life and cultivation in the spirit of the idea that "my life is in me, not in heaven" (Ge 2020).

In the long history of Taoism, it once held a high status. After its founding, Taoism flourished for nearly a thousand years in China's Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and successive emperors accorded it high regard. After Yuan Li, the Tang emperor, became emperor, he established a policy of respecting Taoism as a royal religion, honoring Laozi as his ancestor and declaring himself to be "the descendant of the immortals". The Tang emperor, Longji Li, started the Kaiyuan Dynasty, in which Taoism also reached its peak, and Taoist culture developed to an extreme. The rulers of the Song Dynasty inherited the Tang Dynasty's policy of worshipping Taoism, and the Song Emperors Kuangyin Zhao and Guangyi Zhao advocated the Taoist ideology of tranquility and inaction, building palaces and giving economic benefits. Ji Zhao, Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, implemented a series of measures to promote the study of Taoist scriptures, set up a Taoist system, and listed *Tao Te Ching* and *Zhuangzi* as classics for practice. After the Mongols established the Yuan Dynasty, in order to obtain the support of Han scholars, they also expressed respect for Taoism, which laid the foundation for its great development in the Yuan Dynasty. The rulers of the Ming Dynasty maintained a respectful attitude toward Taoism, and their management measures were also greater. Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang personally wrote the commentary on the *Tao Te Ching*. Ming Emperor Zhu Houchong was the most revered of the Ming emperors, and his reign was dominated by the practice of Taoism, resulting in it reaching its peak in the Ming Dynasty (Qing and Tang 2021).

In the Qing Dynasty, Taoism began to decline sharply. Although the Kangxi emperor followed the custom of ennobling Zhang Tian Shi, he explicitly forbade Taoist activities, such as jumping on gods and exorcising ghosts, restricting Taoism and dealing it a blow.

The Taiping movement during the Xianfeng and Tongzhi periods dealt a heavy blow to the originally flourishing Taoism in the Jiangnan region of the Qing Dynasty. During the Opium War, China was reduced to a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, and Taoism further declined, being relegated to the weakest of the five major religions in China in terms of clerical power and political influence. Many Taoist priests were poorly educated and lacked religious knowledge. Taoism was loosely organized, and there was not enough contact and unity around the country. After the establishment of the Republic of China, the Republican government stopped providing financial support to Taoism. During the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, Duxiu Chen, Xuantong Qian and others attacked Taoism as a feudal superstition, and Taoist thought was greatly impacted (Qing and Tang 2021).

In addition to mainland China, Taoism currently has branches in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, as well as Taoist palaces established by local Chinese in Asia, America, Europe, Africa and Oceania.

Taoist films, as the name implies, are about Taoism, which are mediated through the film format. Drawing on the common practice of other religious films, for example, Sharon A. Suh's definition of Buddhist cinema (Suh 2015), so-called "Taoist films" in this paper mainly include the following: (1) films with Taoist characters as the main narrative driving forces; (2) films that tell Taoist stories; and (3) films that promote Taoist teachings and Taoist spirit. In particular, this paper aims to explore the mass communication of Taoism through film, so its target is public films on Taoism, excluding "anthropological" documentaries on Taoism produced for purely academic research purposes. Because these anthropological documentaries were produced with the intention of faithfully documenting Taoism for academic research, they are intended for experts and scholars only, not for mass dissemination, which is inconsistent with the subject of this paper.

At present, the Chinese-speaking region is the main producer of Taoist films. The representative works of Taoist films include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; *Wu ji*; *Monk Comes Down the Mountain*; *Drifting Snow Red Heart*; *Zhong Kui: Snow Girl and the Dark Crystal*; *Dragon Tiger Mountain Zhang Tianshi*; *The Young Taoism Fighter*; *Taoism Drunkard*; *A Chinese Ghost Story*; *Double Vision*; *The Tai Chi Master*; *Mr. Vampire*; *Exorcist Master*; *Vampire vs. Vampire*; etc.

Outside of China, Taoist films exist mostly in the form of documentaries. In France, Fan Hua, Elodie Brosseau, and Caroline Bodolec have made several documentaries on Taoism, such as *Jiao, Taoist Funerals* and *Taoist Tibet* (Hu 2014). However, these documentaries belong to the discipline of the "anthropology of film and television", in which film is a tool to record and understand cultural phenomena, and video is a supplementary means to study Taoism and is a tool rather than an end. These documentaries on Taoism were made for the purpose of research rather than to earn the public's artistic appreciation (Hu 2014). Similar "anthropological" documentaries on Taoism have been released in the United States and the United Kingdom (Jackson 2000; Ma 2022). It is rare to see Taoist films produced for public release outside of China.

3. Why Is the Cinematization of Taoism Significant to Taoism?

Although Taoism has long since passed its prime, many of its ideas have not lost their value because of its decline. For example, Taoism itself is "based on the value of individual life (valuing oneself and life), and explores the question of how to make one's spiritual happiness and life eternal". It not only promotes the spirit of "out of the world" and asks Taoists to "educate themselves", but it also asks them to "educate others" with the intention of "entering the world", i.e., helping the world. The spirit of "out of the world" requires Taoists to "measure themselves" and to "measure others" with the sentiment of "into the world", i.e., to help the world and benefit the people, to encourage people to combine their personal interests with the interests of the community and to build a harmonious social environment (Institute of World Religions 1999). For example, Laozi says that "Heaven is long-enduring and earth continues long. The reason why heaven and earth are able to

