

Taoism in Lee Ang's Films

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Taoism is one of the oldest orient philosophies. Taoism advocates the respects for individual differences and the diversity of life in both human beings and nature from its origin till now. This immemorial and mysterious oriental philosophy seems hardly to be presented in the films. However, Lee Ang did quite well. To some extent, Ang is the best oriental storyteller in western film industry. In this essay, I will choose three of Ang's Films to explain how Taoism exists in these works.

Keywords: Lee Ang, Taoism, Sino-western coexistence

Taoism, one of the oldest and most important Chinese philosophies, is widely thought to be originated by Laozi and inherited by Zhuangzi from Spring and Autumn Period and continues till now. Tao (Chinese character: 道) in Taoism is boundless; it presents the universal truths which contain what have been known already and have not known yet. Unlike Confucianism (which is also an important Chinese philosophy focusing on loyalty, filial piety, manner, justice, honor, and gratitude), Taoism stands for the conformity-to-nature, which means human beings should due to the physical properties, to attain the communion with nature as the basis of man's inner peace. Zhuangzi followed Laozi and became the most important philosopher in Taoism after Laozi. He built up his theory of freedom. Zhuangzi believes that the supreme value of human beings is freedom.

From Laozi to Zhuangzi, Taoism developed, but the most significant feature of their theories is identical: Taoism is all-embracing and indiscriminate which also based on the proposition of conformity to nature. In short, Taoism advocates the respects for individual differences and the diversity of life in both human beings and nature.

Lee Ang, who is the most influential Chinese director in world stage, has won Oscar Best Director twice since 2005. As an American director who was born and raised in Taiwan, it is ordinary to discover "oriental imprint" in his films. Zhang Yimou, a film director from Mainland China, once said that Ang might be the only one in Chinese language filmdom who performed well in both Chinese language and English language films in world stage (Zhang, 2008). On the one hand, it is Ang that promoted Chinese language film to a broader acceptance by westerners. On the other hand, Ang put the Chinese philosophies into his English language films to help easterners comprehend the story (because there still exist some embarrassed cultural differences between east and west even in modern times). Like the topic of Yin and Yang (which are the components of Tao, and respect the negatives and positives of the world) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the repression and release of humanity in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the choices of humanity and divinity in *Life of Pi* (2012), as

well as the family ethic in the “*Father Knows Best*” *Trilogy* (1992-1995), there is a coincidence where all of them mentioned above present the immemorial Taoism. Furthermore, this kind of oriental philosophy is hardly presented in the films which directed by Mainland China film directors. More interestingly, Ang’s oriental story might be more acceptable by the occidental audience, because of the proper coexistence of immemorial eastern thoughts and the western expression. To some extent, Lee Ang is the best oriental storyteller in western film industry.

In this essay I will analyze the tight connection in some of Lee Ang’s films with Taoism. To be specific, I will explore the different aspects of Taoism in Lee Ang’s films in the first part. And some relative reasons will be listed in the rest of the essay.

Concepts of Yin and Yang, Rigid and Soft in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon (2000) tells a story of martial-arts-society (Chinese called *Jianghu*) in historical China. Distinguished from most of Chinese martial art films that focus on the glinting and flashing fighting scene, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* adopted the heroine Yu Jiaolong as the main story line. Yu, who once was an arrogant princess, disputed for the Green Destiny with Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian at all cost. Even though Yu Jiaolong did some wrong and made serious consequences, she was still forgiven by Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian. As Lee himself said, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a film which focuses on human.

Taoism is composed by “Yin and Yang”, “Rigid and Soft” for thousands of years since Spring and Autumn Period in China. It is a great challenge to explain such an abstract Chinese concept to western people. However, Ang describes it in the film by telling some specific, understandable stories to occidental audiences.

Yin and Yang

Yin-yang is one of the most basic components of Taoism. It stands for two Chinese characters: Yin (阴) and Yang (阳). To cut a long story short, Yin stands for the human with Moon, which represents the dark, soft, negatives, and female. On the contrary, Yang stands for the human with Sun, representing the light, steady, positives, and male. Everything has the aspects of Yin and Yang. Conformity-to-nature means the balance of Yin and Yang. Only when Yin and Yang coexist harmoniously, everything (both nature and human being) can be sustained.

