



# Taoist Federation: A Study on Malaysia-Singapore-China Relations Based on Public Diplomacy Theory

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**Abstract.** Religion is a kind of cultural resource for external exchanges. China is the birthplace of Taoism. Taoism is an integral part of Chinese culture and the precious wealth of human civilization. As the carrier of public diplomacy between China and Singapore and also Malaysia, the Singapore Taoist Federation seeks to improve relations between Singapore, Malaysia and China through official or non-governmental exchanges with various institutions and organizations. Singapore Taoist Federation is selected as the research object based on the theory of public diplomacy. By analyzing the establishment, development, operation mechanism, and foreign exchanges of the Singapore Taoist Federation, this paper examines this religious community's role in public diplomacy with the help of relevant theories of public diplomacy. The purpose of this paper is to explore the attributes of public diplomacy of religious organizations. By exploring the frequency and function of the activities carried out by the Singapore Taoist Federation, it is found that the communication activities to China carried out by Singapore Taoist Federation have public diplomacy nature. It plays the role of the subject in Singapore's public diplomacy with China and object in China's public diplomacy with Singapore. At the same time, it also plays the role of bridge and bond in the exchanges between Malaysia, Singapore and China.

**Keywords:** Singapore Taoist Federation · Public Diplomacy · Singapore-China Relations

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Basic Information of Singapore Taoist Federation

As of June 2022, the total population of Singapore was 5.7 million, of which about 74% were Chinese. Most Chinese ancestors in Singapore came from Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan provinces in China. Apart from dialects and living habits, the Chinese brought

their religious beliefs to Singapore. Due to different dialects, those who speak the Fujian dialect seek Fujian Taoist priests, those who talk to Cantonese seek Guangdong Taoist priests, and those who speak the Hainan dialect seek Hainan Taoist priests. Besides, there are Chaozhou Taoist and Hakka Taoist priests [1]. In 1974, three groups of Taoist priests, the Fujian group, the Guangzhou group, and the Guangxi group, began to plan and set up the Sanqing Taoist Association. In 1979, Sanqing Taoist Association was formally established, becoming the first Taoist group in Singapore. Guoxian Chen and others, the founders of the Sanqing Taoist Association, actively advocated massing the power of folk temples in Singapore to promote the development of Taoism [2]. In 1988, the Singapore government conducted a census, and the results showed that the proportion of Taoists in Singapore dropped from 29.3% to 13.4% between 1908 and 1988. To protect the Taoist belief, the leaders of the Sanqing Taoist Association decided to set up Singapore Taoist Federation as the general organization of Taoism [3]. On March 11th, 1990, the Singapore Taoist Federation (from now on referred to as “Taoist Federation”) was formally established, becoming the only national Taoist organization in Singapore. Guoxian Chen, the founder of the Sanqing Taoist Association, was elected as the president of the Federation, and the Council was composed of representatives elected by members of different temples [4].

After the establishment of the Singapore Taoism Federation, it actively established contact with China, exchanged views with Taoist groups in various provinces of China, held lectures, exhibitions, meetings, and other activities, and held seminars with Taoist institutions and academic groups in China, thus expanding the influence of Taoism in Singapore. In 2002, Tiantai Chen was named the successor of the Singapore Taoist Federation. He has done a lot of work in publicizing Taoism, cooperating with the Singapore government in designing religious harmony standards, serving the community, benefiting people, and promoting international Taoist cultural exchanges. In 2005, he began to edit and publish the *Journal of Taoism (Singapore)*, aiming to open a window for Taoists and non-believers to understand Taoism from a cultural perspective further. The Singapore Taoist Federation takes Taoist temples as its members, and each temple elects two agents to form a council [3]. As of December 2022, the Singapore Taoist Federation has 16 boards with 559 members.

## 1.2 Singapore Taoist Federation’s Contacts with China

The main activities of the Singapore Taoist Federation include holding religious activities, participating in charitable activities, promoting Taoist culture, and cooperating with the government and other religious groups. Under the unified leadership, the independence of each temple was kept. On the one hand, temples participate in activities with the help of the Taoist Federation; on the other hand, they also organize activities independently. These temples can give full play to their advantages and characteristics. At the same time, as a religious group, the Singapore Taoist Federation, as a non-profit organization, respects the different beliefs of different races and holds religious activities in various forms. Its formal establishment has offered a home for many Chinese religious believers in Singapore. It has shown advantages in social activities, cultural exchanges, educational investment, academic exchanges, international exchanges, and welfare services. Of course, as a religious association, the Singapore Taoist Federation

has successfully conducted religious discussions at home and abroad. It has a particular reputation and influence. Since its establishment, the Singapore Taoist Federation has worked in extensive exchange activities. Besides organizing activities jointly with the Singapore government and religious organizations, it has frequent contacts with governmental or non-governmental organizations in China and Southeast Asian countries. This paper also selected Singapore Taoist Federation as the research object. Taking the *Journal of Taoism (Singapore)* [1], a quarterly published by the Singapore Taoist Federation, as first-hand data, this paper analyzed the contacts of the Singapore Taoist Federation with China recorded in it and found that Taoist Federation has played a role as a carrier of public diplomacy in these exchanges, which contributed to the development of public diplomacy between people and the two countries.