endure and continue thus long is because they do not live of, or for, themselves. This is how they are able to continue and endure" (Laozi 2016), thus laying down the fundamental principle of "the Way of Nature" for health. In the view of Taoism, if you find the Tao, you will live, and if you lose the Tao, you will die. Taoism advocates the "dual cultivation of life", and this approach to health is of great significance for us to maintain physical and mental health. In today's increasingly competitive society, it is inevitable that many people have a subhealthy state of mind, experiencing tension, anxiety, impatience, etc. If we refer to the Taoist practice of the "double cultivation of life", taking the initiative to channel tension and anxiety to actively smooth out the impatient state of mind, Taoism can undoubtedly provide positive help for mental health. For example, Taoism advocates "the unity of heaven and man", i.e., it emphasizes the unity of individual life and the life of the universe, and its ideal personality is a natural personality. The *Tao Te Ching* says the following: "There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)! It may be regarded as the Mother of all things. I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Tao (the Way or Course)", and "Man takes his law from Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Tao. The law of the Tao is its being what it is" (Laozi 2016). In other words, "Tao" is the origin and law of all things, and one of the purposes of studying "Tao" is to deal with the relationship between humanity and nature. We must understand nature, follow nature, and correctly grasp the nature of the development of things: "Nature's Tao cannot be disobeyed, so obey it" (Huang 2022), we must fully understand the laws of nature, act according to them, and comply with the ecological rules. The current trend of global environmental degradation continues unabated, which requires us to assume a historical and developmental perspective to integrate the relationship between human beings and nature in a farsighted manner. Harmonious society is the common pursuit of humankind, and those short-sighted policies that only consider immediate interests and act against the "way" are bound to harm humankind itself. This Taoist wisdom is undoubtedly a good remedy for the deteriorating ecological environment and increasing spiritual pressure we experience today, and it can provide a solution to those difficult dilemmas.

However, because Taoism today has been alienated from the general public for a long time, even in China, the birthplace of Taoism, the percentage of registered Taoist priests among the general public is low[2], and very few people have a deep understanding of Taoism. Connecting Taoism with the public and making it accessible to the public are the biggest challenges for the popularization of Taoism. Film, which is powerful at this level, may be the answer to this dilemma.

First of all, the "threshold" of movie appreciation is low. It uses sound and images to communicate, which do not require a high literacy level; even people with little or no education can understand movies. Second, film is a narrative art that conveys emotions through storytelling, and a wonderful story and exquisite narration undoubtedly make a film extremely charming, as if a magnet with magic power firmly attaches the audience to the plot of the film and generates empathy. Once again, film is an audiovisual art; its colorful expressions provide an audiovisual feast, immersing the audience in colorful light, shadows and pleasant music. The audience is deeply impressed by the beauty of the film form. Because of these advantages, movies have a wide audience; men, women, the young and the old from all walks of life can watch and enjoy movies. Therefore, film has become the artistic medium with the most popular potential.

Since the birth of cinema, various religions have used the art of film to appeal to the masses and expand their influence. Almost all major religions that are popular in the world now have their own films. For example, Christian films include *The Ten Commandments, The Passion of the Christ, The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, etc. Buddhist films include *The Cup; Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter . . . and Spring; Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?: A Zen Fable*; etc. Islamic films include *The Message, The Great Journey, Knife in the Clear Water*, etc.

Like other religions, Taoism must reach out to the masses in order to expand its appeal and influence. Therefore, the cinematography of Taoism is important for creating a connection between the public and Taoism and for encouraging public interest in Taoism.

Taoist films are of great importance to the spread of Taoism.

First, Taoist films have expanded the audience of Taoism worldwide. Although Taoism is native to China, with the emergence of overseas Chinese immigrant groups, Taoism now exists in other countries. However, its influence is limited, and the attention it attracts is low. People in many countries have never heard of it, and even if they have, they know little about it. Taoist films can break through this limitation. As a globally popular medium, cinema has an extremely powerful transnational and cross-cultural nature, and it can be widely disseminated throughout the world (Bordwell and Thompson 2003). Taoist cinema has the opportunity to promote Taoism as a native Chinese religion to a global audience, so that they can understand and know Taoism and its philosophy. For example, the Taoist film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, directed by Ang Lee, has been warmly praised by global audiences and has received numerous awards for its outstanding artistic quality. According to Box Office Mojo, it has grossed over USD 210 million worldwide and remains to date the highest grossing non-English-language film in the world (BoxOfficeMojo 2000). What matters is not only its superb box office performance, but also the number of viewers reflected behind its box office performance, which means that hundreds of millions of moviegoers worldwide have watched *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The Taoist philosophy that the film expresses has naturally spread around the world. Regarding the Taoist priest Li Mu Bai, played by Chow Yun Fat in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, his "closed-door training", his understanding of swordsmanship and many of his lines, such as "Hold your fist tight, you grasp nothing inside. Open your hand, you will have the sky on you palm", are rich in Taoist wisdom. With the global popularity of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, these Taoist concepts have achieved global dissemination.

