



“The Tao in Chess” in *The King of Chess*

Ziliang Huo^(✉)

School of Literature and Art, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Mianyang, China
1457157395@qq.com

Abstract. The protagonist—Wang Yisheng in *The King of Chess* is characterized by a distinctive Taoist style of chess, in which the Tao of chess is embedded in three aspects: “playfulness and entertainment”, “combativeness and athleticism” and “symbolism and philosophy”.

Keywords: *The King of Chess* · Wang Yisheng · chess · Tao

1 Introduction

The King of Chess was published in Shanghai Literature in 1984 and instantly received a great response, making Ah Cheng’s debut in the Chinese literary world. This is about the tale of Wang Yisheng, a “chess nerd” who travels to other countries to participate in the “go to the mountains and go to the countryside” movement, and eventually becomes *The King of Chess* after going through various levels of training and learning the art of chess. The essay has a strong Taoist background, and even talks directly about Taoist thought. For instance, Wang says “we also say that Chinese Taoism talks about yin and yang”, and “chess is the chess of Taoism”. The “nerd” in Wang’s nickname is the ultimate expression of Taoism’s out-of-this-world inaction.

“Chess” is a game competed by two players, which exhibits the spiritual experience of traditional literature. Therefore, “chess” has become a symbol of traditional Chinese culture. This is the carrier of the Chinese traditional philosophical concept of “Tao”, which forms the term “Tao of Chess” and is tainted with Taoism in the cultural structure. The author directly plants the imagery of “chess” in the title and adorns it with the character “Wang”—the surname of the main character, which extends the punning connotation of the title, meaning that the top of the chess game is “Wang”—Wang Yisheng. The word “chess” in the text not only carries a profound cultural volume but also naturally makes the image of Wang Yisheng full of superlatives. Zhang Ru’an has also proposed a triple realm of “the way of chess” in Chinese culture: “Firstly, it is a game of playfulness and entertainment, as a tool to relieve boredom after meals. Secondly, it is a game of combativeness and athleticism, in which the opponents plan their tactics, attack, and defend on the chessboard. Thirdly, it is the game of the symbolism and philosophy, as the microcosm of life and the cosmos” [1]. In this paper, we will start from these three aspects to interpret the standpoint of Tao contained in *The King of Chess* (Fig. 1).

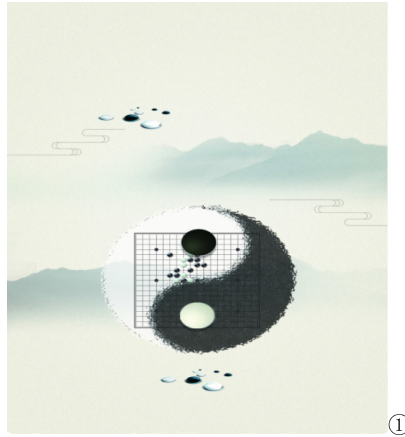


Fig. 1. Chess in Tai Chi (This image is from <https://www.yipic.cn/sucal/2883542.html>)

2 Literature Review

The King of Chess is regarded as a classic work of contemporary Chinese literature, and its study is also extremely deep and flourishing. One direction gives priority to analyzing the traditional thought (especially Taoist thought) in The King of Chess, while the other direction focuses on considering the literary-historical values of The King of Chess in the context of the literary phenomenon of searching for roots. The first direction is symbolized by Su Ding & Zhong Chengxiang (1985). This paper is an early analysis of the Taoist thought in The King of Chess, which is argued from two perspectives: the image of Wang’s life with great wisdom and the creative technique with great ingenuity [2]. Hu Heqing (1989) anatomizes in detail the Taoist philosophy behind The King of Chess, which strives for “tranquility” [3]. Chen Zhonggeng (2002), on the other hand, inherits the “tranquility” from his predecessors and analyzes Wang Yisheng’s image more from the Taoist spirit of “obsession and persistence” [4]. In the direction of root-seeking literary criticism, Li Jiefei (1995) analyzes The King of Chess in its historical context, and introduces the concept, development, and influence of root-seeking literature in a detailed way [5]. Yang Xiaofan (2010) analyzes the process of the literary history of the transformation of the novel of the youth into a root-seeking novel from the interaction between the classicization of The King of Chess and the writer’s root-seeking identity in a minor way [6].

