

## Symbolic Memory and Cultural Philosophy: The Philosophical Implications of Taoist Images

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the symbolic meanings and cultural inheritance functions of Taoist imagery from the perspective of Taoist philosophy. Taoist philosophy, centered on concepts such as Dao, natural non-action, and the dialectical relationship between Yin and Yang, provides a profound theoretical framework for interpreting Taoist visual symbols. Through analyzing elements like deities, ritual instruments, and imagery in Taoist art, this study reveals how these visual representations embody Taoist philosophical ideas. For instance, the Tai Chi symbolizes the harmony of Yin and Yang, while the Sanqing statues reflect the cosmic order and moral teachings of Dao. Taoist imagery not only serves as a religious medium to reinforce faith and preserve cultural memory but also acts as a social guide promoting harmony between humanity and nature, as well as ethical values. However, contemporary challenges such as cultural globalization and technological limitations necessitate innovative strategies like digital preservation and integration with creative industries to ensure its sustainable heritage.

**Keywords:** Taoist Philosophy; Taoist Imagery; Symbolic Meaning; Cultural Inheritance; Natural Non-Action; Religious Art.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As an important part of traditional Chinese philosophy, Taoist philosophy has a long history and is broad and profound. Since Lao Tzu put forward the profound idea of "Tao can be Tao, extraordinary Tao" in the pre-Qin period, Taoist philosophy has profoundly influenced the way of thinking and values of Chinese with its unique views on the universe, nature and life. It advocates the concepts of conforming to nature, governing by inaction, and returning to the basics, providing people with a life attitude that transcends the mundane and pursues spiritual freedom. As an important carrier of Taoist culture, Taoist images are a visual presentation of Taoist beliefs and teachings. It covers various forms such as statues, talismans, murals, prayer flags, etc., and is widely used in Taoist palaces, Taoist classics and folk belief activities. With their unique shapes, colors and symbols, these images contain rich symbolic meanings and are visual expressions of Taoist thought and culture. The shaping of Taoist

gods is often based on the Taoist immortal system and teachings, through facial expressions, clothing, posture and other details to show the sacred characteristics and extraordinary abilities of the gods, such as the Sanqing statues, which represent the highest Taoist gods Yuan Shi Tianzun, Lingbao Tianzun and Daode Tianzun, their images are solemn, symbolizing different aspects of the Tao and the order of the universe; The talisman is a mysterious symbol, which is believed to have the effects of warding off evil spirits, praying for blessings, and curing diseases, and its intricate lines and patterns contain Taoist spells and beliefs.

Taoist murals depict Taoist fairy stories, myths and legends and practice scenes with vivid pictures, which not only have artistic value, but also play a role in spreading Taoist teachings and educating believers (Kohn, 1992a). The study of Taoist images from the perspective of Taoist philosophy is of great necessity and unique value. Taoist philosophy provides a profound theoretical basis and ideological framework for the interpretation of Taoist images. Many elements in Taoist imagery, such as yin and yang, the five elements, and the eight trigrams, are closely related to the concepts and ideas of Taoist philosophy. By analyzing these elements from the perspective of Taoist philosophy, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic and cultural connotations conveyed by Taoist images.

The concept of yin and yang is one of the core of Taoist philosophy, and in Taoist images, the interdependence and mutual transformation of yin and yang are often reflected through the contrast of black and white, movement and static, virtual and real, such as the Taiji diagram, which shows the balance and harmony of yin and yang with concise and profound graphics, symbolizing the movement and change of all things in the universe (Creel, 1956). The study of Daoist images from the perspective of Daoist philosophy helps to reveal the intrinsic connection between Daoist culture and traditional Chinese culture. Taoist philosophy is an important foundation of traditional Chinese culture, and Taoism, as a religious embodiment of Taoist thought, carries the genes of traditional Chinese culture. Through the study of Taoist images, we can better understand the diversity and richness of traditional Chinese culture, and the important role that Taoist philosophy plays in it. The auspicious patterns such as dragons, phoenixes, and unicorns that often appear in Taoist images are not only symbols of Taoist beliefs, but also auspicious and beautiful symbols in traditional Chinese culture, reflecting the yearning and pursuit of a better life in traditional Chinese culture.

## 2. RELATED WORK

In the study of Taoist philosophy, scholars at home and abroad have made great achievements. Domestic scholars have deeply explored the connotation and value of Taoist philosophy from multiple perspectives. Mr. Chen Guying's "Lao Tzu Commentary and Translation" provides a detailed commentary and translation of Lao Tzu, and deeply explains the core ideas of Lao Tzu's Taoist philosophy, such as "Tao". The concept of non-action and the political concept of rule by doing nothing provide an important textual reference for later generations to study Taoist philosophy. His "Zhuangzi Commentary and Translation" also comprehensively interprets Zhuangzi's thoughts, showing Zhuangzi's free spiritual realm and unique philosophical thinking. In *The Course of Beauty*, Li Zehou discusses the influence of Taoist philosophy on the aesthetic concept of Chinese art from the perspective of aesthetics, and points out that the pursuit of nature and freedom in Taoist thought has shaped the unique aesthetic taste and artistic conception pursuit of Chinese art, such as the creation of ethereal and distant artistic conception in traditional Chinese landscape painting, which is deeply influenced by Taoist philosophy (Chang, 2011). Foreign scholars have also shown a strong interest in Taoist philosophy. American scholar Roger T. Ames, in his works such as "The Tao Is Not Far Away: Confucius Thought from the Perspective of Comparative Philosophy", uses the methods of comparative philosophy to compare Taoist philosophy with Western philosophy, providing a new perspective for the study of Taoist philosophy. He emphasized the harmonious coexistence between man and nature in Taoist philosophy, which is in stark contrast to the dichotomy of subject and object in Western philosophy, which helps to break down cultural barriers and promote communication and understanding between different cultures. The German sinologist Rudolf G. Wagner has conducted an in-depth study of Laozi's thought, starting from the analysis of texts and combining the historical and cultural background to discuss the formation and development of Laozi's thought, and his research results have an important influence in the international sinology community (Kohn, 1993). In the field of Taoist image research, domestic research has made some progress. Scholars have analyzed Daoist images from the perspective of art, religion and other disciplines. Wang Yucheng's "Exploration of Taoist Law Seals and Tokens" systematically studies the image symbols such as Taoist law seals and tokens, revealing the religious connotations and cultural meanings behind these images, such as Taoist law seals are believed