Second, Taoist films can elucidate Taoist concepts, making them easier to understand. Taoist culture is so profound that even Taoist priests who have studied it for years cannot fully grasp it, let alone the general public. Therefore, in the mass communication of Taoism, visualizing the obscure Taoist culture and making it easy to understand for the general audience are key aspects. In this regard, Taoist films have a powerful function. As we all know, movies, as a narrative art, express ideas and themes through their plots, which are advanced through cause-and-effect logic (Field 1989). In this way, regardless of how profound an idea is, as long as it has a reasonable storyline and is supported by sufficient cause-and-effect logical arguments, it can be fully and clearly presented in a movie. For example, the Taoist film *Double Vision* is a wonderful interpretation of the Taoist concept of "becoming immortal in five prisons". This movie is similar to the Christian movie *Se7en*. Taoism holds that there are "five jails to become immortal", and after going through the five jails, a person can become immortal after following the six paths of cultivation. The so-called five prisons are the cold prison, the fire pit prison, the intestine prison, the heart prison and the tongue prison. Through the Double Pupil, the owner searches for human elves, i.e., people with grave sins, to conduct trials to fulfill the Taoist prophecy of becoming immortal. The plot of *Double Vision* is set up in such a way that the Taoist culture of "five jails to become immortal" is visualized and popularized, and the chain of cause and effect is clear and logical, so that the audience can fully understand them as the film's plot progresses.

Third, Taoist films visualize and present the Taoist "Zhai-Jiao" and Taoist arts in an interesting way. Taoism reveres the gods and focuses on rituals and prayers. In order to show solemnity and devotion, those who offer prayers must cleanse their bodies and minds and observe certain rules of behavior, a practice called Zhai. When Taoism is practiced, Zhai and Jiao are always linked together, so they are often referred to together. The main content is offering sacrifices to the gods, thanking, repenting and praying, accompanied by chanting, worship and music. Taoism contains a wide range of Taoist arts, including charms, forbidden spells, occultation, exorcism, voodoo, demon subjugation, disaster

elimination, prayers, divine magic and the art of warding off evil spirits (Zhang 2007). As the main carriers of Taoist culture, the Taoist "Zhai-Jiao" and Taoist arts express the beliefs and concepts of Taoism. However, they are confined to specific places and moments of Taoism, and ordinary people know little about them. Through the visual presentation and dissemination of Taoist films, the limitations of time and space can be broken through, giving audiences the opportunity to see and understand them in depth. What is particularly rare is that Taoist films can not only present them as they are, but they can also present them in a spectacular and interesting way, making them more likely to win the hearts of audiences. For example, the Taoist film *Qi Men Dun Jia* brilliantly presents the Taoist art of "Qi Men Dun Jia" and has achieved good communication effects. Since Zhang Daoling founded Taoism in Sichuan, "Qi Men Dun Jia" has become a magical Taoist art passed down from one line of Taoism to another. The director Yuan Heping designed the fights of the boxers in *Qi Men Dun Jia*, including the Five Ghosts of Fortune, "Qi Men Da Fa", and the Taoist art of evading the earth, with extraordinary acrobatic movements and many traditional magic tricks, so that the characters, props, sets and fight scenes in *Qi Men Dun Jia* present both horror and humor in a bizarre style. This amusing presentation was appreciated by the audience. After watching *Qi Men Dun Jia*, audience member Yan stated, "The variety of Taoist arts is so exciting that I can't help but applaud the film" (Yan 2008); audience member Igor Saboyi stated, "There are a lot of different, fantastical and weird Taoist arts in the film, which is both eye-opening and interesting" (Saboyi 2014).

Fourth, Taoist films can perfectly present Taoist aesthetics. The core of Taoism is "Tao", which is the pursuit of the "Taoism of nature", "tranquility and inactivity" and "freedom and liberty". On an aesthetic level, Taoism expresses the beauty of simplicity and naturalness, the beauty of emptiness and tranquility, the beauty of high and open air, the beauty of profundity and mystery and the beauty of freedom, emphasizing the ideal of the "unity of heaven and man" through the way of "viewing things with things" (Pan et al. 2010). As an audiovisual art, film can use its own visual elements and sound elements to perfectly present these Taoist aesthetic qualities on the screen. The film can use shots of scenery and still life to compress characters and social information, thus presenting the aesthetic flavor of "viewing things with things", or it can use the traditional cultural concept of Taoism to create the relationship between heaven and humans, making the natural scenery a symbolic representation of Taoist culture. Taking the Taoist film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as an example, in the "Bamboo Forest Battle" sequence, the relationships between humans, human and bamboo, and bamboo and mountains are expressed by abandoning the Western "small view of the big" method of fixed-point perspective and by presenting the "big view of the small", which starts from the "big" concept—the whole and the overall situation—and determines the "small" elements, such as characters, objects and parts. As a result, the martial arts action becomes an expression of the character's personality and temperament and is externalized into an unhindered integration with nature (Mubai Li) or the separation from restlessness (Jiaolong Yu). This process organizes people and scenery into a vivid, rhythmic and harmonious artistic picture, clearly revealing the idea of "view things from things". The Taoist aesthetic charm of the "unity of heaven and man" is evident.

Put simply, Taoist films can promote Taoist ideology, religious rituals and aesthetic styles to a global audience through the presentation of an audiovisual language, which builds a bridge between Taoism and the general public. Global audiences are given the opportunity to come into contact with Taoism and thus to know, understand and accept Taoism. In this way, these quality cultural assets of Taoism can be communicated, and a dialogue can be opened with other cultures on a global scale. This not only spreads Taoism but also enables Taoism to reposition itself in the global dialogue and gain further space for enhancement and development.

4. What Cultural Transformations Are Highlighted in the Process of the Cinematization of Taoism?

The cinematization of Taoism is the mass communication of Taoism as an object through the medium of film. Fundamentally, it is an act of communication. Thus, the cinematographic dissemination of Taoism is bound to be limited and restricted by a series of communication laws. For example, it is influenced by the communication environment, shaped by the communication media and is limited by the audience (McQuail 2005).