From 2005 to 2015, the Singapore Taoist Federation had frequent exchanges with Chinese governmental and non-governmental organizations. The Taoist Federation and its subordinate organizations had extensive discussions with the State Administration of Religious Affairs of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Chinese Association for Religious and Cultural Exchanges, provinces and cities in the Chinese Mainland, as well as Taoist groups in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan in Taoist culture, art, academia, and other fields. Among them, the most influential ones include: In 2005, the 2nd China Taoist Culture Festival was held in Chengdu, Sichuan. In 2007, China Religious and Cultural Exchange Association and China Taoist Association held the first international forum of Tao Te Ching. 2008, the President, Secretary General, and other members of the Singapore Taoist Federation went to the China Embassy in Singapore, handed over the donations raised by the members and its affiliated temples for the people in the earthquake-stricken areas in Sichuan to The Chinese Embassy in Singapore, and took part in the activities organized by the Chinese Embassy. In May 2009, "Wudang Chenghuang Taoist Health Institute" was established. In September 2009, "Wudang Chenghuang Taoist Health Institute," "together with China Wudang Taoist Kung Fu Group, participated in the 8th National Wushu Observation Meeting in Singapore, with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as the special guest. In December of the same year, China-Singapore 2009 Religious Culture Exhibition was held in Singapore. In October 2011, the International Taoist Forum was held in Hengshan, Hunan. In 2014, the famous drama troupe of Xiamen, China, was invited to Singapore. The special guest was the Cultural Counselor of the Embassy of China in Singapore. During this decade, there were many exchanges between Singapore Taoist Federation and China, reaching 22 times in 2014. This year, the academic exchange activities between China and Singapore sponsored and participated by Singapore Taoist Federation alone exceeded the previous years. In 2014, the bilateral trade volume between China and New Zealand reached 79.74 billion US dollars, with 2.384 million bilateral personnel exchanges. In 2013, after the Embassy of China in Singapore signed a memorandum of cultural exchange and cooperation with the Singapore-China Friendship Association, the businesses in the fields of culture, science, technology, and education developed further, especially in the area of academic exchange, and the Singapore Taoist Federation gradually became a powerful driving force to promote the intellectual business of Taoist culture between China and Singapore.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Background of Literature Review of Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is a new way of thinking of contemporary diplomacy, which takes culture as its core characteristic and is increasingly valued by countries all over the world. There have been many studies on the definition of public diplomacy. First and foremost, it is undoubtedly a form of diplomacy. As for the subject of public diplomacy, different scholars have different definitions of this concept, which can be roughly divided into two categories. One group thinks that the main body of public diplomacy is government organizations because diplomacy is first and foremost government behaviour. The other group gives a broader concept of public diplomacy, believing that the main body of public diplomacy includes civil organizations and the public besides the government. It can be seen that the first type of definition focuses on “diplomacy” and emphasizes the government, while the second type of definition focuses more on the cultural characteristics of public diplomacy and emphasizes the characteristics of the process of foreign exchanges.

For example, Chinese scholar Zhao Qizheng believes that public diplomacy and government diplomacy jointly constitute the overall diplomacy of a country, and the subjects of public diplomacy include the government, civil organizations, social groups, social elites and the general public. Among them, the government plays the leading role, nongovernmental organizations, social groups and social elites are the backbones, and the general public is the foundation [5]. To sum up, the former regards public diplomacy as a part of government diplomacy, while the latter distinguishes public diplomacy from government diplomacy. Based on the above two definitions, it can be concluded that public diplomacy is inseparable from cross-cultural communication. For example, “Panda Diplomacy” between China and the United States in 1972 and the establishment of the United States Information Agency all fall into the category of public diplomacy. By observing these diplomatic practices, it can also be concluded that the diplomatic mode characterized by cultural exchanges, whether it is the government’s official foreign propaganda or the folk cultural exchange, is indirectly and imperceptibly influencing national policies and international relations, which is often referred to as “cultural diplomacy” in the UK.

Since World War II, public diplomacy has been developing gradually, many countries have been exploring public diplomacy outside the traditional diplomatic field. As an important part of public diplomacy, people-to-people and cultural exchanges have become indispensable links in the process of state-to-state exchanges and are playing an increasingly influential role in international relations. At present, cultural exchanges have become one of the diplomatic practices of many countries. Cultural and people-to-people exchanges help directly form positive interactions between people from different countries and areas, to quickly build people’s perception of a country’s national image, break down cognitive barriers, and lay a foundation for a country’s foreign cooperation in various fields.

