

Heroes in Hollywood Cinema: An Examination of 'Da Yin Xi Sheng, Da Xiang Wu Xing' Concepts in Daoism

Jun Cui, Mark Qin, Wei Chang, Celtic Wang

Abstract—In popular culture, there are Western heroes and Eastern heroes. The differentiation between them is not identified on color, ethnicity, physique, or appearance, nor does it pertain to the pejorative discourses of 'Western hegemonic culture' and 'Orientalism.' Regardless of nations, heroes frequently exemplify Daoist concepts such as 'powerful sound is silent, powerful form is formless'. In this paper, we argue that the characters in the Hollywood film *Avatar: The Way of Water* embody the archetype of a Xia, carrying out the duties and behaviors typical of this archetype, which aligns with the 'Da Yin Xi Sheng, Da Xiang Wu Xing' concepts of Daoism.

Keywords—Daoism, Chinese culture, heroism, Zhuangzi, film study.

I. INTRODUCTION

HEROES in popular culture can be generally classified into Western and Eastern categories. The distinction between modern "Western" and "Eastern" heroes does not rely on factors such as color, ethnicity, physique, or appearance, nor does it align with the negative stereotypes of "Western hegemonic culture" and "Orientalism." We contend that the disparities among individuals arise from the diverse educational and cultural backgrounds that influence their perspectives. Although heroes across many cultural frameworks may attain comparable results, a detailed examination uncovers significant disparities in their governing creeds, ideologies, and belief systems [1]. Eastern heroes frequently exemplify Confucian principles of "benevolence" and Daoist concepts such as "great sound is silent; great form is formless" [2]. Modern Western heroes predominantly originate from American or Hollywood cinema, which we classify into four categories: superheroes, solitary heroes, ordinary heroes, and "politically correct" heroes. These heroes' beliefs occasionally align with the concepts of Daoism.

This study classifies Eastern heroes into three primary categories: national heroes, everyday heroes, and Xia. The central research inquiry of this study is to determine how the Xia archetype embodies Daoist philosophy within Eastern heroes. We contend that the notion of "jianghu" (the realm of martial arts) transcends Chinese wuxia literature and historical cinema; it also includes modern and contemporary society [1], as illustrated in the film "Let the Bullets Fly," which is set in

the Beiyang era. The principal figures of Jianghu culture — Xia— each exhibit distinct abilities and maintain a sense of justice, occasionally aiding the disadvantaged and at other times exemplifying restraint and passivity.

In this paper, we assert that the characters in Hollywood cinemas epitomize a Xia, fulfilling the duties and behaviors typical of this archetype, which are related to the "Da Yin Xi Sheng, Da Xiang Wu Xing" concepts in Daoism.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of Daoist thought are among the most ancient in history, perhaps emerging at the dawn of time and persisting since antiquity. Despite appearing mostly overlooked throughout history, Daoism's principles and adherents continue to quietly shape and sustain the world, without the pursuit of notoriety or gain. They interact alongside society, yet seem to inhabit a distinct dimension, exemplifying the concept that "profound sound is silent, profound form is formless" [3].

Daoist philosophy perceives nature as the essential foundation of all existence and the origin of everything. The character "Dao" signifies nature, heaven, the universe, and the principles regulating the functioning of all entities. Daoism underscores a naturalistic philosophy, promoting harmony with one's intrinsic essence and comprehension of the principles governing natural transformations. Unlike Confucianism, which prioritizes qualities such as compassion and righteousness as fundamental foundations for thought and conduct [4], Daoism champions simplicity and purity, urging a reversion to a state of authenticity reminiscent of a child's clarity [5]. The transformation of Daoism into religious Daoism, which designates the ultimate state as "zhenren" (genuine person), embodies this concept. Upon attaining this condition, wants and negative ideas gradually diminish, rendering rigid commitment to moral virtues such as compassion or righteousness unnecessary. Daoism prioritizes comprehending the fundamental nature of situations above concentrating on external appearances. It advocates for adhering to the natural progression of events and acknowledging the duality of existence: the magnitude of an action correlates with its potential influence, which may result in uncontrollable repercussions. Consequently, Daoism promotes a judicious, guiding methodology in worldly matters,

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directing them toward favorable results rather than undue meddling [6].