Specifically, in order to echo the influence of the communication environment, the communication medium and the audience, the cinematization of Taoism has clearly undergone several cultural transformations in order to achieve a good communication effect.

First of all, in order to fit the cultural atmosphere of the communication environment, Taoist films clearly highlight their own spectacle, which is prominently reflected in the spectacle of Taoist rituals. The Taoist ritual is traditionally called "Zhai-Jiao". The Taoist "Zhai-Jiao" is sacred, but in Taoist films, it is often visualized in a fun and interesting way to gain the audience's attention and interest. This is exemplified by the series of "zombie movies" starring Hong Kong movie star Lin Zhengying. In these zombie movies, such as *Mr. Vampire, Exorcist Master, Vampire vs. Vampire*, etc., the Taoist priest played by Lin Zhengying, Uncle Jiu, must set up a dojo when exorcising demons and catching ghosts and act out the spectacle of the Taoist rituals in an exaggerated and unbelievable way. Some of these Taoist rituals are real and are only exaggerated in the film, whereas some do not exist in Taoism at all and were fictionalized for plot needs and comedic effects. These images of the spectacle in Taoist films are undoubtedly an echo of the contemporary turn toward the "spectralization" of visual culture. In his book *Media Spectacle*, Douglas Kellner provided a fascinating analysis of the spectralization of visual culture. He indicated that, in a highly media-saturated society, the "landscape" and "spectacle" of real life are often "hyped" by the media in an entertaining and dramatic way. In Douglas Kellner's definition, a spectacle mainly emphasizes the drama and entertainment in a landscape (Kellner 2002). In turning toward the spectacle of visual culture, the spectacle film emerged. As the name implies, the most important feature of a spectacle film is the "spectacle" image, without which spectacle films would not exist. Since the 1980s, many spectacle films have been released, such as *Alien, The Abyss, Star Wars, Twister, The Matrix, The Chronicles of Narnia, The Lord of the Rings*, etc. These films have been warmly received by audiences, and almost every one of them was a great success. As a subgenre of film, Taoist films are inevitably influenced by the film industry and the overall social and cultural atmosphere, and their "spectacle" transformation process undoubtedly fits the transformation of visual culture into a spectacle and the trend of spectacle films.

Second, in order to adopt the properties of the communication medium, Taoist films clearly aim to strengthen their commerciality, which is prominently reflected in the pursuit of entertainment effects in Taoist films. The properties of the film medium include commerciality, artistry and ideology (Villarejo 1985). The ideal state of cinema is the "unity of the three": a perfect integration of commerciality, artistry and ideology. However, this is only an ideal. In fact, it is difficult for most films to achieve this ideal. Therefore, when it is impossible to integrate all three, what is the most fundamental media attribute that a film production should guarantee? Undoubtedly, it should be the commodity of a film, i.e., ensuring that the film can be circulated in the film market and that it is liked enough by audiences such that they are willing to buy tickets and go to the cinema to watch it, achieving for the film a complete dissemination and acceptance process. On the one hand, it can ensure box office revenue to realize the sustainability of the movie, and on the other hand, only when the final stage of appreciation is completed can the artistry and ideology of the movie be received by the audience. In order to satisfy the commodity property of the film medium, Taoist films clearly highlight their own pursuit of the entertainment effect, which is highlighted by the entertaining transformation of the image of Taoist priests in the films. Taoist priests, as the main body of Taoism, are the carriers of Taoist teachings and should adhere to Taoist precepts and teachings, which are the embodiment of Taoist spirit.

However, in order to pursue entertainment value, many Taoist films have made changes to the image of Taoist priests. For example, in order to pursue the entertainment effect, *Zhong Kui: Snow Girl and the Dark Crystal* let the Taoist priest Kui Zhong fall in love with the demon Qing Xue in the film. In Taoism, Kui Zhong is an iconic figure in eliminating demons, but the film's subversive transformation of Kui Zhong's image clearly breaks through this position and is created entirely for entertainment purposes. In order to pursue the contrasting effect of the Taoist characters in the film, Daoxian Zhang, the biggest villain in the film, is clearly based on Daoxian Zhang, who was the founder of Taoism. From the subversive image transformation of Taoist characters Kui Zhong and Daoxian Zhang in *Zhong Kui: Snow Girl and the Dark Crystal*, we can clearly feel the entertainment impulse of Taoist movies.

Once again, in order to meet the basic expectations of the audience, Taoist films have clearly accentuated their popular nature, highlighted by the popularized interpretation of Taoist teachings in the films. The teachings of Taoism are profound. They have inherited the Taoist ideas of "the way of nature" and "the way of inaction" (Laozi 2016) and communicate that "the way of nature is in the hands of nature and the way of man is in his own hands" (Tao 2014) and "death and life are in the hands of the mind" (Huang 2022). The sage knows that the natural way cannot be violated, and therefore he controls it. He advocates respect for the Tao and its virtues, respect for life and harmony, while seeing the vegetative and the simple, holding the elementary and keeping the one, being quiet and inactive and being kind and frugal. These teachings are profoundly ideological and a concentrated expression of Taoist wisdom. However, Taoism today is no longer the same as it was in its prime, and the general public knows little about it; many young people know nothing about it. Under such circumstances, Taoist films must adjust their own communication strategies and make trade-offs in Taoist teachings in order to cater to and echo the public's knowledge of Taoism. In this regard, Taoist films have strengthened their popular orientation, avoiding obscure Taoist teachings as much as possible and focusing on those that are more popular and easier for the public to understand and accept, such as "doing the right thing for heaven", "eliminating demons", "returning to seclusion", "to be free and retired" and "to become immortal". In this way, the profound teachings of Taoism are popularized. The public more easily understands them, and their accessibility is enhanced, making it easier to win the audience's love and thus broaden the appeal of Taoism. Taoist films such as *The Tai Chi Master, The Young Taoism Fighter*, and *Taoism Drunkard* are all successful examples in this regard.

