

# Ancient Oriental Spirituality: On the Aesthetic of Spirituality in the Film “Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms”

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**Abstract:** The Chinese film “Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms”, adapted from the 16th-century fantasy novel \*Investiture of the Gods\* by Ming dynasty author Xu Zhonglin, presents scenes filled with the mystical essence of Eastern mythology. Director Wu Ershan employs “spirituality” as the core of the film's visual design, adhering to the philosophical theory that “all things possess a soul.” This approach infuses the film's scenes and props with vibrant emotional tension and the vitality of ancient Chinese aesthetics. Through elements such as artistic conception, totem symbols, and primitive religious philosophy, the director imbues the film's visual aesthetic with spiritual energy, conveying the ancient oriental resonance through the mysterious and spiritual culture of the Shang dynasty.

**Keywords:** Film Set Aesthetics; Spirituality; Artistic Conception; Totem Symbols; Religious Philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

The Chinese film \*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms\* (2023) tells the story of Ji Fa, a hostage prince of Western Qi, who dreams of becoming a hero. Upon arriving in Zhaoge, he uncovers the tyrannical deeds of King Zhou, including the murder of his father, defying the heavenly way, and ultimately escapes from Zhaoge. The film promotes the themes of heroism and patriotism found in Chinese mythological epics. The art team, led by Wu Ershan, visited numerous museums and historical sites across China, eventually establishing a design concept that balances tradition with innovation and fuses history with modernity. Art director Tim Yip proposed the creation of visual effects centered on “spirituality,” emphasizing the depiction of “spirit” in Shang dynasty art, which enhances emotional intensity and impact in artworks. Therefore, the “spirituality” in the film can be appreciated on multiple levels, such as the ancient artistic conceptions present in the scenes and the symbolic significance of ancient totemic symbols. By appreciating this spiritual beauty, audiences can experience the captivating charm of ancient oriental epics.

## 2. Spirituality in Artistic Conception: From Painting Styles to Film Scene Creation

### 2.1. Green Landscape Painting Style and the Kunlun Immortal Realm

The “artistic conception” of Chinese film art involves applying the aesthetic forms of traditional arts, such as calligraphy and painting, to the spatial design of film sets and visual imagery, achieving an artistic realm where emotion and scenery are harmoniously blended. In this film, the director creates a variety of artistic conceptions, one of the most prominent being the color art style of green landscape painting. This style is used to create the spiritual Kunlun Immortal Realm. The “green landscape” painting style originated from the “five-element color system” of the Western Zhou Dynasty over 2,000 years ago, where the color

green symbolized prosperity and vitality. In Taoism, green corresponds to wood, which represents life and vitality, reflecting the traditional Chinese philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature. Kunlun Mountain, as the central sacred mountain in Taoism, is the source of many Chinese rivers and home to the highest Taoist deities such as the Queen Mother of the West, the Yellow Emperor, and Yuan Shi Tian Zun. Notably, the director draws inspiration from the landscape composition of the famous painting \*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains\*, where the central green peak, like a pyramid, dominates the scene, surrounded by other mountains, rivers, and trees in a carefully arranged composition.

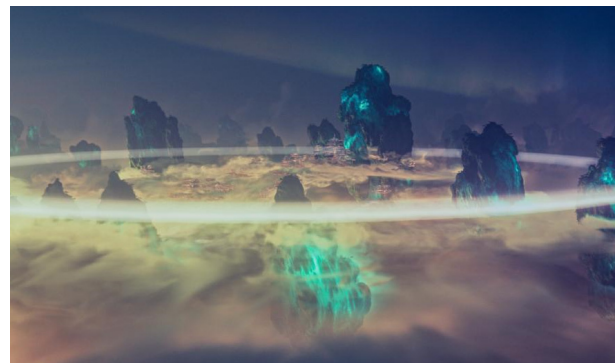


Fig 1. Kunlun Immortal Realm scene from “Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms” (2023)