to have mysterious magic powers, and are important tools for Taoist priests to exercise magic and communicate with the gods, and their patterns and words contain rich Taoist doctrines and belief elements. From the perspective of art history, Li Li's "On the Basic Theoretical Issues of Taoist Art History" discusses the development process, stylistic characteristics and relationship between Taoist art and Taoist thought, and provides a theoretical framework and research ideas for the study of Taoist images. He believes that Taoist art is not only the expression of artistic creation, but also the material carrier of Taoist thought and belief, and through the study of Taoist images, we can gain an in-depth understanding of the connotation and evolution of Taoist culture. There are also unique results in the study of Taoist images abroad. In the book "Xiuzhen Diagram - Taoism and the Human Body", the French scholar Catherine Despeux conducted an in-depth study of the content related to the cultivation of the human body in Taoist images and analyzed the TaoShe pointed out that the human body cultivation diagram in the Taoist image is the intuitive embodiment of the Taoist Inner Dan cultivation theory, and shows the meridians, acupuncture points, and cultivation methods and processes inside the human body in the form of images (Kirkland, 1992). Martin J. Powers, an American scholar, studies Daoist images from the perspective of cultural context, and believes that the production and development of Daoist images are closely related to the social and cultural background of the time, and through the study of Daoist images, we can understand the social thoughts, religious beliefs and cultural exchanges in different historical periods. In his research, he focuses on the comparative analysis of Daoist images with other cultural and artistic forms of the same period, revealing the role of Daoist images in cultural transmission and exchange. However, there are still some gaps and deficiencies in the current research. In terms of the correlation between Taoist philosophy and Daoist images, although some scholars have realized the connection between the two, the research is not in-depth and systematic enough. Most of the studies only stay at the surface of the elaboration, but fail to dig deep into the specific embodiment of Taoist philosophical thought in Daoist images and how Daoist images convey the profound connotation of Daoist philosophy in visual form. For example, in the study of the Taoist Sanqing statues, although it is known that the Sanqing statues represent the supreme gods of Taoism, there is a lack of in-depth and detailed analysis of how their images embody the Taoist philosophy of the origin of the universe and the movement of the Tao. In terms of the research on the cultural inheritance function of Taoist images, the existing research mainly focuses on the

religious significance and artistic value of Taoist images, and there are relatively few studies on the specific role and influence mechanism of Taoist images in folk beliefs, social life and cultural inheritance (Ely, 2009). Taoist images are widely used in folk belief activities and have a profound impact on people's values and behaviors, but the current research on this aspect is not comprehensive and in-depth, and fails to fully reveal the important value and unique role of Taoist images in cultural inheritance.

### 3. THE INTRINSIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TAOIST PHILOSOPHY AND TAOIST IMAGES

#### 3.1 The Core Tenets of Taoist Philosophy

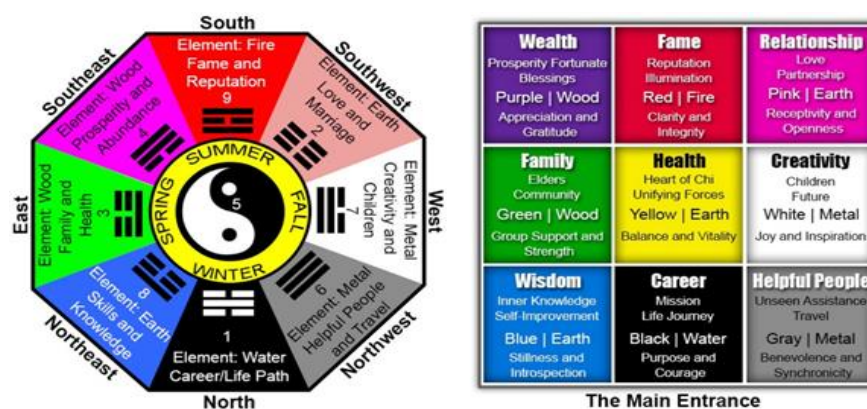
"Tao" is a central concept of Taoist philosophy and is regarded as the root and essence of all things in the universe. Lao Tzu proposed at the beginning of the Tao Te Ching that "the Tao is the Tao, the very Tao; The name can be named, and the name is not very famous", emphasizing the metaphysical abstraction and transcendence of the "Tao". As an ontology that precedes the existence of heaven and earth, "Tao" is the fundamental law of the operation of the universe, which is formless and formless, but contains infinite vitality and power. In Taoist philosophy, "Tao" is not only the root of all things in the universe, but also the law and criterion of the operation of all things. Zhuangzi said in "Zhuangzi Zhibei Tour": "Dong Guozi asked Zhuangzi and said: What is the so-called Tao, what is evil? Zhuangzi said: Everywhere. Dong Guo Zi said: It can be later. Zhuangzi said: In the ants. Said: What a wickedness? Said: In the barnyard barnyard Said: How is it getting worse and worse? Said: In the rubble. He said, "How evil is it?" Said: Drowning in. Through this dialogue, Zhuangzi emphasized that the Tao is omnipresent and exists in all things in the world, whether it is tiny ants and barnyard trees, or seemingly lowly rubbles and dung, all contain "Tao" exists. This shows that the Tao, as a universal law, runs through all things in the universe and guides the growth, development, and change of all things (Schipper, 1993). Natural non-action is one of the important ideas of Taoist philosophy, which emphasizes conforming to nature, not deliberately intervening, and letting things develop according to their own laws. Lao Tzu put forward the view that "Tao is natural", believing that "Tao" takes nature as the law and naturally exists and operates. "Man is the law of the earth, the earth is the law of the sky, the heaven is the law of the Tao, and the Tao is the law of nature", the "nature" here It does not refer to the natural world, but to a state of naturalness and self-inaction. The Tao runs naturally, it does not carry any subjective will