Taken together, these cultural transformations in the cinematization of Taoism require respect and adherence to the laws of communication in the process of Taoist film dissemination.

5. Can Taoist Films Have Their Transcendental Style?

Many scholars have made fruitful explorations in the field of the intersection of film and religious studies (Lyden 2003; Plate 2008; Sison 2012; Nayar 2012). These studies mark the maturation of this field. However, in terms of the study of how cinema presents the sacred, it is important to mention Paul Schrader and his "transcendental style", which is the earliest and most fundamental study of this thesis and remains an important influence on related research to this day.

In 1972, Paul Schrader published *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, which became the foundational text for subsequent related discussions. In this book, Schrader analyzed the film works of Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer and found that they share the same cinematic form, namely the transcendental style. The so-called transcendental style, as defined by Schrader, is the articulation of transcendence through cinematography. Through this style, artists from different countries can express the common theme of the "sacred" (Schrader 2018).

In Schrader's opinion, the transcendental style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence. It eschews all conventional interpretations of reality: realism, naturalism, psy-

chologism, romanticism, expressionism, impressionism and rationalism. In his book, he quoted Amédée Ayfre to reinforce this point: "If everything is explained by understandable causal necessities or by objective determinism, even if their precise nature remains unknown, then nothing is sacred." (Schrader 2018)

Based on this understanding, Schrader argued that the key premise for transcendental style is the universality of its form in sacred art that is only achieved in stasis. Schrader believed that the common feature of the films of Ozu, Bresson and Dreyer lies in their stylistic similarities—their use of off-screen space, narrative ellipses and low-key acting (Schrader 2018). This combination produces a sense of singularity, autonomy and objectivity in the characters, which, for the viewer, appears as a certain emptiness. "This emptiness, however, is counterbalanced by a sort of 'mystical integrity' related to a deeply religious component of the human psyche." (Kovács 2007)

Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer has been reprinted several times since its publication, with the most recent edition published by the University of California Press in 2018. In his new preface, *Rethinking Transcendental Style*, Schrader further clarified and refined the meaning of transcendental style. In his new reflections, based on a comprehensive analysis of Deleuze–Tarkovsky slow cinema, he referred to the interstitial technique mentioned by Deleuze in *Cinema 2: the Time Image* as the "essential element" of transcendental style. He believed that the core of what makes slow cinema truly different is a different attitude toward time; "slow cinema examines how time affects the images . . . experiential not expositional." (Schrader 2018)

Undoubtedly, Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* laid the foundation for discussion in this field, and any discussion of religiosity in cinema can hardly bypass the theoretical framework constructed by Schrader. Whether you agree or disagree with his views, you are not prevented from returning to the original point he established to start your discussion.

What I want to discuss here is as follows: Can Taoist cinema have its transcendental style? If so, does this transcendental style guarantee the ability of Taoist cinema to express the sacred? If not, in what way should Taoist cinema express the sacred?

First, let us look at whether Taoist films have the potential to form a transcendental style.

If we examine it in terms of generative capacity, any film can be deliberately crafted in the direction of a transcendental style. However, if we consider the artistic integrity of a film work, i.e., the matching of its concept and form, we need to further refine and analyze what kind of concept matches the transcendental style to avoid a sense of misunderstanding and rigidity. What about the Taoism? Does it match the transcendental style?

Let us look at what Taoism says. In the first part of the opening chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, it is stated that

> *The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Dao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name. (Conceived of as) having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; (conceived of as) having a name, it is the Mother of all things.*
>
> *Always without desire we must be found,*
>
> *If its deep mystery we would sound;*
>
> *But if desire always within us be,*
>
> *Its outer fringe is all that we shall see.*
>
> *Under these two aspects, it is really the same; but as development takes place, it receives the different names. Together we call them the Mystery. Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful.* (Laozi 2016)

According to Laozi, the Tao existed before the creation of the world, and the eternally existing Tao is universal and ineffable as well as the most mysterious and ubiquitous. Therefore, one is able to view the mystery of the Tao in the eternally existing nameless world, as well as the genesis of the Tao in the eternally existing world of the Tao. The

mysterious Tao is vast and profound and is the gateway to explore all mysteries. Laozi advocated overcoming the artificially created Tao and echoing and feeling the naturally occurring Tao that exists eternally, because, although the artificially created Tao may look grand, it is obtained by breaking the eternal Tao. Therefore, how can one echo and feel the eternal Tao? Laozi further pointed out that "The (state of) vacancy should be brought to the utmost degree, and that of stillness guarded with unwearying vigour" (Laozi 2016), because "Loud is its sound, but never word it said; A semblance great, the shadow of a shade. The Dao is hidden, and has no name" (Laozi 2016), and only when one reaches a state of extreme silence can one feel the existence of the Tao.

We can see the similarity between Taoist philosophy and transcendental style; they both consider the religious experience of the sacred (the Tao or the Wholly Other) as mysterious and ineffable, which cannot be expressed through artificially created causal logic but needs to be felt in a state of silence. From this, we can say that they share the same aesthetic concept, and Taoist films loaded with Taoist concepts have the full potential to have their own transcendental style.

