

TAOISM THEMES IN MODERN CHINESE CINEMATOGRAPHY

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Abstract: The paper demonstrates some peculiarities of Taoism, a Chinese national religion, in its intersection with Chinese cinematography. The paper analyses how Taoism themes influence modern Chinese films and how they are interpreted in plots, characters and symbolism of these films.

Key words: Taoism, traditions and beliefs, religion, philosophy, cinematography, symbolism.

Taoism is one of the most ancient national Chinese religions that have ever existed. It is widely accepted that a national religion is named as one if it is closely linked with a particular nation or country and its capability of spreading in other regions is limited. There are two main types of national religions: religions, to which the nationality of the followers and accompanying social organization are essential. The second type isn't as strictly linked to the particular country or specific social organization as the first one, thus in certain conditions it can be spread through the borders of its initial localization (Торчинов, 1993). At first sight, Taoism is the second type religion: it isn't linked to any particular nation, although its organization and doctrines aren't put into system, as we can see in Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. Besides, Taoists aren't inclined to send missionaries to convert other nations into Taoists.

To put a firm ground under the argument that Taoism is the national Chinese religion, we can have a close look at religious and philosophical Taoism. Nowadays it is widely accepted that religious aspects of Taoism have a long-time run genesis and appeared before Taoists' philosophical concepts (Торчинов, 1993). These concepts, which are found in such works as Lao-Zi and Zhuang-Zi, only rationalized religious beliefs.

Taoism has never been a uniformed philosophical and religious teaching. During the course of its existence, there were various "offsprings" which claimed to have the only righteous teaching, in spite of the others. The main cause was that according to the followers' perception, after the creation of the Universe, Lao-Zun, a celestial honorable God, started to occasionally reincarnate on Earth. The anticipation of Lao-Zun's coming to establish a kingdom of well-being and prosperity to all kinds of people, regardless of their origins, was one of the reasons of mass peasants' uprisings. It is necessary to mention that Taoist movement, Way of the Celestial Masters, claimed that its founder, Zhang Daoling, was the last incarnation of Lao-Zun. Thus this teaching pretended to be an orthodox Taoism teaching (Цзянь Вэнь et al., 2002).

One of the key aspects of Taoism is inner and outer alchemy. Outer alchemy is a laboratory practice aimed at the creation of the potion of immortality. There was a belief that all kinds of metal are immature gold and they are bound to get ripe in the depths of the Earth. Gold is a metal that is exposed to corrosion, so if an alchemist drinks cinnabar he either prolongs his life or eventually becomes immortal. The ripening of gold in the depths of the earth requires 4320 years, but an alchemist can get it faster, after 360 days in a retort. Practitioners of the Inner alchemy believed that an immortality potion can be created in the body of an adept through the yoga and psycho-physical training. These adepts believe that alchemists' model of the Universe can be presented in the adept's body. Those who already transformed their bodies acquire supernatural powers, such as levitation, extra physical power, foreseeing etc. Eventually they become "xian", immortals (Торчинов, 1999). Among folk beliefs an image of Taoist, a wise man, magician, protector was very popular. It is no surprise that Taoists often lead folk's uprising. Also, national dynasties often used Taoism as an ideological and patriotic support during the fights against the outsiders.

There are discussions held among academics regarding the place and role of Taoism in the modern Chinese society (Малявин, 1985). The difficulty of this question lies in many sources. Firstly, researchers divide all Taoism teachings into two main groups: profane and temple (or monkish). In “Profane” Taoism the idea of social service is essential. Taoists live among ordinary people and their religious activity isn’t strictly regulated. In “Monkish” Taoism self-improvement and ascetics are important. Taoists live in monasteries, study mystical practices and abandon all profane pleasures. The first type of Taoism was more successful in terms of expansion. It has an effective form of preaching. Also this type includes social Taoism communities which include actual followers, profane followers and scientists as well.

Nowadays China undergoes profound growth of national self-consciousness. This process is directly connected to the China’s transformation into one of the world’s leading countries. But modernization doesn’t exclude, on the contrary, it stimulates the growing interest to the history and traditions. Chinese cinematography can serve as an example of these both processes. Films based on history synopsis are always popular and attract much audience in China. With the help of these films Chinese society can get an appropriately interpreted and presented picture of the days past. To other countries Chinese cinematography, after all, is a source through which traditional Chinese values and traditions can be comprehended. In many popular films whose synopsis is based on historical events themes, plots, images, allusions are one way or another connected to Taoism. Therefore, it is worth examining how philosophical and religious teaching that have been an inseparable part of Chinese’ everyday life for over two thousand years was presented in a few most popular films recently released.

