

Philosophy of Kung Fu Panda Trilogy

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ABSTRACT

The Philosophy of Asian family is deeply rooted in the deontic relationship between father and son. The duty of a father is to teach the son the moral or higher values as well as the pass down of family enterprise. Hailey Milner in her essay “*Religions of the world*” presents these relations by taking the reference of a movie “The Kung Fu Panda (Movie Part 1, 2 and 3)”. She showed a tension between Taoism or Non-interference and Confucianism or traditional way of East Asian Parenting. These philosophies contrast each other in building an individual character by causing moral dilemma on protagonist Po. As story further moves, it incorporate themes of self-worth, validation or approval and self-acceptance. Milner through these movies brought highlight the traditional order of Confucianism and explain the essence of Taoism. In contrast to Milner’s essay the attempt of this paper is to show that Tradition and self-cultivation may not necessarily contradict each other rather it may complement each other. To do so I will once again revisit the trilogy “THE KUNG FU PANDA” and other legendary stories of Asia such as Ramayana, Upanishad and Mahabharata

Keywords: Kung Fu Panda, Asian family, Ramayan, Mahabharata, Upnishad

INTRODUCTION

Robert McKee quote “Stories are the creative conversion of the life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of Human contact”. This Quote perfectly capture the philosophical experience of Kung Fu Panda (Part-1, Part-2 and Part-3). Confucianism and Taoism do not have a specific founder or date while Confucianism appears to be named after an individual who born in 551 BC In China. Taoism is mostly Based on Tao de Ching (The way of Power) which is written by Lao Tzu. Taoism seems to be better spiritual solace for Asian parenting, self-worth, Validation, and Self-Acceptance. Although Confucianism solidifies this problem.

Paper’s Aim and Objective:

The aim and objective of paper is to Philosophise argument in favour of Taoism against Confucianism through the story telling of Kung Fu Panda trilogy. It

describes the experience of traditional Asian parenting and draws parallel from Legendary stories from Mahabharata, Ramayana and Upanishad. The four protagonist Ram (Ramayana), Bhishma (Mahabharata), Nachiketa (Upanishad) and Po (The Kung Fu Panda) will be compared on the basis of their Parenting and decision they took. In conclusion we will show how Taoism is spiritual solace for the problems created due to interference in natural force of universe called Tao.

Commonalities of Chinese Parenting and South Asian Parenting:

Po, Tigress and Tai Lung:

Asian parenting here refers to style of parenting based on system that focuses on children to obey and listen due to its hierarchical nature. Here Chinese parenting and south Asian parenting refers to its standard of carrying father’s tradition and expectation to maintain Confucius order. It is not a mischief to malign the sacred traditions of Asian parenting but to apply a critical

approach and point out its shortcomings.

Our first product of Asian parenting is Tia Lung, the main antagonist of Kung Fu Panda¹. He is what we call tragic hero or anti-hero. Tai was adopted son of Shifu, the only child who was not only treated as student but as the son. Shifu raised him with love and pride he has as a kung fu master to carry forward his legacy. As Tigress says “He (Shifu) believed in him (Tai Lung). He told him he was destined to greatness. It was never enough for Tai Lung¹”. The way he escaped the prison and the fight with furious five is enough evidence to pass the judgement that he is one of the strongest character of series. Tai Lung has this desire for validation of his self-worth from his father is quite relative. During the fight scene with Shifu he put his feelings “All I ever did, I did to make you proud! Tell me how proud you are, Shifu Tell me! Tell me!”² And he further says “Who filled my head with dreams? Who drove me to train until my bones cracked? Who denied my destiny?”³. These remarks suggest that he was never after Dragon scroll but for Shifu’s validation and the central theme of destiny. His character embodies how the expectation could shape someone personality. If he could not achieve the Dragon scroll, he can never become great which is destined for him. When he was denied the scroll by Oogway to test how he reacts at failure where he miserably failed and find solace in darkness. After the escape from prison when he finds the scroll and realised that it was empty that proves that it was not Oogway or the scroll that can make *him great*.