Laozi's "Dao De Jing" asserts: "Dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, and three generates all things." Daoist philosophy can be considered the foundation of Chinese culture, acquiring humanistic concepts from the early phases of Huaxia civilization [7]. These concepts have significantly shaped Chinese culture. Following the establishment of the Daoist school by Laozi, two principal branches of Daoism emerged: the doctrines of Laozi and Zhuangzi and the Huang-Lao school [5]. The primary distinction between these two lies in their emphasis on individuals and occurrences: Laozi and Zhuangzi prioritize inner growth and emotional depth, whereas the Huang-Lao school concentrates on governance and management of worldly affairs, which is plainly of more importance. In the doctrines of Laozi and Zhuangzi, "Lao" denotes Laozi, whereas "Zhuang" signifies Zhuangzi. In Huang-Lao philosophy, "Lao" denotes Laozi, but "Huang" pertains to the mythical Yellow Emperor, Xuanyuan [6]. One embodies the humanistic foundation of Huaxia civilization, while the other denotes the progenitor of the Hundred Schools of Thought, both significantly impacting Chinese culture. If Confucianism originates from figures such as Yao, Shun, Yu, and King Wen of Zhou, then Daoism derives its concepts from ancient figures such as Fuxi, Nuwa, the Yellow Emperor, Shennong, Yiyin, Xuyou, Chao Fu, Shang Tang, Jiang Taigong, and Guan Zhong. Upon leaving Hangu Pass, the sage Laozi assimilated the wisdom of past sages and authored the "Dao De Jing," a valuable text comprising five thousand words. This work established the groundwork for the Daoist philosophical framework, with its extensive impact observable in numerous facets of life [6].

Following Laozi, Zhuangzi, likewise esteemed as a sage, adopted elements of Laozi's philosophy. He primarily advocated for the simplicity and purity of human nature, the serenity of the heart, and explored the interconnections between humanity, the natural world, and the cosmos—a concept known as the "relationship between heaven and humanity." Zhuangzi's concepts, combined with Laozi's, shaped the current Lao-Zhuang philosophy [4]. Subsequent adherents developed and interpreted this tradition, ultimately resulting in the metaphysical framework known as Daoist Xuanxue (mystical studies) [5]. Xuanxue denotes notions that are beyond human experiences, embodying a metaphysical theory within Daoism that aspires to spiritual satisfaction beyond the material domain. Xuanxue has significantly impacted multiple domains, particularly philosophy and religion. Both Daoist philosophy and Xuanxue have profoundly influenced China's intellectual and religious concepts, as both traditions have assimilated several elements. Daoism significantly influenced the evolution of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming's heart-mind philosophy. Furthermore, Xuanxue significantly contributed to the development of Chinese Daoism and Buddhism, with numerous concepts assimilated into Zen Buddhism. Chinese Buddhism extensively adopted the concepts of truth, goodness, beauty, and moral virtue from Daoism, harmonizing with the principles of compassion and

benevolence [7].

