

Living in a Digital World: Different Reflection on the Online Taoism Spreading

Jingxing Qian^{1,*}

¹Shanghai Starriver Bilingual School, Shanghai, China

*Corresponding Author: qianbing2006@sjtu.edu.cn

Abstract:

With the rise of the Internet and social media, Taoism's ideas, symbols and other information have gradually come into the public's view through Internet platforms. However, Taoist culture, as an excellent traditional Chinese culture, faces challenges and uncertainties when adapting to the new cultural communication methods in the digital age. In order to comprehensively understand the current status of Taoist culture's online communication in the digital age and to promote the modernization of traditional Taoist culture, this study uses questionnaires and interviews to collect the views of two groups, Taoist priests and the general public, on online Taoist culture communication. The study found that although the Internet has facilitated the popularization of Taoist culture, its dissemination is relatively shallow and suffers from fragmentation of information and shallow understanding. Regarding online communication channels, Taoist priests support the integration of Taoist culture with digital society with an open attitude. However, the public wants to improve the accuracy and systematization of online communication. The study suggests that the participation of Taoist officials should be strengthened, and that the government and society should respect the objective laws of Taoist cultural development and reduce intervention to promote the transmission and development of Taoist culture in the digital age. This study helps to clarify the current situation of Taoist thought's online dissemination and provides inspiration for authorities to promote the development of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: Digital World; Taoism; online spreading.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, with the rise of internet and social media, multiple kinds of electronic byproducts have appeared as well, including video games, online journals, websites and etc. These new technologies provide people with platforms of gaining information and ideas. This has led to traditional culture being increasingly disseminated through the wider but shallower ways of the Internet. There are more and more concerns about how to view the change of traditional culture in the digital society and how to guide traditional culture to adapt to the great change in mediums. Taoism religion, derived from the initial Five-Dou-Grain Taoism at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, includes worship, belief, and ritual, which is one of the most pervasive religion indigenous to China mainland [1]. Being one of the two oldest religion or philosophical system in China with Confucius, Taoism has delved deep into the root of Chinese ideas and life philosophies [2]. Today, Taoist culture still plays a vital role in Chinese society. In the digital age, traditional Taoist culture is still in the process of continuous transmission and development [3]. Thus, it is crucial

to unearth systematically how Taoism may adapt to the modern digital era and to find out what opportunities and challenges the digital society brings to the dissemination and development of Taoist culture. Current academic research on Taoist culture focuses on two aspects: cultural spreading and modernization due to development. In terms of spreading, Taoism, as an indigenous Chinese religion, has been deeply spread and recognized globally while having a profound impact on the local culture [4]. Some studies have pointed out that the overseas dissemination of Taoist culture suffers from a number of problems, such as insufficient specialization of disseminators and insufficient systematization of disseminating content. Scholars have called for raising the degree of importance attached to Taoist culture, the professionalism of cultural disseminators, and the scientific nature of dissemination content [5]. With regard to the modernization and development of Taoist culture, the Taoist community is responding positively to the demands of the times and striving to realize the modernization and transformation of Taoism. In this regard, some scholars have pointed out that Taoism can transform itself by reconstructing its doctrines and teach-

ings to harmonize with the development of the knowledge economy and information economy era, and to connect with the contemporary high-tech society that is advancing by leaps and bounds. In the process of change, it is necessary to attach great importance to the inheritance and development of the cultural values of Taoism. In particular, it is necessary to explore the value of modernity of Taoist culture in the philosophy of life, interpersonal relations and the relationship between man and nature. However, these studies have focused on Taoist culture itself with a lack of in-depth exploration on how Taoist culture is communicated online. Since online communication is characterized by its broad, rapid and shallow features, relevant research should tightly integrate Taoist culture with the characteristics of the Internet, focusing attention on the breadth of communication. Therefore, this study will explore the characteristics of dissemination, opportunities and challenges of Taoist culture in the Internet space from the characteristics of the Internet in the digital world.

The purpose of this study is to understand the opportunities and challenges that the digital era brings to the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese Taoist culture. Specifically, this study takes the Internet platform as the research scope and analyzes the characteristics and problems of Taoist cultural media in the digital era through interviews and questionnaires. Specifically, this study will describe the current situation of Taoist culture development on the Internet platform, summarize the impact of online communication channels on the development of Taoist culture, and analyze the opportunities and challenges of Taoist culture development. Finally, several suggestions for promoting the modernization and digital transformation of Taoist culture will be presented.