Scholars have studied the spiritual connotation and literary-historical values of The King of Chess, but the discussion of the specific form of Taoist philosophy in The King of Chess is ambiguous. Moreover, the scholars attach great importance to the Taoist color analysis of Wang’s image but ignore the crucial role of the imagery of “chess” in the formation of Wang’s image. In addition, in the consideration of the literary-historical values of the literary roots of The King of Chess, there is also neglect of the traditional culture behind “chess”. Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate on the specific expression of Taoist philosophy behind the imagery of “chess” and to analyze the role of “chess” in constructing the Taoist connotation of the characters and the text as a whole. It is also

essential to highlight the effect of the “Tao of Chess” rather than on the main character Wang Yisheng, as this mode of analysis is more likely to reveal the deeper “Taoist subconsciousness” of the writer. Therefore, this paper will appraise the “chess” in *The King of Chess* from the three characteristics of “chess” proposed by Zhang Ru’an.

3 Playfulness and Entertainment

Wang loved chess, and the word “chess” appears sixty-one times in *The King of Chess*. He also repeatedly speaks of the healing power of chess for his spirit. To name only a few, Wang says: “What can I do to relieve my sorrow but chess?” He also states: “I am a fan of chess. When I play chess, I forget everything. I am comfortable with chess. I can play in my mind without a chess board or chess pieces, thus who’s in the way?” Wang sees “chess” as a way to dispel worries and gain mental leisure, and he expresses his true love for “chess” in a straightforward way. Not only the words but also the actual actions Wang takes to practice his Tao of chess: “Since I didn’t have to use my brain to fold the pages, I have played chess in my head. Sometimes, when I got bewildered, I would suddenly slap the pages of a book and shout about the moves of chess, which startled the family.” Wang’s “bewitchment” of “chess” is so shocking that it shows the depth of his love for “chess”. The “dullness” is definite in his affection of “chess”.

The trigger for this is that the game of “chess” is to achieve the state of “sitting and forgetting”, which has a theoretical origin. Laozi once put forward the realm of “washing and removing the mystery” in the 10th chapter of *Tao Te Ching*. According to *Shuowenjiezi*, “washing means sprinkling”, and “remove” is illustrated as “where the old renewal is said to remove” [7]. The overall meaning of the mood as a distant and profound mirror, which can be an insight into the operation of the “Tao”, is easy to be covered by the various worries of the world. Therefore, individuals require washing the dirt to maintain purity. To cultivate this purity, Zhuangzi proposed the phrase “sitting and forgetting” in “the Great Teacher”, which means “to drop the limbs, to depose the intelligence, to leave the form and knowledge, and to be in the same way with the great pass” [8]. When the body is “departing from the form” and the mind is “departing from knowledge” in a two-pronged way, an individual can reach the realm of “forgetting without relying upon something” [9] and merge with the Tao to achieve “great communication”. Wang’s deep love of chess is manifested in the fact that he uses the chess he is obsessed with to achieve a more free and transcendent state, freeing him from the social attributes of a mundane human being and the “ritualistic” ethical constraints of Confucianism. The “sorrow” that Wang wants to “forget” is not entirely but fundamentally clarified by the psychological meaning that “chess” carries, that is, to dispel the sorrow that the tragedy of his family brings to Wang Yisheng, to transcend temporarily, and to keep the ultimate peace, while what is behind it is the intensely realistic grief and the meaning of redemption.

This is an extremely profound realm. Regarding the effect of this realm, Peng Fuchun adds in “On Sinology”: “In the process of anti-masking, one can view and illuminate itself while things manifest themselves. This lies in the fact that one’s view of illumination is to view the nature of things, and the manifestation of things is to manifest in one’s view of illumination. Therefore, the so-called human observation and the manifestation of things are identical” [10]. It can be seen that in the process of “anti-masking” through the two

manners of “leaving the form” and “anti-knowing”, characters can develop an essential interpretation of things and take advantage of the reverse use in the “manifestation of things” that emerges after the “observation and illumination” to help one’s observation, and thus more deeply understand the subtle and elusive connotation of the “Tao”. Wang Yisheng is so deep in the world of “chess” that he even forgets the shackles of reality, and eventually reaches the ultimate tranquility of his mind, which virtually reaches the “sitting and forgetting” as Zhuangzi and Laozi said. This kind of realm is “to the extreme of emptiness and to preserve quiet”, that is, to return to the extreme quietness of the mind’s nature, and to break away from reality to see everything itself.