or purpose, nor does it deliberately pursue anything, but only allows all things to grow, develop and change naturally. The idea of natural inaction does not advocate people's passive inaction, but advocates that people should give full play to their subjective initiative on the basis of respecting the laws of nature. Taoism emphasizes "doing nothing without doing nothing", that is, by not deliberately pursuing certain goals, it is possible to achieve greater deeds. This is because when people conform to the laws of nature and do not confront nature, they are often better able to give full play to their abilities and realize their own values (Zhihua, 2012). For example, in agricultural production, farmers can obtain a bumper harvest by following the growth laws of crops and carrying out agricultural activities such as sowing, watering, and fertilizing in a timely manner; However, if the laws of nature are blindly planted and managed, it may lead to reduced crop yields or even no harvest. The dialectical concept of yin and yang is a profound Taoist understanding of the nature of the world, which believes that everything in the world is composed of the interaction of two opposing forces, yin and yang. Yin and Yang are opposed to each other and unified with each other, and there is a relationship of interdependence and mutual transformation between them. There is a cloud in the Book of Changes: "One yin and one yang is the 'Tao'", which clearly points out that the interaction of yin and yang is the fundamental law of the operation of all things in the universe. The opposition of yin and yang is reflected in the fact that they represent two opposing attributes and forces. The mutual transformation of yin and yang is an important part of the dialectical concept of yin and yang. Taoists believe that yin and yang can be transformed into each other under certain conditions, that is, "the extremes of things must be opposed". (Ziporyn, 2003) When things develop to a certain extent, yang can be transformed into yin, and yin can also be transformed into yang. In nature, the change of seasons is the embodiment of the mutual transformation of yin and yang. Yang energy is at its peak in summer, but as time passes, yang energy gradually declines and yin energy gradually increases, thus entering autumn; In autumn, the yin energy is at its peak, and in the winter, the yin energy reaches its peak, at which time the yang energy begins to grow, and with the gradual growth of the yang energy, it enters the spring. This inter-transformation of yin and yang drives the cycle and change of the natural world. The dialectical concept of yin and yang also embodies the wholeness and balance of things. Yin and Yang interact with each other, and together form an organic whole, and the balance between them is the basis for the stable development of things. If yin and yang are out of balance, it will lead to

imbalance and chaos in things. In the human body, the balance of yin and yang is the key to good health, and if yin and yang are out of balance, it will cause various diseases. Therefore, TCM emphasizes the treatment of diseases by adjusting the balance of yin and yang to restore the human body to health. In nature, the balance of the ecosystem is also the embodiment of the balance of yin and yang, if human beings overexploit natural resources and destroy the ecological environment, it will break the balance of yin and yang, leading to the emergence of ecological crisis (Kohn, 1992b).

### 3.2 The Mapping of Taoist Philosophies by Taoist Images

As shown in Figure1, in Taoist images, Tai Chi Tu is the most typical representative of Taoist philosophical ideas embodied by symbols. The Taiji diagram is composed of two fish-shaped patterns in black and white, the white part represents the yang part, the black part represents the yin part, and the S-shaped curve in the middle separates and connects the two. This concise and meaningful graphic vividly illustrates the Taoist concept of the interdependence and transformation of yin and yang. The white yang fish contains a black fish eye, and the black yin fish contains a white fish eye, symbolizing the yang in the yin and the yin in the yang, and the yin and yang are not absolute opposites, but contain and penetrate each other. This symbolic presentation intuitively expresses the Taoist understanding of the nature of the world, that is, everything in the world is composed of the interaction of the two opposing forces of yin and yang, and the balance and harmony of yin and yang are the basis for the stable development of things (Yang et al., 2019). As the Tao Te Ching says: "All things are negative yin and embrace yang, and the impulse is harmonious", Tai Chi Tu concretizes this philosophical idea in the form of images, so that people can more intuitively understand the Taoist concept of yin and yang.



**Figure 1:** The Connotation of Taoist Images

The Bagua diagram is the core symbol of Taoism, which is composed of

eight basic hexagrams: Qian, Kun, Zhen, Xun, Kan, Li, Gen and Dui, each of which is combined with a unique three hexagrams, corresponding to different things and attributes. Dry like the sky, yang, strong, kun like the earth, yin, soft, vibration like thunder, Xun like the wind in, Kan for the water depression, away from the fire beauty, Gen as a mountain, to RuozhePleased. The eight trigrams are interrelated and constrained, constructing the Taoist cognitive system of all things in the universe, and the sixty-four hexagrams derived from it show the complexity and changeability of things. The Book of Changes uses gossip to interpret nature, society, and life, deduce trends, and guide behavior, showing Taoism's deep insight into the order of the universe and the laws of nature. Mountains and rivers symbolize the way of nature in Taoist images and embody the connotation of Taoist philosophy. Taoist landscape painting is not simply a depiction of scenery, but uses mountains, rivers, and clouds to convey the awe of nature and the pursuit of the Tao. The mountain peaks are towering, symbolizing the unfathomable and infinite power of the Tao; The river is endless, implying the eternal change of the Tao and giving birth to all things; The clouds and mist are shrouded, creating a mysterious and ethereal artistic conception of the Tao. For example, Huang Gongwang's "Fuchun Mountain Dwelling Map" vividly depicts the scenery of mountains and rivers interdependent, from which the viewer can understand the Taoist concept of conforming to nature and returning to the truth, and feel the quiet and far-reaching realm. In Taoist images, elements such as pine trees, cranes, and plum blossoms are also metaphorically expressed. The pine tree symbolizes longevity and tenacity, inspiring people to persevere in difficult situations; The crane symbolizes longevity, auspiciousness and transcendence, carrying the Taoist pursuit of longevity and spiritual transcendence; The plum blossom represents nobility and tenacity, demonstrating Taoism's admiration for noble character. These elements are integrated into the palace murals, combined with teachings, to create a religious atmosphere, to convey Taoist ideas and moral concepts, so that Taoist images become a unique carrier of the integration of thought and art (Kirkland, 1986).