2. Methodology

2.1 Questionnaire

A Questionnaire is a research tool or survey instrument that consists of a set of questions or prompts designed to gather information from individuals or groups of people. The questionnaires asked all respondents in the same questionnaire format, which facilitates comparative analysis of the respondents in the same situation. Meanwhile, Questionnaires are not limited in number or scope [6].

The researchers designed a list of questions about Taoism, people's familiarity toward the topic and their daily experience and reflection toward this topic, such as "how often do you see this topic" and "What are some main ideas about Taoism you have heard". From July 18 to July 25, 2024, the authors distributed questionnaires through the online survey platform Question Star, collecting a total of 414 questionnaires. Then, the authors filter out the incon-

sistencies and illogical questionnaires, finally obtaining 379 valid questionnaires. The majority of the respondents belong to the group of 0-55 age group, taking about 93% of all respondents. Researchers excluded certain responses due to these feedbacks' invalid responses, such as controversial responses in different questions. This number of responses are able to provide a thorough overview to the goal of understanding Taoism being spread online.

2.2 Interview

Interviewing is a qualitative research method that gathers in-depth and detailed information through personal interaction between the researcher and the participant [7]. It is usually conducted as a conversation or discussion, allowing the researcher to gain insight into the views, experiences and feelings of the interviewees. In order to comprehensively examine the perceptions and attitudes of different groups of people towards the propagation of Taoist culture, the authors adhered to the principles of representativeness and practicability by dividing the research respondents into Taoist priests and the general public. Taoist priests are well versed in Taoist culture, while the general public has an average understanding. The authors invited thirteen members of the general public between the ages of 16 to 50 for group interviews and one Taoist practitioner for in-depth interviews. Each interviewee in both sections included questions exploring their frequencies of being attached with Taoism elements and ideas, their personal embodiments of these ideas and also their own understanding. Meanwhile, researchers proposed questions directly attributed to the digital epoch. For instance, the questions such as "what do you think are the main advantages and disadvantages brought by online spreading of Taoism". The average interview length among the public is approximately 35 minutes. The authors then compiled a cumulative total of 4300 words from the interview transcripts and invited interviewees to check and confirm the content of the transcripts. During the interviews, all interviewees were made fully aware of the academic use of this study before the interviews began and agreed to be audio-recorded throughout. The personal information of all interviewees will be anonymized.

3. Results

3.1 Current Situation

Currently, Taoism is flourishing in Chinese social media. The population of Internet users has been magnified, resulting in drastic changes in social behaviors. Taoist culture enters the Internet with online video as the starting point. The first video, *Taoist suggests you believe in science, the jumped off the cliff with Wudang Kungfu*, posted

by a Taoist in 2020, marked the emergence of Taoism spreading through the Internet. So far, hundreds of videos associated with Taoism can be found on social platforms such as Bilibili. Some videos instruct Kungfu skills, some exhibit what life is like in a Taoist Abbey, and some illustrate the history of Taoism. The majority dominant part of the video associated with Taoism discusses Tao by referring to some quotes from Tao Te Ching and other works on Taoism. Profoundly inspired by Taoism thoughts, some people compose poetry evoking the combination of Taoism and their contemplation. Up till now, there are more diverse ways for Taoism to be spread online. Various kinds of games and comics and other forms of entertaining products involves various kinds of Taoism elements. By recreating the original of Taoism thoughts, embodiments of Taoism in games and comics may be attached to typical characters, scenes, or critical elements.