Master Tigress is also the adoptive daughter of Shifu, who is also the leader of furious five. Her hard character showed the training he endured by punching the iron wood trees outside the Jade palace. She represents the child who was abandoned metaphorically and literally due to hopelessness from other child for whom the father, a long time put his hope. The story of Tai Lung was introduced to Po by Tigress confirms the desire of her to be loved like him by Shifu. There is parallel between Tai Lung and Tigress, both wanted approval from their father. After her all hard work when she was going to finally recognised as Dragon warrior, the chance was taken by Po but unlike Tai Lung she didn’t choose

darkness but respect the decision made by Oogway due to her inner belief. Initially she didn’t respect Po and says disrespectful words “You (Po) are a disgrace to Kung Fu and if you have any respect for who we are and what we do, you will be gone by morning”⁴. But when Po saves Shifu and defeated Tai Lung, she was the first to offer salutation to Po.

The main protagonist of series panda named Po, who is cute and fat just like other pandas. He was admirer of furious five and wanted to learn Kung Fu. His adoptive father who is perfect representation of Asian parenting who want to entrust his son with secret ingredient soup to carry tradition which he carried from his father. Mr. Ping says, “You are almost ready to entrusted with secret ingredient of my secret ingredient soup and then you will fulfil your destiny”⁵. There is almost a sense of imposition on panda even Po lied him about dream of noodles which was dream of Kung Fu warrior. This is kind of typical sacrificial macho son for father that is celebrated. But there is catch even Mr. Ping once upon time desired to learn making Tofu which he makes fun of as immature behaviour. When Po heard about selection of Dragon warrior by Master Oogway, he decides to see the furious five, but his father ordered him to sell noodles at Jade palace. This is one of iconic scene of movie due to its subtle nature of representing a rebellion for freedom. Po climbing Jade palace with noodles shows a conflict between his own destiny (Kung Fu) and father’s will (noodles). It was very difficult for panda to climb with noodles but when he abandons the noodles and run for the thing which is very natural for him, then he easily reached. Shifu didn’t ready to accept a panda to be Dragon warrior due to his traditional perception of Kung Fu. The irony here is that Shifu himself was a red panda. Initially he tried to get rid of him but after seeing his dedication he taught Po in a very anti traditional way.

Bhishma, Nachiketa and Ram:

This is attempted to draws parallel between India (Bharat) and China ideal of father-son relationship. Bhishma, Nachiketa and Ram are three central characters eulogise for their role of son and represent the figure to

1. Kung Fu Panda. DreamWorks, 2008
2. Kung Fu Panda. DreamWorks, 2008
3. Kung Fu Panda. DreamWorks, 2008
4. Kung Fu Panda. DreamWorks, 2008
5. Kung Fu Panda. DreamWorks, 2008

adopt.

Bhishma also known as Devavrata and Gangaputra is character of epic Mahabharata. He was son of Shantanu and goddess Ganga. According to legends Shantanu met with fisherwoman Satyawati and fell in love with her. He asked her father for her hand in marriage. Satyawati's father asked a promise to make the son born to Satyawati as King. Shantanu rejected this demand and returned to his kingdom. Devavrata met with Satyawati's father and promised fisherman to put her son to throne. But when fisherman didn't agree then he done the work for which he is known today. Devavrata took the vow for lifelong celibacy for his father's happiness. Due to this hard vow, he was named as Bhishma and his father give him boon of Iccha mritiyu (control over death or wishful death). This whole episode points two things: (1) It is duty of son to sacrifice his something for father's well-being, (2) When son performs such task, he will get some good prize or boon in return. These two tropes are very repetitive in nature in Indian stories. Bhishma had done what is right in his eyes but can't an old father abstain and follow celibacy instead of son. It looks kind of cruelty towards son.