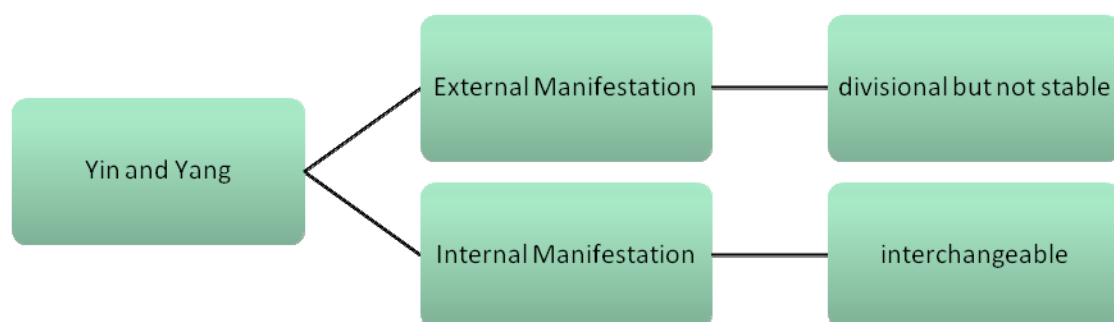


Figure 1. Relationship between Yin and Yang.

In the very beginning of the film, the swordsman Li Mubai went back from Mount Wudang which is the scared mountain for Taoists. Li just finished his personal retreat (which is an essential method to enhance the level of Taoists') there. As the Yin and Yang Theory mentioned before, in this movie, the swordsman Li Mubai represents "Yang" in gender while Yu Xiulian and Yu Jiaolong stand for "Yin". Traditional Taoism believes that Yin is soft and exquisite; on the contrary, Yang is hard and tensile. Yin and Yang cannot live without each other, just like not a single person can exist individually. However, in this film the heroines Yu Xiulian and Yu Jiaolong have the inner strength in character while Li Mubai has the inner weakness in character and behavior.

Yu Jiaolong, a girl, has outside Yin and inside Yang in herself. As a spoiled princess, she lives a wealth and royal family. It seems that she would live with the splendor for granted. However, she admires Yu Xiulian who walks all the corner of the world as a swordswoman. She practices the acrobatic skill and keeps it secret from her master Biyan Fox. Yu Jiaolong pursues the Green Destiny (Li Mubai's sword) at all costs, even fights against Yu Xiulian who treats her as a younger sister and Li Mubai who is the real owner of Green Destiny. When Yu Jiaolong finally realized that the killing is cruel and the domination of Green Destiny is meaningless, she jumped out of the cliff in Mount Wudang, the holy place of Taoists, wished to get redemption from those who were hurt by her like Li Mubai, Yu Xiulian, and relieved the guilt from Yu Jiaolong's inner heart.

Rigid and Soft

When it comes to the wuxia film, martial arts must be noticed. Compared with other Chinese wuxia film like *Hero* (2002) and *The Promise* (2005), the martial arts in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden dragon* is cultured and refined without the brutal killing. This also pointed another Taoism concept: no-kill. Also, the gender issue should not forget to mention here. It is widely accepted that in Chinese wuxia films that the wuxia world is the male-domain world: Male represents the strength, leader, and hero while female represents the weakness, contributor, and follower. However, Ang shows the other aspect of Chinese wuxia film. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, there are two main scenes of martial arts: One is between Yu Xiulian and Yu Jiaolong in the escort house; the other one is between Li Mubai and Yu Jiaolong in the bamboo forest. Compared with these two scenes, the fight between two women in the escort house is more masculine; they showed almost every kind of the weaponry like sword, broadsword, spear, etc. On the contrary, the fight between Li Mubai and Yu Jiaolong in the bamboo forest is more elegant. Bamboo is the symbol of moral integrity since Chinese ancient times. The straight bamboo often used as metaphors for those who are the men of virtue. In this scene, the elegant bamboo forest and grueling fight stand out as a strongly contrast. Li defeated Yu by faith and Tao-spirit (beyond-harmony of human and nature) without using weaponry. Both of the two scenes embody the Taoist concept of rigid and soft. To be more specific, on the one hand, as women, both Yu Xiulian and Yu Jiaolong have the inner-rigid behind their soft appearance. On the other hand, as a man, Li Mubai has the inner-soft behind his rigid appearance. This is so called Taoist "coexistence of rigid and soft".

Right and Wrong

Another distinctive feature in Chinese wuxia film is, before 2000 Chinese wuxia films used to focus on the distinct difference between right and wrong. In addition, there must exist one hero to represent justice and another hero to defeat the baddies. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, Yu Jiaolong is a stubborn princess who was incited by her master Biyan Fox to loot the holy article of Wudang. However, Yu was influenced by the kindness

of Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian. What if Li Mubai tamed Yu Jiaolong by fencing at first rather than exerting influence on her? In addition, Yu Jiaolong finally got introspection and repentance; can she always be a mischievous girl? In Ang's narration of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, everyone has the opportunity to revise and mend because every individual has the inner goodness. To this extent, it cannot be pointed out who is definitely right or wrong.