Second, let us then look at whether Taoist cinema has developed its own transcendental style.

Because Taoist cinema has the full potential to possess its own transcendental style, has Taoist cinema ever transformed this possibility or potential into reality? In fact, the answer is no; we can hardly find traces of transcendental style in numerous Taoist films. Whether in well-known and representative Taoist films, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; Wu ji; Monk Comes Down the Mountain; Double Vision; or The Tai Chi Master*, or in those other notorious Taoist films, we cannot see the presence of an explicitly transcendental style.

As mentioned above, what we can observe in Taoist films is that Taoist films generally intensify their spectacle and entertainment, pursuing more narrative tension and excitement, more novelty and chic images and more dramatic conflicts in performances. In other words, Taoist films choose to resort more to external action rather than internal contemplation and more to lively and cheerful storytelling rather than creating a silent and still style.

Clearly, Taoist films are far away from Schrader's "transcendental style"; rather, Taoist films do not show any willingness to approach transcendental style.

Therefore, do Taoist films lose their ability to express the sacred because of the lack of transcendental style? Let us explore this question further.

Third, in what way do Taoist films express the sacred?

Before we get into this discussion, let us analyze why Taoist films have abandoned transcendental style when they have good potential for it. This is the basis for the discussion of how Taoist films express the sacred.

In my opinion, the most fundamental reason why Taoist films abandon the transcendental style is that this style can neither guarantee the effectiveness of Taoist films in expressing the sacred nor can it deprive it of the opportunity to express itself. In other words, Taoist films may not be able to obtain sustainable development space if they insist on choosing this transcendental style.

When we discuss films, whether they are Taoist films or other genres, it is best to have a sense of the potential audience. Ultimately, movies are made for audiences. Without the audience's viewing and participation, all the ideas of cinema (whether religious or otherwise) cannot be realized.

So, what is the status of the audience of Taoist films?

Although very few Taoist films have achieved global distribution, for example, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Wu ji*, it must be said that these are only a few cases. Most Taoist films still mainly face Chinese audiences, and they are mainly popular in Chinese-speaking regions. Therefore, the film aesthetic tendency of audiences in Chinese-speaking regions, especially in mainland China, have a direct impact on Taoist films. If you look at the box office rankings of the Chinese mainland film market, you can find that, among the top 30 films, 15 are comedies, and the other 15 are war films, detective films, science fiction

films, etc. However, without exception, they are all fast-paced narrative films. None of them is a "slow movie" or has a transcendental style (Yien 2023). This box office ranking is very convincing, as it shows what kind of movies are popular in Chinese-speaking regions. Unfortunately, the transcendental style is not included in this list. This explains why, although Taoist films have good potential for a transcendental style, the transcendental style does not actually exist in Taoist films.

However, I believe that, although Taoist cinema has not developed its own transcendental style, it does not prevent it from expressing the sacred. As Sheila Nayar's excellent analysis reveals, the transcendental style is not the only way to express the sacred, but only one of the ways. In *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the 'Genuinely' Religious Film*, Nayar questioned many of the norms of the transcendental style as defined by Schrader. She argued that

> *If the majority of religion and film scholars have been prone to seeing silence or stillness as marking the way to the legitimately sacramental, very likely this is because these scholars' long-term cultural investment in the acts and practices of reading and writing have led them to believe that narrative is something with which one engages in solitude and which, in the realm of the sacred, ought fundamentally to reflect an inward turn. Private contemplation may of course be central to discrete encounters with a godhead or icon (whether Hindu or Christian), but when hierophany is part of an orally inflected story, other contingencies ensue. In an oral milieu, what can quiescence and quietude mark, after all, other than the dearth of institutionalized cues? The visual/aural image's "stopping" indicates the end of an utterance, as earlier I stated, which, instead of making room for the evocation of the ineffably mysterious, leaves a viewer with nowhere existentially to go.*

> *Austerity may render a text impenetrable for orally inflected spectators, in other words— or, at the least, may provoke in those spectators a sense of a text's dismissibility. A legitimately oral text cannot afford what is essentially an esoteric (or etymologically "inner") surface.*

> *In a culture where the self is highly informed by one's interaction with others, what purpose or value can there be in being intentionally isolated and abandoned both from people in the present and the accumulated wisdom of the past? How could that sort of isolation lead anyone closer to the sacred? In fact, Bresson's kind of movie making may well appear highly antisocial to the orally-inflected viewer. If the viewer is both abandoned and abandoning her group—including her ancestors and her people's gods—how could that lead to any meaningful or worthwhile experience of the sacred?*

> *Consider, after all, that the norms these analysts generally, and oftentimes quite poetically, extol—stasis, austerity, the mundane—are never part and parcel of films highly inflected by orality. In fact, the transcendentally styled cinema's partiality for a "hidden God" may well owe its existence to writing and print.* (Nayar 2012)

Sheila Nayar made a unique and significant contribution to the religion and film discussion by employing paradigms from media ecology (such as orality and alphabetic literacy). She shifted our attention to the religious experience of cinema from the level of cinematic style to that of audience perception, and gave us a good demonstration from a methodological point of view, greatly expanding the space for further exploration in this dimension. Indeed, following Nayar's path, we have every reason to make the argument that film audiences are not uniform, they belong to different regions, countries, races, classes, cultural systems, etc. There are so many individual differences that, when they watch a movie, how can there be only one uniform way of experiencing the sacred? It is entirely possible for them to construct a way of experiencing based on their own individuality or group characteristics, and it is entirely possible for different groups of viewers to have different paths to experience the sacred, which may be unrelated or even completely opposite. Therefore, how can a transcendental style "catch all"?