4 Combativeness and Athleticism

The symbol of “chess” is the game of two individuals holding two sides to try to win their competitive color, which contains layers of the symbolic meaning of the game of checks and balances. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Ban Gu’s “Game Will” also pointed out that “chess is involved in the image of heaven and earth, the emperor’s rule, the five periods of hegemony, and the affairs of warring states, helping us see one’s gains and losses and be ready to the current affairs by ancient things.” Ban Gu holds the view that the most profound place of chess can show the mystery of heaven and earth, the second can show the art of emperor’s rule, and can also show the power and strategy of the hegemony in warring states.

In Wang’s case, “chess” is for the most part a game of entertainment, but when it is indeed competitive, it was the game of nobility. In the fourth section of the text, the context twice mentions Wang’s eyes when he is completely absorbed in “chess”: “Wang sits in a reclining chair in the middle of the field, put his hands on both legs, and looked at..... With his eyes in vain..... Wang’s posture has not switched, still with his hands on his knees, eyes flat, just like looking into the far away, and like staring at the exceedingly near position.....” Wang Yisheng’s eyes have been like a figure of “dead wood”, and his body has left, disappearing into a higher realm. Wang Yisheng has turned the “chess” as the cohesive body of the “Tao” into a vehicle to maintain the ultimate calmness. Such a state of calmness is also the state of “freedom” as Zhuangzi said. Cheng Xuanying’s has a clear interpretation of “freedom and ease”- “freedom and ease is the name of being at relief” [11], meaning a free and self-sufficient mind. According to Liu Xiaogan, Zhuangzi’s “freedom and ease” is “a synonym for a certain kind of freedom”, and Liu also points out that “in regard to the subject and process of freedom and ease, Zhuangzi’s freedom and ease is a spiritual realm realized by a few supreme people and real people after they have cultivated themselves”, and it is “the personal experience of freedom from bondage” [12]. Zhuangzi’s meaning of “freedom and ease” is indeed the meaning of freedom in a narrow sense, and he also pointed out that this freedom is the experience of individual’s unrestrained reality forming the natural experience of life, and attributed this experience to the few who has cultivated and attained the Tao. In addition, Zhuangzi proposed the influence of that state: “The man is not hurt by anything, feeling non-drowned with the tremendous dip in the sky, and feeling cool with the great drought that can melt the gold and stone and scorch the earth and mountains.” After attaining the state of “freedom”, it is difficult for external objects to harm the person who has attained

the Tao. Wang lost his wisdom and became completely “self-sufficient” in the world of “chess”, even throwing away the wordless chess and his mother’s hope, to get rid of all constraints and achieve absolute “freedom”. The consequences of becoming the “The King of Chess” are in line with his “real life. The final result of becoming “chess king” is also in line with his character of “real man” and “supreme man”.

In this regard, it is easy to analyze that Wang Yisheng in “chess” has achieved the goal of maintaining extreme stillness amid external chaos, not being moved by it but merely wandering in the analysis of “chess”, thus eventually comprehending this “matter of war”. The long days of training in “chess” have brought him to the spiritual realm of “chess”, and finally, after the triumph, he has learned “what it means to be alive”. He became the “king” of the “five hegemonic powers”, and by inference, the “Tao” of “chess” can be seen. The “Tao” of “chess” has an overwhelmingly spiritual healing effect on the king’s life.

5 Symbolism and Philosophy

In addition to the philosophical connotation of “forgetfulness” and “freedom” in “chess” discussed above, the philosophical ingredient of “chess” in the philosophical component of “chess” in *The King of Chess* is reflected in the setting of the name—Wang Yisheng. It is said to mean “a life not in vain”. This interpretation of the antique prophetic cryptic style is reasonable and corresponds to the Taoist spirit in the foremost theme. Furthermore, we can see that the connotation of the name has the connotation of thinking about life. In Feng Youlan’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*, he suggested: “In the contemporary terminology, philosophy consists of three major divisions: “Cosmology, the theory of life and the theory of knowledge” [13]. The “Theory of Life” is the philosophical connotation of Wang’s name, and in conjunction with the title, “chess” is also the carrier of “Tao”, and “Tao” naturally contains the “chess”, and the “chess” naturally reveals the “Tao”, the two complements each other, and in the metaphysical and metaphysical systems of the two schools of thought the two complement each other and reveal the image of Wang Yisheng.