Biyan Fox seemed like a bag guy because she always wanted to kill Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian, but she did care about Yu Jiaolong (who is her apprentice and master) till she died. Yu Jiaolong seemed like an insolent and impious princess; she dared for the Green Destiny at all costs. But finally, when she realized that what she believed before was not exactly right and there still existed someone who really care about her, she started to change. The last scene of this film, Yu Jiaolong jumped out of Mount Wudang with no hesitate and anxiety to find what is so called "things work out if one only trusts". This proverb comes from Taoism initially, and it is one of the highest levels of Taoism. Taoism stands for the humanity along with divinity, because human beings are charismatic and they can make a clear distinction between right and wrong. That is why individual can always re-choose and adjust his life at any moment like Yu Jiaolong does.

Humanity: The Repression and Release in *Brokeback Mountain*

The story happened in West American 1963. Two young men named Jack and Ennis met and fell in love while wrangling sheep. In recent Chinese thoughts, queer love violates moral principles. Unlike the ethical pressure in Chinese queer love, they themselves repress the queer love between two cowboys. Most Chinese gay will choose marriage at last because it is responsible to produce heirs for a man. However, Jack and Ennis in *Brokeback Mountain* married with women because they try to regress to a normal life. In other words, the repressions and pressures are all from themselves; they do not want to differ from other "straight guy". But finally, both of them are failed.

When it comes to the reason why they struggled to get rid of the gay identity, Ennis saw the discrimination against the gay then the brutal murder in his childhood. It left a deep impression in his mind and he has been struggling with this memory for 20 years. This repression and peace was destructed after meeting his pasturing partner Jack. Jack seems more courageous and brave in this gay relationship. It is Jack who evocates Ennis inner feeling.

However, this queer relationship temporarily ended when they finished their work in Brokeback Mountain until four years later. When they met each other again, they realized how important the love between them is although they both married with women and lived a straight life. Nevertheless, it is hard to keep the deep secret in one's heart. So does Ennis. He inadvertently turned over his wife and had sex with her in the rear-entry position (which widely used in gay sex) at night.

To keep a secret is hard, but it is even torment when the secret revealed. Ennis's wife Alma found his husband and Jack kissing in the corner of the wall. A few years later, they divorced. Ennis crumbled and shouted to his ex-wife because the gayness, which he refused to adapt to, was found. Ennis is reluctant to become an unusual man to the public, but he cannot quit Jack in his heart.

To my perspective, *Brokeback Mountain* is a movie that calls for the basic rights of human. This is somehow catering to the conformity-to-nature principle in Taoism. The concept of Yin and Yang which I mentioned in the

first part, is not only represented the gender distinction, but also stands for the inner property of human being. In other words, everyone has both Yin and Yang in himself. When Yin and Yang are balance, things will go naturally. The world can run normally only if Yin and Yang coexist and balance. However, male does not only mean Yang. When Yin and Yang are balanced in the relationship of two people, they do not have to be different genders, which means even two males can balance Yin and Yang. Jack is more active in this relationship, which makes him play a role more like Yang. Also, Taoism advocates the activity of human. In the movie, when Ennis lost Jack, he became low-spirited. This situation is imbalance in yin-yang perspective. Just like Ang said in Oscar Awards: *Brokeback Mountain* is about not just all the gay men and women whose love are denied by society, but just as important, the greatness of love itself.

In fact, Taoism is different to detail and clarify, because it stands in a universal perspective. Taoism advocates the conformity to nature. It can be comprehended that you are what you are, and you just follow your nature property. Taoism is not explicitly support homosexuality. But that every choice obeys the nature is reasonable and acceptable in Tao by Zhuangzi. We cannot claim that we are born with homosexual love or heterosexual love, but it is quite sure that we are born with the ability of love. Love cannot be repressed by conventional principle. It is hurt for queer love men and women to suppress their emotion, but it is even heart-broken for them to be discriminated and despised.

In the last scene, Ennis's eyes filled with tears and looked at the shirt (which is the remnant of Jack) and the postcard of Mount Brokeback then said "Jack, I swear". This scene reminds me the theory of "White Space (留白)" by Zhuangzi in Taoism. "White Space" is one of the forms of Chinese classical art. This theory is widely used in Chinese painting. It means to leave something blank to the imagination. Even though Jack is gone, his shirt is still surrounded by Ennis's. That means "there is still a bit of you being in me and a bit of I being in you" (你中有我, 我中有你). The sight of two shirts would always remind Ennis of Jack, along with the old days in Brokeback Mountain. It is the most classic and touching scene in this movie. It seems like that in the very last, when his children got the best end-result, Ennis released his emotion eventually. What impresses me the most is that every kinds of love should be respected if the love is pure and innocent. Ennis and Jack are not only the symbols of queer love but also the love itself. Gay men and women cannot be the sacrificial objects in the evolution of human rights. This goes against both conformity-to-nature and human instinct in some ways.

Ennis's repression finally released at the end of the film. It is a tough story but has a tender ending. To tolerate, to forgive, and to release is the ultimate intelligence of Taoism. Everything submits to the nature should not be repressed. Love is one of the most beautiful words in this word. Love is supposed to be the great integrate between soul and body no matter whether it is heterosexuality or homosexuality.