In the film's main Kunlun Mountain scene, Yuan Shi Tian Zun is shown levitating above the ground in a kneeling

posture, surrounded by a vast green aura, symbolizing his sacred and supreme status as a Taoist deity. Other deities maintain similar postures, arranged in a harmonious and orderly fashion, with their hierarchy visually distinguished by the purity of green shades used in their costumes. Yuan Shi Tian Zun's green aura is particularly striking, featuring a translucent gradient from green to purple, symbolizing the serene and detached nature of Taoist immortals. Additionally, the film includes a panoramic view of Kunlun Mountain, showcasing the abundance of jade trees emitting a green glow, further highlighting the spiritual essence of this ethereal realm. The director cleverly incorporates the mountain shapes from *\*A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains\**, using sharp, rugged peaks and vibrant green tones to create the spiritual Kunlun Mountain, which floats in the sky, enhancing the immortal atmosphere.

## 2.2. The Style of Yongle Palace Murals and Character Design



Fig 2. Detail from Yongle Palace mural from <https://www.cnki.net>

Director Wu Ershan also draws inspiration from the style of Yongle Palace murals to design characters and scenes. In an interview, he mentioned that the characters and costumes in the Yongle Palace murals are identical to those described in *\*Investiture of the Gods\**. The Daoist temples of the time visually presented the mystical and spiritual colors of that world, as seen in the murals and sculptures. The Yongle Palace murals primarily use colors like stone blue, stone green, earth red, and earth white, derived from Taoist "five-element colors." According to Taoist cosmology, colors are assigned to geographical directions: blue for the east, red for the south, white for the west, black for the north, and yellow for the center. The director uses this color scheme in the film, such as designing Queen Jiang's and the Duke of the East's costumes in soft blue tones, reflecting the "blue for the east" concept, while the Duke of the South's costume is dark red, corresponding to "red for the south."

However, the director also adjusted the color palette based on the historical context of the Shang Dynasty. For instance, Chinese historical texts record the Shang Dynasty's cultural tradition of favoring white, leading the director to use a predominantly white color scheme for the palaces of Zhaohe and King Zhou's attire. To contrast with this, the director designed a golden wheat field scene for Western Qi, reflecting the prosperous life of its people, where warm earthy tones represent hope and vitality, corresponding to "yellow for the earth" in the five-element color system. The director also borrowed the costume styles of the Daoist priests depicted in

the "Pilgrimage of Celestials" mural from Yongle Palace, incorporating their formal, loose-fitting robes into the costume design for Yuan Shi Tian Zun, symbolizing his transcendence and detachment. Similarly, the emperor's costume style from the "Pilgrimage to the Heavenly Court" mural was adapted for King Zhou, conveying his imperial majesty. Through this clever use of ancient cultural elements, the director brings the spiritual beauty of Chinese painting into the film, offering viewers a profound sense of the mystical and spiritual atmosphere.

## 3. Spirituality in Totemic Symbols: The Spiritual Core of Shang Dynasty Civilization

### 3.1. The Beast-Face Motif "Taotie" and the Architectural Design of Palaces



Fig 3. Palace Scene from *\*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms\** (2023)

The film features numerous totems from the Shang Dynasty, with the most prominent being the spiritual symbol of the *\*Taotie\**, representing King Zhou's authority, courage, and ambition to unify China. In ancient Chinese mythology, the *\*Taotie\** was a mysterious beast symbolizing power and ferocity, evoking a sense of awe. Historically, the *\*Taotie\** was a composite creature imagined by ancient artisans, blending features of insects, fish, birds, and beasts into one mythical figure. In the film, the director designed a *\*Taotie\** totem above the throne in the main setting of "Longde Hall," symbolizing King Zhou's supreme power. The intricate and symmetrical design of this *\*Taotie\** sculpture presents a formidable beast, as shown in Fig. 3. The director used exaggerated techniques to enhance the visual impact, portraying the *\*Taotie\** with an exaggerated, fearsome appearance. The statue features large, round eyes with highly stylized, downward-curving eyebrows, giving it a solemn and commanding expression. Additionally, the *\*Taotie\** incorporates various animal features, such as goat-like teeth near the mouth, a bull's nose on the central axis, and phoenix and bird motifs atop its head. The sides of the *\*Taotie\**'s head feature single-footed dragon carvings. This combination of animal elements emphasizes the mystery of the *\*Taotie\** and

illustrates that in the Shang Dynasty, the \*Taotie\* served as a spiritual vessel filled with significance.