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF TAOIST IMAGES

##### 4.1 The Symbolism of the Image of the Deity

##### 4.1.1 Statue of the Three Qing Gods

The Sanqing statues occupy a supreme position in the Taoist immortal



system and are the core symbols of Taoist beliefs, as shown in Figure 2, which are the Yuan Shi Tianzun, Lingbao Tianzun and Daode Tianzun. Their images are not only the crystallization of artistic creation, but also the embodiment of Taoist philosophical thought, which contains profound symbolic meaning.



**Figure 2:** Statue of Sanqing

Yuan Shi Tianzun, the head of the three Qings, often sits on the lotus throne, surrounded by auspiciousness. His countenance is solemn and kind, his eyes are deep and serene, and he has insight into the mysteries of the universe. Dressed in a gorgeous robe embroidered with the sun, moon and stars, mountains and rivers, symbolizing the order of the universe; The chaotic element bead in his hand represents the "infinite" state of the initial chaos of the universe. In Taoist philosophy, Yuan Shi Tianzun is the embodiment of "Tao", as the Tao Te Ching says, "There are things mixed, and are born from nature." can be the mother of the world", symbolizing the origin of all things that transcend time and space and eternal existence, and is the source of the universe. Lingbao Tianzun, that is, the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty, holds Ruyi in his hand, his face is kind, and he exudes a compassionate and peaceful atmosphere. The costumes are exquisite and bright, implying that they are rich in wisdom and infinite vitality (Wang & Stringer, 2000). Ruyi in the hand can give people auspiciousness and meet good wishes. From the perspective of Taoist philosophy, he adheres to the will of the Yuan Shi Tianzun, promotes the movement of the "Tao" and the generation of all things, makes the chaotic universe differentiate yin and yang, creates all things in heaven and earth, symbolizes the laws and order of the universe, and is the key promoter of the growth and development of all things. Dust can sweep away the dust of the soul and guide the return to pure nature. Its image embodies Lao Tzu's ideas of "governing by

inaction" and "Taoism and nature", representing the highest realm of moral practice, and is a moral model and spiritual teacher. By disseminating the teachings of Taoism, we persuade people to conform to nature, abandon worldly desires, and pursue inner peace and freedom, and remind people to adhere to the bottom line of morality and improve their self-cultivation, so as to achieve the state of unity with the "Tao", as stated in the Tao Te Ching.

#### 4.1.2 Statue of the Four Gods

The Four Emperors are the four gods who assist the "Jade Emperor" in the Taoist Heavenly Realm, as shown in Figure 3. They are the Arctic Ziwei Emperor, the Antarctic Immortal Emperor, the Gouchen Shanggong Emperor and the Chengtian Emperor of the Later Earth. They have an important position in the Taoist system of immortals, and the symbolism of their idols is also closely linked to Taoist philosophy, reflecting the Daoist deep understanding of the rule of the heavenly realm and the protection of the earth.



**Figure 3:** Four Imperial Statues

The Arctic Ziwei Emperor's beliefs originate from the ancient Chinese worship of the stars. His idol usually wears a crown on his head, wears court clothes, and his face is Zhuang Ziwei Emperor in the North Pole Zhongtian Ziwei Palace, and his shrine is full of majesty. He is in charge of the latitude and longitude of the heavens, the sun, the moon and the stars, commanding the stars of the Three Realms and the gods of mountains and rivers, and can call the wind and rain, and serve the thunder, lightning, ghosts and gods, just like the center of the universe, dominating the operation of celestial bodies, symbolizing the absolute control of the cosmic order. In Taoist philosophy, all things in heaven and earth follow the law, and Emperor Ziwei is the embodiment of this law, ensuring the harmony of heaven and earth with strong power, just like the "Book of

Changes" cloud "Heaven is strong, the gentleman is self-improving", showing the power of the heavenly body (Yu, 2006). The Antarctic Immortal Emperor is the doppelganger of the Yuan Shi Tianzun, with a kind face and a serene demeanor. According to the Taoist scriptures, he assisted the Jade Emperor in ruling the four seasons of the climate, controlling all things and blessings, and called the leader of the Thunder Sect, Perak Gaya Tianzun. He symbolizes the continuation of life and the advent of blessings, and affects the growth of all things and human life by regulating the climate, which perfectly fits the Taoist concept of life continuation and natural harmony, deeply reflects Taoism's respect for life and reverence for nature, and carries people's yearning for longevity and happiness. Gou Chen Shanggu Emperor originated from the worship of the stars, dressed in gorgeous clothes, wearing a crown on his head, and his eyes were resolute and sharp. Its duty is to assist the Jade Emperor in weighing the north and south poles and the three talents of heaven, earth and man, and presiding over the weighing of the military revolution. He symbolizes the management of human affairs and the control of the victory or defeat of wars, and actively coordinates all parties to maintain order and tranquility in the world in the Taoist concept of the relationship between heaven, earth and man, reflecting Taoism's concern for human society and the pursuit of peace and stability, and showing people's awe of authoritative power (Ke, 2023). Chengtian imitated the Hou Tu Huang Di Di, that is, Hou Tu Niangniang, with a loving face, dressed in gorgeous clothes, wearing a phoenix crown, and holding a magic weapon that symbolized the land and the harvest. As the ruler of the earth and mountains, she is in charge of the changes in the mountains and land, controls the robbery, and rules the mountain gods and the earth. Houtu belief originates from the ancient land worship, which is like Mother Earth, nurturing and nourishing all things, and is the foundation of human existence. Taoism regards the earth as the mother of all things, and the image of the Emperor of the Later Earth perfectly reflects Taoism's gratitude to the earth and its dependence on nature, and expresses people's deep feelings for the land and their prayers for a better life.