The Choice of Humanity and Divinity: *Life of Pi*

The film *Life of Pi* tells a story about a teenager named Piscine who struggled with adverse nature in the Pacific Ocean by the faith. In the eastern world, "faith" is a miraculous word. In traditional Buddhism and Taoism concept, one can have strength to be recovered from adversity by real belief in faith.

Pi has the same pronunciation with the term of mathematics " π " which is a non-repeating and non-terminating irrational number. It shares something in common with Tao: irregular and illimitable. In the beginning of the film, Piscine lives in an ambivalent family. His father believes that religion is lying; only science

can be trusted. In contrast, Pi turns to the only believer in his family after talking with a priest. Pi's mother is a classical oriental housewife. She stands "in-between" her husband and Pi and believes that science can teach people more about what is out there but not what is in one's heart.

The film tells two versions of Pi's survival. The difference between the two is that one calls for the divinity and the other calls for the humanity. In the first version, Pi drifted in a lifeboat with a tiger, an orangutan, a zebra, and a hyena because of a shipwreck. The first version is extremely strange and unbelievable. Because of hunger, animals kill each other for life. Only Pi and the tiger survived; even though they are competitors, they use all means to struggle for the food and life space. However, they are also companions; according to Pi's saying, he cannot live without the tiger and he found its spirituality. What moves the audiences the most, after reaching the shore, the tiger left only with a glance over Pi. It is kind of metaphor; the tiger is like a god who protects and helps Pi to survive. But it is the time to leave when the god (tiger) makes sure that he is safe at last. To some extent, it can be called divinity. As a person of faith, he always believes that there must exist some magic power to help him pull through in secret. And it corresponds to one of concepts of Taoism "Xin Cheng Ze Ling (心诚则灵)" which means holding your faith and things will go to your way.

In the second version, the story is brutal, inhumane, and seems realistic. After the shipwreck, there are four people jumped to the lifeboat actually: Pi, Pi's mother, chief, and sailor. The four people correspond to the four animals in the first version: Pi corresponds to tiger, Pi's mother meets with orangutan, and chief and sailor stand for the hyena and zebra respectively. The harsh environment awakes their inner devil. They struggled, battled, and killed. No one survived but Pi. This version of the story seems more credible based on the human instinct. It is the life instinct for survival. The tiger seems to present the inner devil in Pi's heart. After their safety, the tiger left along with the inner barbarity in Pi's and everything returns back to the origin.

These two versions of the story have the different plots but the same ending: Pi survived. The first one is kind but unbelievable; the second one is cruel but expectable. It is not mandatory that which one has to be accepted. Just like Pi said, if you choose the first one, that means you follow the faith. It is somehow related to the "Eliminate Yuen Kam (涤除玄鉴)" Theory by Laozi. It means to eliminate distractions and follow your heart. Taoists believe that living creatures should not be restrained; they should have the highly liberty to choose and to give up. To Pi, no matter what kind of version he chose, he followed his faith and belief. Likewise, to the audiences, what kind of version they prefer, they followed their internal guidance. I prefer to interpret the film in this way: What you believe is what you are willing to believe. In other words, it also meets the conformity-to-nature theory of Taoism. On the one hand, the first version of Pi's survival is reasonable because it complies with the inner-kindness of human (which is the nature of human instinct). On the other hand, the second version is also acceptable because the fight between human-human or human-nature obeys the principle of "survival of the fittest" (物竞天择).

Water is one of the most important symbols in the film. Pi's name comes from a swimming pool. His drift is also closely related to the water. On the one hand, it is the water that made boat sink. On the other hand, water saves Pi and other animals' lives: bring them living necessities. However, water is not only the necessity of subsistence but also has a deep meaning in spirit. In Tao's philosophy, water is the origin of the world. Nothing can live without water. Water benefits everything without evoking conflicts or resistance. Just like Pi recalled that his uncle gave the name to Pi to wish he would have a clean soul. Pi and tiger's drift actually present Pi's struggle

to live. It is the water baptism that reminds Pi to envisage good and evil. Taoism advocates that the main character of the mascot is water (上善若水). It is water to eliminate the evil thoughts and improve the soul. It also reflects the traditional oriental philosophy like Buddhism and Taoism which both advocate the coexistence between human and nature—one can hardly defeat the nature, but can coexist with it.

Conclusion

Film, as one of the art forms, plays a more important role in trans-culture communication than before, and it is actually the symptom of globalization in art and culture. The experience of living in western world lead to that Ang has multiple perspectives to accept both of eastern and western culture and lifestyle. It is the reason why Ang can explain the complex oriental Taoism so well and can blend these two kinds of cultures and traditions together properly in his films.

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