The second protagonist is Nachiketa, whose name is highly revered in Upanishads. He is son of sage Vajashravas. According to legends his father was doing yagya (sacrificial ritual). He was offering his possessions including cows who were old and lame. Nachiketa thought that it will cause his father to live in hell. He intervened in sacrifice and asked his father whom he was offering his son. After consistent provocation due to anger, he shouted "I give you to Yamraj". The legend tells that he met with Yamraj (God of death) and learn about spiritual knowledge of soul (atman). This can be compared with Bhishma who sacrificed for father's desire. It shows how again the ideal son must sacrifice his own individuality and complete the irrational task for father. In last he completes his destiny of becoming sage as reward.

The dialogue of parenting and ideal son in Indian context can't be complete without talking about Ram. He is the avatar of God Vishnu according to Ramayana. Ram was son of Dasaratha and Kausalya, his siblings include Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughan. He was married to princess Sita (Avatar of goddess Lakshmi). The incident for which he popular known follows as; according to legends Kaikeyi second wife of Dasaratha and mother of his stepbrother Bharata asked for long

ago promise which king has made. She asks for exile of Rama for fourteen years to Dandaka Forest. Without even hesitation Ram comply to the demand of his father and gave up throne and moved to jungle where he fulfilled his destiny of killing Ravan (Demon king of Lanka). This could be misled by previous two example, but Ram is unique in himself. The question arise does Ram would comply to the demand even how treacherous and evil it is.

These three characters are very unique in themselves due to this they will be further discussed in next sections. It is not attempted to vilify the father but to understand the impact of this expectations to fulfilled by son instead treating them as individual in oneself. It is necessary to understand the father position in their time and necessity.

Shen / Po: Yin / Yang:

The second part of Kung fu panda trilogy holds four most important aspect: 1) The Yin and Yang of rebellion towards Asian parenting (Po and Lord Shen), 2) The concept of inner peace and energy of universe, 3) The impact of past and what importance it holds, 4) The most asked question "Who I am?"

In first part of movie, it gets clear the constraints of Asian parenting put on their child by analysing Tai Lung, Tigress and Po. It shows how Tai Lung and Tigress didn't liberate themselves, but Po achieved and have guts to said to his father "I love Kung fu", which is going towards own individual nature rather than carrying traditional order. But this revolt against traditional hierarchies and following owns individualism could lead to evil. The prime example of this is Lord Shen.

Unlike others Shen is not some poor adopted but a typical narcissistic rich brat. His parents were Peacock who was popular in Gongmen city. They were known for their colourful fireworks. Instead of following tradition of his parents, Shen followed his individualism and committed a genocide of Panda village to avoid his destiny. The difference between Tai Lung and Lord Shen backstory was that Tai Lung is a real victim of pressure he was put in but Shen committed genocide only to prove his superiority. His parents abandoned him and imprisoned him which is very small punishment as compared to his deed. The way Shen interpreted this imprisonment is quite toxic and this put a lifetime scar on him by himself. These two statements by him from movie could summarise: 1) "My parents hated me. Do you understand they wronged

me, and I will make it right⁶. 2) “Happiness must be taken, and I will take my⁷”. The amount of punishment he received didn’t make sense that they hated his son. Even Soothsayer defends his parents for such accusation. This self-imposed scar on him and defining happiness that something that must be taken is product of his rebellious path. If we compare it with Po, he has a very positive revolt against tradition.

The other three questions cannot be discussed in isolation due to their close relation. Let ask some questions to begin with, what makes yourself completely peaceful? How past defines your present self?, How one can answer the question who am I in light of past and inner peace. Shifu told panda about concept of inner peace and its importance. This happens when Po is all talking about physical threats and Shifu takes a paradigm shift to mental state. When Po sees the peacock symbol on one of guard, he remembers past to which he hasn’t make peace with. After which he asked about his past and who he really is to Mr. Ping. Due to this traumatic past Po didn’t killed Shen when he had chance. The moment Shen answered to Po that his parents abandoned him as terrible thing which he was talking about his self-image he created of his parents. He wanted Panda to feel same thing which he gone through. But what makes difference is Po makes peace with past by letting it flow instead of resisting it. At this time Soothsayer says “Your story may not have such a happy beginning but that doesn’t make you who you are. It is the rest of story who you choose to be.”⁷ When Po defeated Shen, he asked him how he find peace which he simply answers that he let go past and choose who he is in present. And Po finally answered his question that he is son of Mr. Ping because he can choose. He chooses whether past is nightmare or just memory.