#### 4.1.3 Other Deities

In addition to the statues of the Three Qing and the Four Imperial Deities, there are many other deities in Taoism, each with their own distinctive images and rich and diverse symbolism, reflecting the Taoist focus on the realm of life and values from different perspectives. The Eight Immortals are a group of immortals widely believed in by the people, and

they are Tie Guan Li, Han Zhongli, Zhang Guolao, Lu Dongbin, He Xiang, Lan Caihe, Han Xiangzi and Cao Guoshu. The images of the Eight Immortals are vivid and vivid, representing different social classes and life circumstances, reflecting Taoism's concern for secular life. The unkempt beard, peculiar appearance, and holding the iron crutch symbolize strength and unyielding, and his image encourages people to be brave and tenacious in the face of life's difficulties; Han Zhongli bare-chested and breast-bared, holding a banana fan, gives people a sense of open-mindedness and optimism, symbolizes optimism and freedom, and teaches people to face life with a positive attitude; Zhang Guo rides a donkey upside down, implying reverse thinking and detachment from convention, reminding people to learn to think flexibly in life and not to be bound by routine; Lu Dongbin is personable and holds a sword, symbolizing justice and wisdom, and his image represents people's pursuit of justice and yearning for wisdom; He Xiang is the only woman among the eight immortals, she holds a lotus flower, beautiful and dignified, symbolizing purity and kindness, embodying Taoism's praise of women's beautiful qualities; Lan Caihe wears a torn blue shirt and holds a flower basket, symbolizing happiness and freedom, and expressing people's yearning for a free and easy life; Han Xiangzi is good at blowing the flute and has a personable demeanor, symbolizing talent and romance, and his image reflects the Taoist emphasis on art and emotion; Uncle Cao Guo wears a gauze hat, a red robe, and a jade plate, symbolizing wealth and power, reflecting a Taoist attitude towards wealth in secular life, that is, wealth is not the ultimate pursuit of life, but to remain sober and kind in wealth. The stories and images of the Eight Immortals are deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, and their symbolism inspires people to pursue good qualities and realize their self-worth in life (Yang, 2019). Mazu, formerly known as Lin Mo, a native of Putian, Fujian Province, is widely believed to protect fishermen and merchant ships at sea, and is revered as the "goddess of the sea" (Xing & Starik, 2017). The idol of Mazu usually has a kind face, is dressed in ornate costumes, wears a phoenix crown on his head, and holds a ruyi or ritual vessel that symbolizes the sea, giving people a sense of intimacy and tranquility. Mazu symbolizes maritime safety and disaster prevention, and her beliefs reflect the ancient people's reverence for the forces of nature and their prayers for life. In ancient times, sea navigation was full of unknowns and dangers, and people often felt small and helpless when facing the vastness of the ocean. The presence of Mazu gave people spiritual sustenance and comfort, and she was regarded as the guardian saint of the sea, able to bless fishermen and merchant ships to sail safely

on the sea. The image and symbolism of Mazu reflect the importance of Taoism to marine culture and care for people's lives, and also express people's yearning for a better life and awe of nature. With the development of maritime trade, the Mazu faith has gradually spread widely in the southeast coast, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, becoming a cultural link connecting people from different regions and promoting cultural exchanges and integration.

#### 4.2 Symbols of Ritual Objects and Treasures



**Figure 3:** Artifacts and Treasures

Ruyi is a common Taoist ritual vessel (as shown in Figure 3-(a)), which is made of a variety of materials, with a slightly curved shape resembling a heart character, a cloud-shaped or zhi-shaped head and tail, and a circular center. Its shape contains the Taoist pursuit of nature and longevity, the cloud head symbolizes detachment from the world, the Ganoderma lucidum means immortality, and the curved shape reflects conforming to nature and being at peace with encounters. In the Taoist belief in immortals, Lingbao Tianzun often holds jade and wishes to bless. In Taoist ceremonies, Taoist priests wave their wishes to pray for believers and convey good luck. In folk, weddings, birthdays and other occasions, Ruyi was given as a mascot to express good wishes, highlighting the influence of Taoist thought on traditional culture. Whisk dust (shown in Figure 3-(b)) is a typical Taoist ritual vessel made of animal hair and hemp, with an elongated handle. It symbolizes the removal of troubles and the purification of the mind, which is in line with the Taoist concept of pursuing inner purity. Taoists regard earthly distractions as spiritual dust, and brushing the dust can help practitioners return to purity. Practitioners often hold the dust, chant sutras, and meditate to wave to concentrate and eliminate distracting thoughts. The palace is hung with dust, symbolizing purity and sacredness, and reminding believers to stay away from the hustle

and bustle. The dust brushes embody the spirit of Taoist detachment, and many high-ranking hermits express their detachment from the world and their adherence to Taoist thought. The Bagua Mirror (shown in Figure 3-(c)) is a unique Taoist treasure with a round mirror engraved with Bagua patterns (Cheng, 1971). It contains philosophical concepts such as the five elements of yin and yang, and has the function of warding off evil spirits and tainting houses. From the perspective of warding off evil spirits, Taoists believe that the world is composed of yin and yang, and evil qi is the product of yin and yang imbalance. In terms of town houses, Taoism attaches great importance to feng shui, and the Bagua mirror can adjust the aura of the house, echo with the environment to form a strong aura, and create a peaceful living environment, which is commonly found in Taoist palaces and high places of folk houses. The Bagua Mirror embodies the Taoist cognition of all things in the universe, carries philosophical thoughts, and is an important ritual in Taoist rituals, used to communicate with the gods, pray for blessings and drive away evil spirits.