Additionally, Ah Cheng also introduces metaphysical arguments in the text, expounding the true implication of “Tao”. In the words of the old man who sells rags, he tells Wang the methodology of “the way of chess” and even “the way of life”: “Provided that your opponent is strong, you should make him mild. But while you are doing so, you must create a restraining power. Softness is not weakness, but it is tolerance, acceptance, and containment. This momentum has to be created by you, with you needing to do nothing. Doing nothing is the way.” There is fairly a profound philosophy in this passage. Li Shen points out that “this technique of Tao is synthesized into an abstract and ‘magnificent concept’ and that it is characterized by ‘the ability to harmonize all aspects’, which is the method and technique taught by the old man here. ‘Chess’ is the “material that forms the form of all things, and the material and the technique are the combinations that erect all things. This passage also presents the two pairs of ‘yin and yang’: ‘Sheng’ and ‘Rou’, ‘Hua’ and ‘Ke’”. The two opposites of “yin and yang” and the emphasis on the mutual changes of “chess” are implied in the concept of “yin and yang” [14]. So the world is altering, and the game of chess is also changing. It is easy to see

that the teachings of “chess” that Wang received throughout his life are also equated to philosophical discussions, and the symbolic and philosophical connotations of “chess” are clear here.

Moreover, these theories are for the old man’s teachings after quite a few fights between Wang and the “old rag-picker”, since then these theories have been familiar to Wang so much so that Wang can paraphrase the old man’s words in the form of direct quotations. He slowly became a “Taoist” chess player, integrating Taoism and Zen into one furnace not only in “chess” but also in “life”, which seems to be a consideration and re-identification of the value of life and philosophy.

6 Conclusion

The three points mentioned above are the expression of the Tao of Chess and the deep Taoist thought embedded in *The King of Chess*. It is under the triple guidance of “chess” that Wang becomes the “king of chess”, and it is also a manifestation of the three epistemological and ideological modes of Taoism. This article decomposes the “Taoist” characteristics of “chess” into three parts, aiming to inspire future scholars to study literature with small insights into the larger picture when studying contemporary novels that inherit the mantle of traditional fiction. It is vital to partially break through the limitations of existing ideologies such as dualism and explore the ideological patterns of traditional Chinese philosophy in a more three-dimensional and objective manner, so as to better explore the uniqueness of traditional Chinese culture and its literary and social value for contemporary times.

References

1. Zhang Ru’an. *History of Chinese Chess*. Beijing: Unity Press, 1998: p. 1.
2. Su Ding & Zhong Chengxiang, *The King of Chess and Taoist Aesthetics*. *Contemporary Writers Review*, 1985(3): pp. 20–26.
3. Hu Heqing, *About A Cheng*, Ma Yuan, Zhang Wei - *The Evolution of Taoist Cultural Wisdom*. *Literary Review*, 1989(02): pp. 71–80.
4. Chen Zhonggeng, *A Cheng: A Complete Understanding of the Spirit of Taoism*. *Journal of Zeroing Normal College of Higher Education*, 2002(01): pp. 38–44.
5. Li Jiefei, *Roots Literature: the Beginning of Renewal (1944–1985)*. *Contemporary Writers Review*, 1995(04): pp. 101–113.
6. Yang Xiaofan, *How to Find the Roots of Youth Novels: The Classicization of The King of Chess and the Stripping Criticism of Root-seeking Literature*. *Southern Literature Forum*, 2010(06): pp. 40–49.
7. Duan Yucai. *Shuowen Jiezi Note*. Nanjing: Phoenix Press, 2007: p. 979, 1278.
8. Chen Guying. *Chuang Tzu’s Present-day Commentary and Translation*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2007: pp. 240.
9. Wu Genyou, Huang Yanqiang. “Sitting and Forgetting” in Zhuangzi is not “Forgetting by Sitting Upright”. *Philosophical Studies*, 2017(6): pp. 38–45.
10. Peng Fuchun. *On Sinology*. Beijing: Being People’s Press, 2015: pp. 67.
11. Guo Qingfan. *Chuang Tzu’s Collected Commentaries*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1961: p. 664

12. Liu Xiaogan. Two Kinds of Xiaoyao and Two Kinds of Freedom. *Journal of Huazhong Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 2007(06): pp. 83–88.
13. Feng Youlan. *History of Chinese Philosophy*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1961: pp. 2–3.
14. Li Shen. The Philosophy of Tao and Qi. *Philosophical Studies*, 2005(12): pp. 28–32.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