In addition to Sheila Nayar, other scholars have questioned the universality of the transcendental style outlined by Schrader. David Bordwell, for example, suggested that

Schrader failed to produce any evidence that Ozu was ever a devout Buddhist or that he had a keen interest in Zen sufficient for them to be centrally instrumental in his filmmaking. He considered that "placed in a social context, the films are less indebted to Japanese aesthetics and Zen Buddhism than to a vibrant popular culture, and more indirectly to ideological tensions" (Bordwell 1988). Gilles Deleuze agreed that there is no need to call on the transcendental. He saw in Ozu's body of work the first appearance in the time-image of pure optical and sound situations, identifying him as "the inventor" of what he called opsigns (image) and sonsigns (sound) (Deleuze 1989).

Both Nayar and Bordwell, as well as Deleuze, questioned the universal value of the transcendental style distilled by Schrader from different sides, thus opening multiple doors for different audience groups to experience the sacred differently through film. This is particularly important for our understanding of how audiences in the Chinese-speaking region experience the sacred in Taoist films. In fact, audiences in Chinese-speaking regions do not experience the sacred in terms of the style of Taoist films, but rather, they form a dialogue with Taoism by accepting or questioning the religious content in Taoist films. This means that Taoist films cannot express the sacred by resorting to transcendental style, but they must influence the audience through the communication of religious content, thus highlighting the religious attributes of the Taoist religion they transmit.

Fourth, how and under what conditions can Taoist films have a religious impact on audiences?

As a religious film, Taoist films inevitably have missionary aspirations. Therefore, how can Taoist films be made to have a religious impact on the audience, and under what conditions can it be achieved? I believe, as Sheila Nayar revealed, it is best that we do not see audiences as identical but that we make a fine distinction between them. Whether in the Chinese-speaking world or globally, the audience for Taoist films, I believe, can be divided into at least three categories: the first is the group of Taoist priests, who have in-depth knowledge of Taoism; the second is the audience, without much knowledge of Taoism, who may be aware of its existence but who have no knowledge of its teachings, culture, etc., or who may not know that Taoism exists; the third is the in-between audience, who knows something about Taoism but not much about it. As mentioned above, Taoism, as a native Chinese religion, is predominantly preached in Chinese-speaking areas. Outside Chinese-speaking areas, there are Taoist palaces built by overseas Chinese, but the number of Taoist priests is very small. In fact, in mainland China, the number of Taoist priests who are registered is small (Editor 2022). Most people, both in China and in other countries, belong to the third category of viewers who know a little about Taoism but not much, or the second category of viewers who know almost nothing about Taoism.

When we discuss the religious influence of Taoist films on audiences, we need to carefully distinguish how Taoist films respond to the demands of these three types of audiences. The religious influence can be realized only when what Taoist films "give" and what audiences "want" are consistent and combined. For the first type of audience, real Taoist priests have already studied and understood Taoism in-depth and are already Taoist "professionals". As a popular art form, Taoist films can hardly give them more religious knowledge, and they can only give them aesthetic forms, such as "transcendental style", for them to complete a sacred experience. (It is undeniable that Taoist priests also have the need for leisure and entertainment, but the discussion here is about religious influence. Therefore, the case of Taoist priests satisfying their entertainment needs by watching Taoist movies is excluded.) For the second and third categories of viewers, whether they know nothing or a little about Taoism, they are not prevented from being "Interpellated" by Taoist films. The fact that they choose to watch Taoist movies shows that they have some interest in Taoism. Then, Taoist films should strive to gain their liking and even convert them into believers. Compared with the first type of audience, the second and third types of audiences are more interested in gaining more understanding and experience of Taoism from Taoist films. For these audiences, the first thing Taoist movies should do is integrate Taoist spirit and Taoist culture into them through a wonderful story so that they can subconsciously

accept Taoism while watching them happily, and in this way, the religious influence of Taoism can be realized. It can be seen that there is a certain conflict between the way Taoist films exert religious influence on the first category of audiences and the way that they do so on the latter two categories of audiences, but because the number of the first category of audiences is extremely small, it is not difficult for Taoist films to make a rational choice.

As we have seen in most Taoist films, Taoist films have given more attention to how to tell a wonderful Taoist story than to stylistic pursuits. Both the pursuit of a spectacle and the enhancement of entertainment have greatly enhanced the appeal of Taoist films among audiences. This is both respect for the audience's viewing habits and a rational choice to achieve its religious effects. Or, rather, these are two sides of the same coin; only with the acceptance and recognition of the audience can the religious aspirations of Taoist films be realized. This is also evidenced by the audience's feedback. The audience's attention to Taoist films is mainly focused on the storyline and characters. One viewer mentioned after seeing the Taoist movie *The Miracle Fighters* that "in this movie, there is a part about praying for rain, which is very interesting. The Taoist priest finds out that his rheumatism has broken down, and then uses the ancient measurement method to observe the humidity temperature and wind speed in all directions, because the disease changes with the weather. So Taoism is interesting. There are also references to healing and charms in the movie, and there are many interesting episodes that give us a taste of the fun of Taoism" (Ermu 2014). Another viewer was impressed by He Anxia, the main character in *Monk Comes Down the Mountain*: "The young Taoist priest, He Anxia, has been studying Taoism in a Taoist temple since he was a child, and even though he has read a lot of Taoist scriptures and has a clear heart, he probably does not understand those pure and inactive truths of Taoism. So, the film through He Anxia as a spectator, with a seemingly loose, but actually useful experience, a good experience of the human heart and human feelings" (Anguang 2015).