The concept of "Xia" significantly influences Chinese martial arts and martial culture. Confucianism and Daoism have both influenced Chinese martial arts; Confucianism introduces the concept of "virtue" [8], establishing an ethical framework, while Daoism raises martial arts to a philosophical dimension, resulting in a holistic martial discipline. Daoist philosophy has profoundly influenced Chinese martial arts, intricately woven into its core. Daoism, especially in the context of religious Daoism, has significantly influenced martial arts culture, with contributions from Chan Buddhism. Despite being primarily a philosophical philosophy, Daoism, like other religions, has cultivated a mythological framework, engendering belief and establishing a substantial mythos that is integral to Chinese mythology [7]. Daoism's principal objective is personal cultivation, striving for transcendence in physical, mental, and spiritual domains. Daoism encompasses multiple factions, including those focused on martial arts, resulting in the formation of numerous Daoist martial arts sects that constitute the majority of contemporary Chinese martial arts schools [4]. These techniques have progressively developed into conventional martial arts, broadly recognized and practiced [9]. The incorporation of Daoist philosophy has elevated martial arts from simple physical conflict to a significant and profound system of thought. Daoist philosophy delineated a divide between exterior martial skills and the deeper internal disciplines, such as qigong, which cultivates latent forces within the body. Consistent engagement in these disciplines fosters formidable inner resilience. A genuine martial arts master exemplifies martial prowess and philosophical insight, upholding inner tranquility, humility, patience, and fortitude of character [3]. Daoist philosophy has not only inspired Chinese martial culture but has also been a fundamental component in its formation, profoundly affecting the wider culture of "xia" in China. Water functions as a principal symbol in Daoist philosophy, representing the notion that "the supreme virtue resembles water" [7]. Water is the fundamental wellspring of all life, perpetually dynamic and versatile. It encompasses both rigidity and pliability, capable of significant devastation or substantial sustenance. Water illustrates the principle of constant change, encouraging individuals to engage with the fundamental nature of existence and to embrace transformation while acknowledging the duality inherent in all occurrences [9]. The yin-yang idea reflects this duality, where opposites coexist and can either complement or contradict each other. Consequently, one must meticulously examine all facets of events, comprehending the probable ramifications of their actions from many viewpoints. Furthermore, the metaphor of water elucidates attributes such as friendliness, intelligence, virtue, and courage [10].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Data and Text

In *Avatar: The Way of Water*, the narrative intricately weaves Taoist philosophies throughout its storyline, particularly the concepts of "Da Yin Xi Sheng, Da Xiang Wu Xing" and

chivalry. The film follows Jake Sully and Neytiri as they confront external threats to their family and the Na'vi culture.

B. Analysis and Findings

Avatar: The Way of Water offers a sophisticated examination of Taoist beliefs, especially about interconnection, ethical principles, and alignment with nature. The examination reveals several critical elements in which these ideas are expressed through character development, narrative structure, and visual symbolism.

A key subject in the film is the interconnection of all beings, a fundamental principle of Taoism. The narrative effectively depicts Jake Sully's journey as he comes to comprehend and appreciate the sea ecosystem. His interactions with marine organisms demonstrate an increasing comprehension of the symbiotic relationships that characterize the planet of Pandora. This subject aligns with the Taoist principle that all life is interrelated and that harmony emerges from acknowledging and honoring these connections. The film's visual narrative amplifies this concept, as stunning underwater sequences illustrate the vivid aquatic life and its complex interconnections. The artwork highlights the fundamental connection between human existence and the natural world, inspiring viewers to reflect on their environmental responsibilities. The film depicts the ocean not just as a setting but as an essential character, embodying the Taoist principle of harmonious coexistence with nature. For example, Laozi's assertion in *Tao Te Ching* is that "the ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang." They achieve harmony by combining these forces, which complements the film's thematic representation of interconnection. The visual portrayal of Pandora's ecosystems resonates with the Daoist vision of the interconnectedness of life, suggesting that Jake's journey mirrors an understanding akin to Daoist cosmology, where all beings are part of a unified whole.

Jake's evolution from a self-interested outsider to a committed guardian of his family and the Na'vi community illustrates moral development consistent with Taoist principles. Throughout the film, Jake confronts substantial ethical challenges that test his convictions and compel him to consider the ramifications of his actions. His decision to place the welfare of his family and community above personal safety exemplifies the essence of *Xia*, a notion firmly embedded in Taoist and Chinese cultural traditions. This progress is not solely individual; it signifies a wider ethical paradigm that underscores communal accountability. During the pivotal moments when Jake consolidates the Na'vi clans against external adversities, the film emphasizes that genuine strength resides in communal solidarity. *Avatar: The Way of Water* portrays chivalry as a fundamental aspect of moral integrity, prompting audiences to reflect on the significance of selflessness and altruism in their lives. For instance, the narrative of the "Woodcarver" from *Zhuangzi* illustrates that genuine skill is the result of a state of harmony with nature, implying that in order to act selflessly and effectively, one must embody the way (Dao). Jake's development exemplifies this principle, transcending his prior self-focused motivations to

achieve a state of balance and unity with his community by becoming attuned to the demands and rhythms of the Na'vi.