A hit-movie “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” represents its own version of Taoism metaphysics. The main hero, Li Mu Bai, is the Taoist monk who obtains supernatural powers. In the opening scenes he said that during his meditation he didn’t reach enlightenment. Instead he immersed into the great grievance, so he decided to abandon his sword. It is possible that in meditation the “celestial immortals” (“Xian”) showed him to what end his unreasonable intervention into naturalness might lead. There are two intersecting love stories, between Li Mu Bai and Shu Lian, between Lo and Zheng. But both followed false ideals and didn’t let out their feelings which were regulated by social rules. Thus they didn’t follow the Dao, Way, and their stories ended tragically. Also, there is an important scene in the film, in which Lo tells Zheng about a belief that if a man jumps off the mountain with the Taoist temple on, then his wish comes true. Moreover, instead of dying he would fly away and would never come back. At the end of the film, when Zheng realized that she attempted to walk away from the Way and subsequently by her unconsidered actions she caused the death of Li Mu Bai, she jumped off the mountain, hoping that her last wish would come true. “The Way lies where there is no Way”.

Film “Hero” also experienced profound influences of Taoism. According to the story synopsis, Nameless, Broken Sword, Flying Snow are all considered to be great warriors. They can levitate, also they have supernatural strength, speed and stamina. It is not said directly that they practiced Taoists’ inner or outer alchemy or meditated, but without it they would have never gained such extraordinary powers. But true Taoists gain these powers through obeying the principles of Taoism, “nonaction”, “naturalness”, abandoning ordinary ways of perceiving, etc. So their efforts to achieve goals through killing are unsuccessful, as we can see in the film “Crouching tiger, Hidden dragon”.

In the film, the main antagonist, the emperor Qin Shi Huangdi confessed that he wanted to bring all quarrels and wars to an end. The only way to do so is to unify all lands. He is considered to be a cruel and horrific emperor, but he has a noble goal that corresponds to Taoists’ idealistic image of the established country of “Taiping Jing”, where emperor’s government is unseen and undetectable, and his nation is satisfied and is not interested in anything and follows the principles of “nonaction”. Nameless had an opportunity to kill the emperor and fulfill his revenge, but he understood the emperor’s ideals, the only man who could understand Qin Shi-Huang-Di. He sacrificed himself for the nation’s future. It is a historical fact that Qin Shi-Huang favored Taoists and disliked Confucianism. Also, he hoped to obtain an immortality potion.

It is worth looking at the film’s color set. In the first story about the battle between Nameless, Flying Snow and Broken Sword the red color prevails. Red is the color of passion, fertility and female principle. Vermillion color, close to red color, is a centerpiece in Chinese alchemy. The second story is “colored” in blue, which is the color of water and female cosmogony principle. In the last story the main color is white. It represents the “hollowness” of Dao, a seeker’s purity to comprehend the Way.

But apart from Taoism concepts, white also represents the West and mourning in China. The reason of it lies in ancient Chinese history. Back then, China was a small country and was surrounded by vicious tribes from the north and the west. China's emperors and most local citizens and peasants believed their country to be the center of the Earth: the Chinese "Zhongguo", "Middle/center country" is a direct proof to that. So this negative association with the West comes not only from the wars with some European countries in the mid-19th century, but also from the ancient confrontations with neighbors.

Other scenes are mostly colored in white and black. These colors stress that all that all events in the film are in frames of ordinary life. Also, we should not forget about the concept of Yin – dark energy, power and Yang – good, light energy and power. These powers are constantly intersecting, passing into each other, reaching balance and providing harmonic state of all things. Black and white can emphasize the fatalism of living: in the end all will reunite with Dao.

The main theme of the film "Ashes of time" is the correlation between dream and reality. In Taoist book Zhuang Zi there is a proverb about Zhuang Zi and a butterfly. Zhuang Zi puts this correlation under question, meaning that our perceptive can be deceptive. He could not say for sure whether he was a butterfly in his dream or a butterfly fell into sleep and in this dream it envisioned itself as Zhuang Zi. In the film, Murong Yang and Murong Yin are the same person. Murong Yang is a noble warrior, Murong Yin is a cruel and giddy young thing. At the end of their story the conflict of the two sides of this person comes to the point of no return. She could not distinguish reality from dream. Later she became a great warrior who used her own reflection in the water in her trainings. In reality, she just desperately wanted to know on which sides of the water she and her reflection are. The main color in the film is yellow, which represents the emperor's rule, but in the ancient China this color was associated with the decline of life and nether world.

Taoism themes can be found in other films, too ("House of flying daggers", "Little Big Soldier" etc.). Why are they so popular in modern Chinese cinematography? Apparently, the reason lays in the deep connection between Taoism traditions and national mentality. Taoism themes are not reflected only in plots, but also in peculiarities of footage, color and light symbolism. So, as we can see, Taoism, one of the most ancient philosophic-religious teachings, is still relevant in modern society.

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