### 4.3 Symbolism of Animal and Plant Images

#### 4.3.1 Dragons and Phoenixes

The dragon and phoenix are the most representative animal and plant images in Taoist imagery, and they carry rich symbolic meanings and are closely connected to Taoist philosophy. The dragon, as the totem of the Chinese nation, occupies an important position in Taoist culture. It is athletic, winding and circling, with great strength and mystical aura. In Taoist imagery, dragons are often depicted soaring between the clouds, guarding the Cave of the Immortals, or surrounding the statues of the Three Qings. The dragon symbolizes authority, strength, and auspiciousness, and it is a symbol of the great power of nature and represents the Taoist reverence and reverence for the forces of nature. The image of the dragon embodies the mystery and elusiveness of the Tao in Taoist philosophy, which, like the Dao, is formless but contains infinite vitality and power. In the Book of Changes, the hexagram is symbolized by the dragon, "The flying dragon is in the sky, and it is beneficial to see the great", which expresses the nobility and authority of the dragon, and also reflects the Taoist yearning for transcending the mundane and pursuing the highest realm (Hall, 1978). The phoenix, also a common image in Taoist images, is seen as a symbol of auspiciousness due to its graceful and colorful posture. The phoenix often appears together with the dragon to form the pattern of "dragon and phoenix auspicious", which means beauty,



nobility and auspiciousness. The image of the phoenix symbolizes the Taoist pursuit and yearning for beautiful things, and it represents harmony, happiness and auspiciousness. In Taoist philosophy, the good qualities symbolized by the phoenix are in harmony with the spirit of the Tao, which is a manifestation of the Tao in the world. The appearance of the phoenix symbolizes people's yearning for a better life and the pursuit of moral realm. In Taoist belief in immortals, the phoenix is often associated with fairies and immortals, such as the car of the Queen Mother of the West is often pulled by the phoenix bird, which further strengthens the sacred and beautiful symbol of the phoenix. The image of the phoenix also embodies the Taoist pursuit of natural harmony, which echoes with the dragon, symbolizes the balance and harmony of yin and yang, and expresses the Taoist's deep understanding of the order of the universe and the laws of nature.

#### 4.3.2 Turtles and Cranes

The turtle and the crane are symbols of longevity and health in Taoist images, which profoundly reflect the Taoist cherishing of life and the pursuit of immortality. The turtle, as an ancient and mysterious creature, has become a symbol of longevity in Taoist culture with its long-life span and tenacious vitality. In Taoist images, the turtle is often depicted as carrying a mysterious pattern or text, implying that it carries the wisdom and mysteries of heaven and earth. The image of the turtle embodies the Taoist respect for life and compliance with the laws of nature, and it survives in the world at a slow but firm pace, symbolizing the continuation and stability of life. The hardness of the tortoise shell also symbolizes the spirit of perseverance, reminding people to maintain a strong faith in the face of difficulties and setbacks. In ancient times, tortoise shells were often used for divination, believing that they could gain insight into heaven and predict the future, so tortoises were also endowed with the meaning of wisdom, stability and auspiciousness (Freiberg, 1975). The crane, known as the "crane crane" and "longevity bird", has an elegant posture and a high-pitched song, which can soar above the nine heavens, giving people a sense of otherworldliness. In Taoist culture, the crane is accompanied by immortals, which is a symbol of cultivation into immortals, and is also endowed with the beautiful meaning of immortality, health and longevity. The cranes in Taoist images often dance or perch on pine trees, and together with the pines, they form the "pine crane longevity". The beautiful meaning of the word. The image of the crane embodies the Taoist pursuit

of transcendence and the eternal yearning for life, and it represents a spiritual realm that is beyond the world and free and free. The longevity and noble qualities of the crane are in line with the Taoist philosophy of spiritual practice, encouraging people to pursue inner peace and spiritual sublimation. In Taoist legends, many immortals used cranes as mounts, such as Lu Dongbin in the Eight Immortals, who often rode cranes to travel around the world, which further strengthened the connection between cranes and immortals and immortals.

#### 4.3.3 Pine and Cypress

Pine and cypress symbolize tenacity and eternity in Taoist images, embodying the Taoist idea of conforming to nature and sticking to authenticity. Pine trees, evergreen all year round, are not afraid of severe cold and heat, and have tenacious vitality and perseverance. In Taoist imagery, pine trees are often depicted growing on cliffs, or in the company of Taoist temples and gods, representing an indomitable spirit and ability to adapt to the natural environment. The evergreen of the pine tree symbolizes eternity and immortality, embodying the Taoist pursuit of eternity in life and a deep understanding of the laws of nature. Taoism emphasizes conforming to nature, and the pine tree can still maintain its vitality and vitality in the harsh environment, which is the embodiment of conforming to nature. It does not compete with other trees, but grows silently at its own pace, sticking to its true nature (Xu, 2023). The cypress tree also has the quality of toughness, its trunk is straight, and the branches and leaves are dense, giving people a solemn and solemn feeling. In Taoist culture, cypress trees are often planted around Taoist temples, symbolizing the solemnity and sacredness of Taoist temples. The tenacity and eternity of the cypress tree also imply the Taoist practitioners' adherence to faith and adherence to moral principles (Shaw, 1988). In the baptism of the years, it has always maintained its own form and quality, and has not been shaken by the interference of the outside world. The presence of the cypress tree reminds people to stick to their inner beliefs, not to be swayed by worldly temptations, and to pursue spiritual abundance and moral perfection. The symbolic meaning of pine and cypress in Taoist images not only reflects the Taoist observation and perception of all things in nature, but also reflects the Taoist pursuit of life attitude and values. With their unique image and quality, they inspire people to maintain the spirit of perseverance in life, conform to nature, adhere to the truth, and pursue the eternal state of life and spiritual pursuit.