The questionnaire results present a convincing evidence of the current situation where Taoist culture is thriving to spread through the Internet. First, In the digital age, the Internet has gradually become the main platform for the dissemination of Taoist culture, which is integrating and adapting to each other and the Internet. For evidence, Eighty-five percent of the respondents said they had browsed content containing elements of Taoism on the Internet. And 55% of respondents first saw information about Taoism on an Internet platform. Only a small number of respondents said that they mainly obtained relevant information through paper-based media. Secondly, Internet dissemination of Taoist culture has a significant advantage in that it enables the public to break through the information barriers of the paper media era and access a wide range of Taoist knowledge more conveniently and simply. 90% of the interviewee said that it is easier to understand complex Taoist knowledge and gain new insights into Taoist culture through e-learning. They are very willing to support the further popularization and dissemination of Taoist culture, which is supported by this data. Some respondents also said that traditional media have higher accuracy and authority of information, which helps deepen people's understanding of Taoism. Because Taoist culture is helpful to everyone, the laws and essence of Taoist culture are applicable to any era. However, it is necessary to find a way to combine the Internet with offline to spread Taoist culture [8].

3.2 Taoists' Attitudes: Actively Integrating into Secular Society

Taoist priests have a profound and comprehensive understanding of Taoist thought, and they tend to view Taoist cultural online communication from the original perspective of Taoism. Through interview, the Taoist made two

major claims. Around the current status of Taoist cultural online communication, this study finds that the Taoist community tends to support the large-scale dissemination of Taoism through the Internet, while maintaining an optimistic attitude toward the development of Taoism's religious orthodoxy.

From one side, Taoists are glad to see the large scale spreading of Taoism through internet. In response to the question "Do you want Taoism to spread on a larger scale through the Internet", the respondents indicated that they would like to see Taoist culture develop better through online networking channels. The Internet allows Taoist culture to gain higher exposure and attracts more people to know and learn about Taoist thought, which is conducive to the inheritance and development of Taoist culture. From the other side, due to the anonymous characteristics of the Internet, Taoist cultural communication may deviate from the original religious intent in terms of media direction and content because of falsified or distorted information. Regarding the possibility of religious orthodoxy being altered, misunderstood or even manipulated, Taoist priests expressed a secularized tolerance. "Everyone has their own understanding of the central philosophies and ideas due to their difference in life-long experience and the challenges they faced, it is common and natural to have different opinions, understandings, and changes in explanation during the spreading. The issue is not about which is the orthodoxy, the idea that adapts and conforms to the current society, the idea that survives during the spreading process would naturally become the orthodoxy." This quote from the interviewee exemplifies Taoists' open attitudes toward the ongoing changes of Taoism due to the spreading on online platforms.

3.3 Public Attitudes: Fragmented but Easy Access to Information

As the third party and the largest category of people, the public's perception of Taoist cultural online communication in the digital age represents the general cognitive trend of the whole society. The study found that members of the public were able to objectively analyze the advantages and disadvantages of the dissemination of Taoist culture through the Internet. Simultaneously, they also hope to enhance the accuracy of Internet communication channels by increasing systematic and policy support for Taoist culture.

The majority of the public expressed their views on the dissemination of Daoism through the Internet. They pointed out that the advantage of this mode of dissemination is convenience, but at the same time there are problems of fragmentation and shallowness, which were mentioned by several interviewees. The public acknowledges that

Internet dissemination of Taoist information is easier to understand, faster transmission speed, more robust interaction between the platform creator and the audience, and more accessible ways of expressing opinions. Meanwhile, people are concerned that the viewers tend to be more interested in short, fragmented information such as short videos, which are short and fragmented information which does not possess the capacity for people to thoroughly understand a topic. For instance, a female interviewee responded, “The internet does enable me to gain access to the information about Taoism faster and more convenient. However, most videos and articles are intentionally made short to attract readers, which would not lend me a thorough overview to the topic I wish to learn about.”

In response to the opportunities and challenges of the Internet development pathway for the dissemination of Taoist culture, members of the public put forward suggestions mainly in terms of upgrading the level of cultural popularization and increasing policy support. One male interviewee mentioned that Taoist authorities and other professionals should begin to organize this fragmented information for the benefit of those who are genuinely interested and wish to delve deeper into the topic. More systematic structures and categorization, for instance, should be made to benefit all users.

4. Discussion

As traditional religions clash with new technologies, there are chances for the Taoist culture to revive and further flourish to a greater extent [9]. However, in the process of spreading Taoist culture, people should pay attention to the uncertainty and threat brought by the development of digital technology, and take concrete actions to promote Taoist culture to adapt to the digital world.