### 3 Data Analysis

#### 3.1 Analysis of Public Diplomacy of Singapore Taoist Federation

The Singapore Taoist Federation has a particular influence in the world, and it is also a large-scale organization in religious circles. From the beginning of its establishment, the Singapore Taoist Federation has spread the value of Taoism to overseas Taoist circles so that a broader range of people can know about Taoism. Since 1996, Daoism Festival has been held every year, which is well-known in the Taoist circles of Asian countries. Due to the characteristics of religion, both religious associations and leaders of religious associations are influential, and the development of new media has undoubtedly further expanded the influence. The Singapore Taoist Federation and subordinate institutions, such as the Lorong Koo Chye Sheng Hong Temple and the Taoist Academy of Singapore, have their official websites, which can timely report the Federation's news and its members' news, publicize Taoist culture and provide academic information. Besides, the Singapore Taoist Federation is a modern religious association that has attracted believers by developing orchestras, youth leagues, and other organizations through new media. Macroscopically speaking, it is possible to achieve more significant results by using this appeal of religious associations and their leaders to call for peace and cooperation and oppose wars and conflicts. Religious associations are usually welfare-oriented. Religious activities may be easier to carry out in the era of globalization and information technology [6]. Because religious NGOs are easy to break through the boundaries between countries [7]. However, how a government can enhance its national image through transnational charitable activities sponsored by religious NGOs depends on public diplomacy activities.

Since the reform and opening, new immigrants have become a massive group in overseas Chinese society. These transnational immigrants have unique advantages in public diplomacy. On the one hand, in public diplomacy, international immigrants have more social and cultural knowledge; on the other hand, public opinion spread by social organizations, enterprises, and media also shows influence [8]. The overseas Chinese are influenced by the social culture of the country they live in and have close and diversified connections with their country of origin so that they can be a bridge for communication and mutual exchanges between countries, social organizations, and people. They can also tell Chinese stories about the country where they live in a way that the locals enjoy. Public diplomacy focuses on the role and importance of domestic citizens and expatriates in a country's foreign policy [5].

On the one hand, citizens can initiate public diplomacy activities; on the other hand, the overseas Chinese community is not only the target object of public diplomacy but also the subject of its activities. Under the Belt and Road Initiative background, public diplomacy can give full play to its advantages. It has many tasks such as external publicity, education, rights protection, etc. The critical link provides total freedom for overseas Chinese communities' vital role. Due to the extraordinary immigration history, Southeast Asia is the main area where overseas Chinese live, which has the resources to carry out public diplomacy. But at the same time, the relationship between China and overseas Chinese needs to be handled more seriously and cautiously.

There are many forms of public diplomacies, such as cyber diplomacy, summit diplomacy, expo diplomacy, and economic diplomacy. Because of its broad audience and sustainable development, public diplomacy with religious NGOs as its carrier will become the primary supplement to various forms of public diplomacy and will create a better external environment for other forms of public diplomacy. Religion is both a cultural platform and a spiritual bridge. It is feasible to carry out public diplomacy through religious associations or to promote cultural exchanges through religious activities, both directly and indirectly. The Singapore Taoist Federation is an overseas Chinese community organization based on divine affinity or faith. It keeps close contact with China culturally. Apart from exchanging Taoist culture, the Singapore Taoist Federation often invites traditional theatre companies from Fujian and Guangdong provinces to perform in Singapore. In this process, on the one hand, with the support of the Singapore government, the Singapore Taoist Federation promoted religious and cultural exchanges between China and Singapore; on the other hand, it deepened people's understanding of China's culture, politics, and economy, which played an essential role in China's public diplomacy with Singapore. For China, Taoist Federation is an object of China's new public diplomacy. With the help of Taoist culture and China's traditional culture and art, the friendly relationship between China's government departments, social organizations, the public, and Taoism can be maintained so that more Singaporeans can know and understand China.