## 5. THE CULTURAL INHERITANCE FUNCTION OF TAOIST IMAGES

### 5.1 Transmission of Religious Belief

Taoist imagery inspires believers in doctrine and deity with visual images. In the Taoist temple, the solemnity of the Sanqing statue, the majesty of the Dharma Protector statue and the exquisite murals create a sacred atmosphere, touching the hearts of believers and arousing awe and piety. As the embodiment of the Tao, believers worship the statue of Sanqing, which can deeply understand the core teachings of Taoism and strengthen their belief and identity with the Tao. Taoist imagery also reinforces belief cohesion. In religious activities, believers worship and worship Taoist images, and this common experience gives believers a sense of belonging, which in turn enhances the cohesion of the faith community. For example, during the temple fair, many believers gather in the palace to carry out rituals around the images, exchange and support each other, and Taoist images become a spiritual bond that unites believers, connecting different believers across regions and time, and helping the inheritance and development of Taoist beliefs. Taoist images help believers understand the methods and teachings of spiritual practice. For example, the Neidan cultivation diagram shows the meridian acupuncture points and cultivation steps of the human body, and the talisman contains the connotation of magic and belief with mysterious symbols, with classic illustrations, to help believers understand the teachings and master the cultivation methods (Wright, 1969). In ceremonies such as pujas, Taoist images assist Taoist priests in standardizing rituals. The Transcendence of the Dead will hang the statue of Taiyi Relief Heaven, and the blessing puja will use Bagua mirror, Ruyi and other magic instruments, which not only help Taoist priests complete the ritual and conform to the doctrinal tradition, but also guide believers to focus on participation, adjust their mentality, and better communicate with the gods.

### 5.2 Preservation of Cultural Memory

Taoist images such as Taoist murals and stone carvings are like vivid historical paintings, intuitively recording the social style, cultural characteristics and artistic styles of different periods. The Yuan Dynasty "Dynasty Yuan Map" in the Sanqing Hall of Yongle Palace in Ruicheng, Shanxi Province, has a grand picture, depicting nearly 300 "heavenly gods" worshipping the scene of the Yuan Shi Tianzun. From the details of

character costumes, hairstyles and other details, we can get a glimpse of the clothing culture and aesthetics of the Yuan Dynasty, many images of immortals reflect the Taoist beliefs at that time, and the elements of architecture and utensils provide a reference for the study of Yuan Dynasty architecture and living utensils (Lang & Zhang, 1999). The Taoist statues in Dazu stone carvings in Sichuan are rich in subject matter and fine in carving, reflecting the artistic level of Tang and Song Dynasty sculpture, palace architecture and religious ceremony characteristics, and coexisting with Buddha and Confucian statues, reflecting the cultural phenomenon of the integration of three religions, which is an intuitive data for the study of religious culture exchange and integration. Taoist image drawing and carving techniques inherit traditional Chinese art techniques and continue the cultural context. The mural adopts the technique of meticulous brushwork and heavy colors to show the emotion of the characters with delicate lines and color rendering, inheriting the ancient painting tradition. Taoist images contain the national spirit and embody the reverence for nature. Under the Taoist concept of "Tao Fa nature", the elements such as mountains and rivers and auspicious animals in the images symbolize the beauty of nature and remind people to live in harmony with nature, which is the spiritual symbol of national culture.

### 5.3 Social Value Guidance

Taoist images convey the moral behavior and doctrinal requirements of gods in a unique visual way, influencing the moral concepts of believers and the public. The murals of the palace temple depict gods helping the world and punishing evil and promoting good, such as Guanyin helping the people and the God of wealth teaching honesty and prosperity, intuitively displaying Taoist moral principles and guiding people to practice virtue. Believers are infected in worship and appreciation and internalize moral concepts into codes of conduct. Taoist images advocate harmonious and mutual-aid interpersonal relationships. In Taoist fairy tales, gods such as Lu Dongbin help resolve conflicts, guide people to care for others through images, and create a harmonious community atmosphere. In Taoist charity activities, believers actively practice and contribute to social harmony and stability (Kohn, 1990). For overseas Chinese, Taoist images are the spiritual sustenance for maintaining national emotion and inheriting Chinese culture. In a foreign land, Taoist temples and images provide spiritual comfort, and Chinese people enhance national cohesion and sense of belonging by participating in religious activities. For example, the temple

of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia holds activities on important festivals to inherit and promote Chinese culture, promote multicultural exchanges, and enhance the overseas influence of the Chinese nation.

#### 5.4 Inheritance and Development Strategy

The inheritance and development strategies of Taoist images mainly cover three aspects: digital protection, cultural and creative industry integration, and education and publicity, as shown in Table 1. In the digital protection, through high-precision digital collection, the establishment of digital archives and the use of new media communication, to achieve the long-term preservation and wide dissemination of images; The integration of cultural and creative industries is to develop cultural and creative products, develop cultural tourism, and carry out IP development and space design to integrate Taoist images into modern life. Education and publicity include integrating relevant knowledge into the curriculum, encouraging public participation, and organizing exhibitions and community events to enhance public awareness and promote the inheritance and development of Taoist images in contemporary society.