The film depicts nature as a reservoir of wisdom, reflecting the Taoist principle that the natural world imparts essential lessons about life. Jake's encounters with the ocean and its creatures are crucial learning experiences, through which he acquires understanding of humility, adaptation, and perseverance. These lessons are especially crucial during crises, as Jake learns to confront both the physical and ethical dilemmas he encounters. Laozi's description of water as "the softest thing, yet it can penetrate mountains and earth" encapsulates the film's use of it as a symbol of adaptability and resilience. Jake's voyage, where his strength comes not from confrontation but from learning and adaptation, exemplifies the Taoist conviction that power stems from flexibility and yielding. Furthermore, the image's water symbolism, representing adaptability, resilience, and life itself, connects to the *Tao Te Ching's* principle that those who follow the way of water achieve harmony.

The representation of water as a nurturing and transformational element is consistent with Taoist principles. In many situations, water serves as a conduit for characters' personal growth and evolution. The metaphorical representation of water underscores the Taoist tenet of yielding and adapting to circumstances instead of opposing them, indicating that genuine power resides in flexibility. Water symbolizes adaptability, resilience, and life itself throughout the image. The film depicts water as a representation of Taoist principles of fluidity and the capacity to adeptly overcome life's obstacles. This thematic resonance adds story depth and supports the philosophical foundations of Taoism, urging viewers to accept change and cultivate balance in their lives.

The film's climax exemplifies the Taoist concept of communal action for a just cause. As Jake mobilizes the Na'vi to protect their homeland, the tale underscores that ethical choices are most significant when grounded in collective endeavor. This solidarity against external threats underscores the need for unity in attaining moral goals, along with the Taoist principle that individual activities are most impactful when they serve the collective welfare. The characters' unified reaction to peril highlights the ethical obligation to unite in confronting challenges. *Avatar: The Way of Water* emphasizes the importance of community and shared goals, stressing the need to combine personal integrity with a commitment to collective well-being. This can be aligned with the teachings in *Zhuangzi* that suggest harmony in society arises when individuals contribute selflessly to a collective goal, promoting a vision where the well-being of the whole transcends individual desires.

IV. CONCLUSION

Daoist philosophy has profoundly influenced Chinese culture, shaping politics, philosophy, religion, economics, military strategy, medicine, science, and martial arts; hence, enhancing these domains significantly. Through its transmission and the evolution of related disciplines, Daoist philosophy has gently permeated humanistic thought across numerous times and individuals in Chinese history, often serving as a foundational

factor. Daoist thought's deeper meanings and realms resonate better with individuals seeking spiritual rather than material fulfillment. Thus, these beneficial and constructive elements are also adopted by "xia," who likewise emphasize the spiritual aspect. Daoism influences "xia," but they are not the same; significant differences exist between the two. Daoism encompasses a wide array of individuals: some actively participate in the world to promote positive transformation, and others withdraw into seclusion in search of enlightenment. The latter method is inconsistent with the "xia" ethos, as "xia" individuals do not live solely for themselves; even if they cannot alter the world, they endeavor to assist others to the best of their ability.

Daoist philosophy advocates for purity and simplicity, encouraging humans to eschew superfluous mental encumbrances. This quest for authenticity deters malevolent activities and the aspiration for monumental accomplishments. When faced with events, Daoists strive to perceive their essence, focusing on objective elements, and refrain from imposing alterations on circumstances influenced by enduring forces. Rather than resisting the current, they opt to adapt and discreetly steer matters toward a more favorable outcome. Conversely, "xia" remain unwavering in their ideals irrespective of the circumstances. They neither compromise nor capitulate to individuals, circumstances, or destiny. Despite facing obstacles, they remain resolute and undeterred, and despite acknowledging the futility of their endeavors, they remain committed to taking action. They will advance unhesitatingly, determinedly executing what they deem just, prepared to confront the ultimate sacrifice without remorse.

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