It follows that, for Taoist cinema, content rather than style becomes the primary channel through which it expresses the sacred and communicates with the audience about the religious experience. In addition, whether it can combine human nature and human feelings and organically integrate Taoist spirit and Taoist culture with wonderful storytelling becomes the most influential factor in whether it can exert religious influence on the audience. Only after the Taoist movie is appreciated as a movie by the public can the Taoist doctrine and Taoist spirit included in it be propagated among the audience, and the propagation demand of Taoism can be realized.

Finally, let us return to Schrader. Even Schrader, who had immense devotion to religion and was full of faith in the transcendental style, regrettably mentioned in an interview that

> *Because I had the impulse to spread the gospel, I felt a need to go out and preach to as many people as possible and convince them all. I also knew that the real way to convince them would have to be through non-commercial methods. But working in mass media, you have to accept the limitations of the general public, and that means millions of people, because, as long as you're making a movie, you're dealing with at least two or three million individuals. In addition, I am a firm believer in that Christian concept of management: if someone gives you money, then you have to figure out early on how you are going to eventually give that money back. Although it doesn't always really work that way, with every film I've been involved in, I've wanted all the investors to eventually get back what they put in.*
>
> *I used to have a lot of sympathy for Jean-Luc Godard when his films were still of interest to a lot of people, but what would it be like to have spent the last twenty years talking to an empty room? I'm sure he'd say, "The important thing is that I've been talking, and I don't care if anyone listens." But that's not a look I can accept. I think that if you're working in this medium, then you must be sure that someone is indeed listening.* (Jackson 2008)

Indeed, whether it is a Taoist movie or any other movie, making sure that "someone is listening" is always the basis for achieving the desired effect. Whether a film's transmission of the sacred appeals to transcendental style, content or something else, perhaps the key is

what works for the audience in front of the screen, here and now. What works for a certain group of viewers in a certain period of time may not be universally applicable.

6. Conclusions

Although Taoism today is no longer as glorious as it was in its prime, Taoist culture and Taoist spirit can still bring much wisdom and inspiration to the world today. Whether dealing with the relationship between humans and nature, the relationship between humans, or an individual's own health care and spiritual regulation, Taoism can provide help (Ding 2006). Therefore, it would undoubtedly be wonderful if Taoism could achieve mass communication. Because of its own media advantages, film has great power in the mass communication of Taoism, and it can bridge the connection between Taoism and the public. Therefore, the cinematization of Taoism is of great significance to the mass communication of Taoism. Taoist films can promote the ideology, religious rituals and aesthetic style of Taoism to a global audience through audiovisual language so that a global audience can understand Taoism and accept it. In the cinematization of Taoism, the communication laws of film are respected and followed. In order to echo the communication environment, communication media and audience influence, the cinematization of Taoism highlights the visual spectacle, entertainment and popularization, thus enabling it to be better accepted by film audiences and achieve positive communication effects. Although Taoist cinema has not developed a transcendental style, this does not prevent it from expressing the sacred. Through content rather than style, Taoist films express the sacred and communicate with viewers religiously, thus exerting a religious influence on them.

Taoist cinema has attracted the attention of scholars, and relevant studies have been published. However, these studies have mainly focused on the artistic analysis of Taoist films, and the study of the medium of Taoist films has not yet attracted much attention. This paper can serve as a reference for the discussion of this topic. Moreover, the choice of media for religious communication is a common problem for all religions; whether they choose newspapers, audio broadcasting, movies, television or new media on the Internet, they all must face the problem of how to combine religion and media forms and how to exert religious influence on its audience. This paper provides a media case study that combines Taoism and movies for this purpose, and it provides a reference for the integration of other media forms with religion.

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Notes

[1]   In this paper, the terms "Tao", "Taoism" and "Taoist" are used more often. To avoid ambiguity, I explain them here. The Chinese word "道" is translated into English as "Dao" or "Tao". In this paper, I choose the latter. However, in quoting James Legge's classic translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, all quotations of the *Tao Te Ching* in this paper are quoted from James Legge's translation, using "Dao" in order to maintain complete consistency. This is because James Legge's translation translates "道" as "Dao". Other than that, the rest of the paper uses "Tao" to translate "道". "Taoism" is used as a noun in this paper, and it is a translation of the Chinese character "道教", which refers to a Chinese religion. Like Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, it is a religion. As a religion, Taoism has its own culture, doctrine, place, aesthetic, etc. When referring to these things in this paper, I use the term "Taoist XXX" to denote them, such as "Taoist culture", "Taoist ideology", etc. When "taoist" is used in this article, it is sometimes used as a noun and sometimes as an adjective. When it is used as a noun, it refers to an adherent of Taoism, which is the English translation of the Chinese character "道士"; when it is used as an adjective, it refers to "Taoism's", which is the English translation of the Chinese character "道教的", such as "Taoist film". Only the third page of this paper mentions the "Taoist school", which is also a common usage of Chinese character "道家" in English, and it is a fixed phrase.

2   According to statistics, there are currently more than 40,000 Taoist clergy in China. Because there is no strict initiation process for
     ordinary believers, it is difficult to accurately count the number of Taoist believers. For more details, see the article "Policy Q&A"
     published on 21 January 2022 in the *Tien Shan Construction News* (Editor 2022).

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