First of all, spreading Taoism requires more involvement of Taoist officials [10]. Nowadays, online platforms are filled with amateurs. The general public’s understanding of Taoist culture is very limited; they use the Internet as their main channel of information acquisition and have not been systematically educated in the orthodox Taoist culture. Though people may have a different understanding, all people are eager to have authoritative figures to compile the information. By including the official persons who have mastered Taoist culture in the opening of the e-learning platform, orthodox Taoist philosophy can be disseminated to a wider public. Spreading correct Taoist culture and values by analyzing various Taoist information on the Internet will help guide the public to a comprehensive and scientific understanding of Taoist culture.

Secondly, the government and society should fully respect the objective laws of Taoist cultural development and re-

duce excessive intervention in Taoist culture. In the digital age, social interests are becoming more diversified and social affairs more complex, and the government’s social management also needs to keep pace with the times. Religious culture, including Taoist culture, is an important part of traditional Chinese culture, leaving valuable ideological values and material cultural heritage for mankind. The Government should take active measures to respect and protect outstanding Taoist culture. The most important thing is to follow the historical law of development and promote the inheritance and development of Taoist culture in a modernized society, so that traditional culture can play a new contemporary value in the digital age. For instance, adding more introduction of Taoism ideas and thoughts as the simple Taoism elements such as arts and symbols are used.

5. Conclusion

As digital era arrived, Taoism, being a traditional religion who has gone through thousands of years of changes, has to face new challenges and to evoke for new adaptation to the era. This study reveals the current status of the dissemination of Taoist culture on the Internet platform. The study found that with the advent of the digital age, Taoist culture has entered a new stage of development. More and more young people are learning about and recognizing Taoist culture in a fragmented way through Internet channels. For the public, the Internet provides an efficient channel for them to recognize Taoist culture, which helps to increase the popularity of Taoist culture. For Taoist priests, the Internet media has given traditional Taoist culture an opportunity to integrate and develop with modernized society. They believe that the orthodoxy of Taoism will persist with the development of the Internet. On the whole, the dissemination and development of Taoist culture through the Internet channel is conducive to the enhancement of social well-being. On the one hand, the popularization of Taoist thought has enriched people’s worldview, values and self-knowledge. On the other hand, the modernization and dissemination of Taoist thought are in line with the philosophical wisdom of Taoism that “man and nature live in harmony”. This helps to further enrich the connotation of Taoist culture and provides inspiration for digital social governance. In the long run, the promotion of Taoist thought is beneficial to society as a whole. Still, there are concerns about whether the sanctity of Taoism may have been disturbed or the original teachings distorted. Thus, there are long paths and opportunities for Taoism to enhance and improve itself in this era. The authorities can establish more official Internet accounts to be directly responsible for spreading Taoist culture. Simulta-

neously, opening up learning resources to the public and guiding more public participation to improve the online dissemination environment of Taoist culture. Finally, making full use of the power of the public and the resources of authorities to completely improve the online Taoist communication system.

References

- [1] Tan Jing, Bao Xiangfei. Reflecting on the distinction between philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism based on the transmission and transformation of the concept of “philosophy”. *Religions*, 2024, 15(1): 77.
- [2] Littlejohn L. *Daoism: An introduction*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.
- [3] Campbell H. Internet and religion. *The handbook of internet studies*, 2011, 232-250.
- [4] Guoqing Y. *Taoism. Rituals and practices in world religions: Cross-cultural scholarship to inform research and clinical contexts*. Springer, 2020, 99-111.
- [5] Wang Qiaoling. The current situation and strategies of the dissemination of Taoism through Communication Science. *Mudanjiang University News*, 2015, 24(5): 4.
- [6] Boparai K, Sing S, Kathuria P. How to design and validate a questionnaire: A guide. *Current clinical pharmacology*, 2018, 13(4): 210-215.
- [7] Fontana A, Frey H. The interview. *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 2005, 3(1): 695-727.
- [8] Campbel A. Understanding the relationship between religion online and offline in a networked society. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2012, 80(1): 64-93.
- [9] Gao Weidong. Discourse the influence of new media on the cultural communication power. *News window*. 2017,01: 72-73.
- [10] Jiang Zice. Taoist Internet construction and new media development in the transformation of “connectivity” Chinese Taoism. *Chinese Taoism*, 2016, 05: 40-42.