Self-worth/ Self-esteem and Self-acceptance:

What is self-worth? What is self-esteem? And what is difference between two? How one can really accept his/her worth?

Self-worth refers to intrinsic evaluation one place on himself/ herself as human being regardless of external factors. As we keep hearing that your value is more than money you earn, you are more than your looks and physical features, you are more than your social status. These

cheesy romantic dialogues are talking about self-worth that an individual worth is more than this external factors. While self-esteem is about what you feel about yourself regarding external factors such as looks, capabilities, personality, body, social status etc. Self-esteem can be understood by statement like I know I can win the competition. This example is of high self-esteem. Self-acceptance is about accepting yourself who you are and knowing what you can do with valid criticism irrespective of others opinion and societal standards. It is having peace with your worth.

This three theme is centred in first part of Kung fu panda trilogy. The movie starts with 2d animation where Po imagined himself a kung fu warrior who defeats the bandits and protect the village. If we look closely, we can see a desire for approval and to be liked by other. In this dream furious five salute him as warrior who he admires and considered someone who is of high worth. What is Panda’s position regarding his self-worth can know by this statement “Every time you threw brick at my head or said I smelled, it hurt but it could never hurt more than it did every day in my life just being me. I stayed because I thought if anyone could change me, could make me ... not me, it was you. The greatest Kung fu teacher in all of China.”⁸ This statement by Po shows the amount of self-hatred he has for himself. For him bring panda is some obstacle in achieving his dream, so he wants to get rid of it. When Oogway choose him as dragon warrior he didn’t believe it that someone like him could become a dragon warrior. Even furious five whom he admired so much make fun of him because he was a panda. He not only hasself-hatred but low self-confidence. At dinner table when Po serves soup to furious five and everyone admired him, but he couldn’t believe it because for him he doesn’t know secret ingredient of soup. It shows that what he was seeking the external validation from person whom he admired, even then he couldn’t believe because the real validation come from within. The whole point is that Po was never comfortable within himself and look approval from others. He evaluates his self-worth from the eyes of other. The question needed to be asked here is does Po’s self-worth evaluation by others is absolute or not. Shifu initially rejects Po as not worthy candidate for Dragon warrior because he needs

6. Kung Fu Panda 2. DreamWorks, 2011

7. Kung Fu Panda 2. DreamWorks, 2011

8. Kung Fu Panda. DreamWorks, 2008

someone who is able to defeat Tai Lung. Tigress rejects panda as not worthy because she needs someone who can do kung fu. The common thing here is need, the valuation of panda depends on need of others. Their opinion about Po is according to their need not absolute truth.

Finally, when Oogway asks Shifu for promise that he will believe in Po and nurture him as dragon warrior. Shifu didn't trained panda as others but according to his nature. Then, Po was able to learn Kung Fu very easily. His training shows that being panda was not something of low value but unique. From this point in movie Po stops trying to change himself but embrace who he is. If we look at his fight with Tai Lung, it is very distinct from traditional kung fu fight like with Shifu. This fight is aesthetic and artistic depiction of Po embracing himself as Panda. Po defeats Tai Lung by saying "I am not just a big fat panda; I am the big fat panda". Here he was able to grasp that being fat is being part of panda.

Taoism and Confucianism:

Taoism and Confucianism are two most influential philosophy or religion of China. They have distinct way of living life but also some similarity. The Kung fu Panda trilogy heavily drawn from these two schools of thought.