Public diplomacy means that under the guidance and support of the government, with foreign governments and people as the target, public diplomacy activities can be carried out with the help of enterprises, social organizations, and the public. Among them, the public in public diplomacy can be subdivided into non-governmental groups, organizations, and individuals. The Singapore Taoist Federation played two roles in public diplomacy activities. From the Singapore government's perspective, with the Singapore government's support, the Singapore Taoist Federation transfers the "information" of public diplomacy through contacts with various official institutions and non-governmental organizations in China. In my opinion, it is worth noting here that the identity of the Singapore Taoist Federation as the target object of China's public diplomacy towards Singapore is naturally formed in its exchange activities with China. Many of these activities are not aimed at public diplomacy. Still, they have objectively played the role of public diplomacy, so there is no such thing as "China makes use of this organization." Besides, scholar Chenfa Wang proposed that "from the perspective of public diplomacy, soft power construction does not need to rely on the lack of domestic organizations or mechanisms. It is a civil organization that can be extended to the other country or a third country or even wins dialogue partners through the bond of faith and culture. The "third party" may not be at home, but abroad [6]. Therefore, from this point of view, the Chinese government and non-governmental organizations can also consult with Singapore Taoist Federation. Suppose the other side is willing to act as a carrier or link of initiative in the public diplomacy activities of the two countries. In that case, it will be easier to carry out public diplomacy activities, which is also a reflection of the flexibility of public diplomacy.

The Singapore Taoist Federation has a high reputation in Singapore society and has particular influence in the Taoist circles of China and Southeast Asian countries.

Through exchanges with various Taoist organizations, government departments, and relevant academic research organizations in China, the Taoist Federation is conducive to developing Singapore's public diplomacy with China. However, from the perspective of public diplomacy, there are two constraints for the Federation to carry out these exchanges with China. On the one hand, from the perspective of the proportion of Taoist believers in Singapore, although the Taoist Federation is a national Taoist organization, its influence in China may not be as broad as that of the Buddhist Federation, which is its limitation. On the other hand, the Taoist Federation has frequent contact with Taoism-related institutions and organizations. Still, in comparison, it has more contact with other religious organizations in Singapore, such as other religious organizations of the Singapore Religious Association. Its contacts with Chinese religious organizations are mainly the Chinese Taoist Association, Taoist associations in various provinces, and Taoist temples, with a smaller scope. The researcher believes that the Taoist Federation can communicate more with other religious organizations in China, such as the Buddhist Association, to facilitate the development of more activities.

On the other hand, due to geographical factors, the Taoist Federation has the most contact with organizations in Fujian Province, while the other connections are mainly with Taoist temples and Taoist research institutions in Hubei and Shanxi provinces. In fact, according to official statistics, there are about 9,000 Taoist temples in China, with about 48,000 Taoist priests and 5 Taoist colleges. These temples, schools, and other institutions can be used as the target objects of the Taoist Federation's public diplomacy with China, as well as to establish contacts with the people of Singapore.

## 4 Conclusion

At present, religious activities have been included in China's public diplomacy. However, most scholars discuss reducing their negative influence, and few discuss using spiritual resources to carry out positive public diplomacy [9]. Some countries worldwide do not understand China's religious policy and even make rumours about "human rights." The researcher believes it is beneficial to control the negative impact within a specific range by contacting overseas Chinese religious communities to convey China's voice to other countries worldwide, introducing China's situation, and carrying out specific public diplomacy activities.

Religious associations have advantages in introducing a country's religious policies and achievements to the international community. By inviting foreign religious communities, China can show the world an accurate and honest picture and eliminate barriers and misunderstandings. There are a large number of people who believe in Buddhism and Taoism in China, and China is the country of origin of Taoism. Relying on Taoist culture, it has a solid foundation for contact and cooperation with Taoist associations in other countries. In addition, there are many overseas Chinese, especially in Southeast Asian countries. At the same time, China's religious associations should also "go global," and by contacting religious NGOs in other countries and participating in related activities, they can show the image of China to the world. The researcher believes that there are two problems worthy of attention. Firstly, it is necessary to avoid the possible risks brought by the characteristics of religion to the development of public diplomacy.



For example, Jonathan Fox said that “religion can legalize foreign policy [10]. Therefore, when carrying out public diplomacy activities, it is necessary to avoid religious beliefs or non-governmental organizations from becoming tools for the struggle between countries. At the same time, it is essential to prevent the infiltration of forces that organize terrorist and separatist activities in the name of religion. Second, public diplomacy activities should be targeted. On the one hand, public diplomacy activities should be carried out according to the specific conditions of the target country; on the other hand, the concept of “overseas Chinese” should be clearly defined, and the implementation should be flexible and operable to avoid being mistaken by other countries for “interfering in other countries internal affairs.”

Since its establishment, the Singapore Taoist Federation has been committed to spreading and developing Taoist culture in Singapore. It has introduced the culture of Singapore to China people through contacts with Chinese government departments and non-governmental organizations. At the same time, it has also told Singapore society the story of China, strengthened the exchanges and cooperation between China and Singapore in the cultural field, and promoted economic development. In the field of public diplomacy, the Singapore Taoist Federation, as a community organization with both religious nature and overseas Chinese characteristics, has become a positive driving force in Singapore-China relations by giving full play to its advantages, promoting the good-neighbourly friendship between China and Singapore and the healthy and stable development of bilateral ties.

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