Table 1(a): Inheritance and Development Strategies of Taoist Images

Category	Specific Measures	Examples/Implementation
Digital Preservation	High-precision Digital Capture	3D scanning of statues and murals (e.g., 3D data acquisition of Yongle Palace murals)
Digital Preservation	Digital Archives	Establishment of image databases (e.g., Wudang Mountain Taoist Image Database)
Digital Preservation	New Media Dissemination	Production of short videos (on Douyin and Bilibili platforms), development of VR/AR experiences (e.g., AR tour of Qingyang Palace)
Cultural and Creative Industry Integration	Cultural and Creative Product Design	Design of Tai Chi-themed stationery and Bagua mirror-shaped accessories (e.g., the co-branded series by the Palace Museum and Baiyun Temple)
Cultural and Creative Industry Integration	Cultural Tourism	Development of themed tourism routes (e.g., "Taoist Mural Art Tour"), organization of workshops (e.g., Tianshi Cave carving workshop)
Cultural and Creative Industry Integration	IP Development and Spatial Design	Animation of the images of the Eight Immortals; integration of Taoist elements in architectural design (e.g., the image of Taiyi Zhenren in the movie <i>Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child</i> )

Table 1(b): Inheritance and Development Strategies of Taoist Images

Category	Specific Measures	Examples/Implementation
Education and Promotion	Curriculum Incorporation	Offering courses on the appreciation of Taoist images (e.g., the Taoist art elective course at Peking University)
Education and Promotion	Public Participation	Holding summer camps and online lectures (e.g., the "Virtual Taoist Temple Tour" lecture by the China Taoist College)
Education and Promotion	Exhibitions and Community Activities	Hosting international exhibitions and conducting community lectures (e.g., the Longhu Mountain Taoist Culture Forum)

Digital technology is of great significance to the inheritance of Taoist images. With the help of high-precision image acquisition equipment, it can scan Taoist murals, stone carvings, and statues in an all-round way, and 3D scanning can accurately record the three-dimensional form of the statues, and the detailed image data obtained can be converted into digital files and stored in the digital archives, which can effectively resist image damage and information loss caused by natural erosion and man-made destruction, and also facilitate scholars to consult and research. In terms of communication, short video platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili are used to produce exquisite short videos of Taoist images to vividly explain and show their cultural connotation and artistic value to attract the attention of young people. Cooperate with digital media to launch special reports and documentaries, such as the Taoist cultural documentary produced by Tencent Video, digging deep into the stories behind the images, and using the power of media communication to convey the charm of Taoist images to a wider audience. The integration of Taoist images into the cultural and creative industry is an innovative move for inheritance and development. The design of cultural and creative products with Taoist images as elements, such as notebooks, bookmarks and other stationery containing Taiji diagrams and gossip patterns, necklaces, bracelets and other accessories based on the images of the Three Qing Dynasty and the Eight Immortals, as well as related household items, have both practical and artistic value, so that Taoist culture can enter daily life, and spread its cultural connotation while meeting people's aesthetic needs (Woo, 1993). The cultural tourism industry can also incorporate Taoist iconography features. Strengthen the protection and display of images in Taoist palaces, and assign docents to explain their symbolic meaning (Hall, 1987). The development of tourism projects such as Taoist mural copying, god carving experience, such as Qingcheng Mountain Tianshi Cave, can also hold

Taoist cultural lectures, art exhibitions, enrich the experience of tourists, enhance the cultural taste of scenic spots, attract more tourists, and promote the spread of Taoist images. Integrate the knowledge of Taoist images into school education, compile special textbooks and courses, and systematically introduce its history, cultural connotation and artistic characteristics. The art class guides students to appreciate and copy Taoist works of art and cultivate their art appreciation; History lessons explain the development of Taoism and the evolution of images, showing its close connection to Chinese history. Through classroom teaching, visiting palaces and other practical activities, students can feel the charm of Taoist images and enhance their perceptual understanding of Taoist culture. Organizing activities such as Taoist cultural festivals, art exhibitions, and academic seminars can enhance the public's understanding of Taoist images. At the Taoist Cultural Festival, ritual performances, music performances, and image display activities are carried out; art exhibitions showcasing Taoist artworks and inviting experts to interpret them; Scholars are invited to share their research findings. For example, the Longhu Mountain Taoist Cultural Festival attracts tourists and scholars with rich activities and promotes the dissemination and exchange of Taoist culture.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of Taoist philosophy, this study deeply analyzes the symbolic meaning and cultural inheritance function of Taoist images, and reveals the close relationship between the two. Taoist philosophy uses the concept of "Tao", the idea of natural non-action, and the dialectical concept of yin and yang to provide a theoretical source for interpreting Taoist images. As an important carrier of Taoist culture, Taoist images use elements such as images of gods, ritual treasures, animals and plants, etc., to visualize the core essence of Taoist philosophy in a symbolic and metaphorical way. In a symbolic sense, the images of the gods and goddesses of Taoist images have deep meanings. The statue of Sanqing symbolizes the origin of the universe, the movement of the Tao and the moral education, and is the embodiment of the "Tao"; The four statues are in charge of the movement of celestial bodies, human affairs, and the continuation of life, reflecting Taoism's concern for the order of heaven and earth and the fate of mankind. Treasures such as ruyi, dust, and gossip mirrors, as well as images of animals and plants such as dragons, phoenixes, turtles, cranes, pines, and cypresses, reflect Taoism's pursuit of good

qualities and living conditions such as auspiciousness, purity, warding off evil spirits, longevity, and tenacity. Taoist imagery plays a key role in cultural inheritance. At the level of religious belief, it strengthens believers' identification with doctrines and gods, disseminates the immortal system, myths and legends, and practice methods, and maintains the sacred norms of religious ceremonies, which is an important link for faith inheritance. In terms of cultural memory, Taoist murals and stone carvings record the social style, cultural and artistic characteristics of different periods, inherit painting and carving skills, and carry the nation's awe of nature and yearning for a better life. In terms of social value, the image shows the moral behavior and doctrinal requirements of the gods, plays the function of moral education, advocates harmonious coexistence, promotes cultural identity and national cohesion, and actively influences the construction of social spiritual civilization.

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