Difference between Taoism and Confucianism:

The works of Confucius more focuses on way of living rather than spirituality. It talks about individual moral duty and service for a good and harmonious family and society. It tends to solve problems of daily life rather than mystical mind games, for example in Analects, book 11, verse 12: "Chi-Lu asked how the spirits of the dead and the god should be served. The master said "You are not able to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?" "May I ask about death?" "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" What makes Confucianism different is concept of filial piety (Xiao) which is about serving one's parents. It talks about vital relationship between: (1) The royalty and its subject, (2) Father and son, (3) Older and younger brother, (4) Husband and wife (5) Friend and Friend. Confucius is about learning more and more which makes it rigid in nature.

Taoism or Daoism is based on work "Tao Te Ching", its emphasis on spiritual way of living and achieving Tao often translated as the way. This could be called as religion because focuses on spiritual and mystical aspect of life.

Taoism is often referred as esoteric (not easy to understand). In Taoism practitioners do not pray but seek life's problem through meditations. It talks about going with flow and without interfering natural way. This non-interference is called Wu Wei.

Interpretation of Indian legends:

Earlier we talked about three characters of Indian legend: Bhishma, Nachiketa and Ram. These three characters are criticised for solidifying the tradition of parenting and control over child. But if we look at them with Taoist perspective their life story could give a whole new message. Bhishma who takes a vow of celibacy for lifetime could see as someone who followed his true nature and do not interfere with his destiny. In the same way, Nachiketa who obey his father and took lessons from the god of death can see as someone who go with flow and finally fulfil his destiny as sage. Look at Ram, he can be seen as victim of family politics, but he didn't try to interfere. As Oogway says "There are no accidents", it totally fits with Ram who do not see abandonment with betrayal but as course of destiny to kill demon king Ravan to liberate humans from his torcher.

Confucianism to Taoism:

In kung fu panda movie there is flow from Confucianism to Taoism which can be seen, for example: Shifu in first movie taking about control and in second taking about inner peace and meditation which are elements of Taoism. At starting of movie Mr. Ping talks about handling noodle shop to Po which represents the tradition of Confucianism means everything follows the traditional order. But Po likes Kung fu and he abandoned his tradition to follow what he likes. This shows a shift from Confucianism to Taoism. The three-trilogy emphasis on at Taoist concept Wu Wei means effortless action. Wu Wei is about going with flow of universe without resisting. It is about allowing things to happen naturally than forcing into desired results. It led to harmony and inner peace. This concept is best depicted in conversation between Oogway and Shifu at peach tree. Here, Shifu talks about thing he can control like when the seeds are to plant. To which Oogway counter that it will be still a peach tree. He advised him to let go of his illusion of control and be part of natural flow. He is talking about Wu Wei. When Shifu tried to teach Po in traditional way he miserably fails because it was against the nature of panda. But when he taught in what comes to Po naturally,

he learns easily. He even defeats Tai Lung in his panda way. This statement “One often meets his destiny on the road he takes to avoid it”⁹ of Oogway talks about interference in Tao which is shown in movie multiple times. Shifu sends the messenger to avoid the escape of Tai Lung, but it became the reason of his escape¹⁰. To avoid the prophecy, Lord Shen kills all the pandas but this action leads to his downfall by Po. These two scenarios shows that interference in Tao results futile. This quote “I am not trying to turn you into me; I am trying to turn into you” is one of absolute depiction of Taoism. It emphasises on being who you really are instead of following some traditions. To prepare to fight Kai in the village every Panda is trained in way that is natural to them. Some fight by rolling towards enemies while some hugs and incapacitate them.

Conclusion:

Theme like parenting, burden of expectation, following tradition, self-worth and self-acceptance are

core philosophy of daily life. The trilogy shows how art can be used to answer these questions instead of reading scriptures. When Vedic philosophy became too hard to understand for layman, epic like Ramayana and Mahabharata are written. This themes are expressed beautifully in movie through a tussle of Taoism and Confucianism. This can become a great help in overcoming odds and embracing one’s true nature.

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