Furthermore, the director incorporated the image of the \*Taotie\* into the architecture of another palace, the "Deer Terrace." This seven-story palace served as King Zhou's sleeping quarters and as a place of entertainment with Daji. As shown in Fig. 4, the eerie nighttime atmosphere highlights the intricate details of the third-floor ceiling in King Zhou's chamber. The ceiling beams are adorned with two light sources, casting sharp, diamond-shaped patterns that represent the fierce eyes of the \*Taotie\*. The flying eaves on the fourth floor, designed in the shape of birds, symbolize the eyebrows of the \*Taotie\*, while the columns on the lower floors resemble the beast's fangs. Visually, the building presents a top-heavy design, forming the likeness of a \*Taotie\*'s head. The director's extensive use of \*Taotie\* motifs in the palace's architectural design creates a dynamic and spiritually resonant aesthetic for the film's sets.

### 3.2. The "Xuan Bird" Worship and Sacrificial Scenes



Fig 4. Sacrificial Scene from \*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms\* (2023)

According to Chinese classics, such as the \*Book of Songs\*, the myth of the Shang Dynasty's origin mentions, "Heaven commissioned the Xuan bird, to descend and give birth to Shang." Additionally, it is said that the Shang Dynasty's ancestor, Qi, was born after his mother swallowed the egg of the Xuan bird. The director incorporates the totem of the "Xuan Bird" into the sacrificial scenes, symbolizing the Shang Dynasty's spiritual and primitive worship, as shown in Fig. 4. The term "Xuan" is linked to the natural laws of the universe, with its origins in fertility worship, which became a significant cultural concept in ancient China. Laozi believed that the "Dao" and the source of all things began with the reproductive worship embedded in the concept of "Xuan." Hence, in the film, King Zhou hosts a grand sacrificial ceremony using the Xuan bird as an important totem, praying for the prosperity and longevity of the Shang Dynasty.

The Xuan bird prop in the sacrificial scene is depicted as a small bird with a hooked beak resembling that of a hawk, bright red elliptical eyes, and long, eagle-like wings. While the Xuan bird is a mythical creation, the director referenced historical accounts, such as the "Swallow Theory" and the "Crow Theory," to design this spiritually charged creature. The body of the Xuan bird is also adorned with "cloud and thunder patterns." These patterns, combining circular motifs representing clouds and spiral designs symbolizing thunder, add layers of spiritual meaning to the prop. The extensive use of cloud and thunder patterns in the sacrificial scene reflects the ancient society's reverence for natural phenomena like clouds and lightning, which were seen as divine signs. By incorporating these spiritual symbols and totems into the sacrificial scenes, the director conveys the Shang Dynasty's

deep-rooted totemic culture, highlighting the spiritual essence of its civilization.

## 4. Spirituality in Religious Philosophy: "Round Heaven, Square Earth" and the Spirit of Qi

### 4.1. The Philosophy of "Round Heaven, Square Earth" and the Ancestral Temple Architecture



Fig 5. Ancestral Temple Scene from \*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms\* (2023)

In the design of the ancestral temple architecture in the film, the director employed the Taoist philosophy of "round heaven, square earth," as shown in Fig. 5. This reflects the ancient Chinese metaphysical understanding of heaven, earth, and nature, imbued with spiritual mysticism. The ancient Chinese believed that the concepts of "round heaven, square earth" and "harmony between heaven and humanity" belonged to Taoist thought. "Round heaven, square earth" embodies their reverence for the universe, with expressions such as "heaven is yang, earth is yin" and "heaven is round like a canopy, earth is square like a chessboard" providing explanations of this philosophy. The ancestral temples served as reminders to maintain social order by adhering to "rules and order," in alignment with the heavenly way, avoiding any unlawful actions. The term "rules" in traditional Chinese culture encompasses both the concepts of "square" and "round," as seen in the \*Tao Te Ching\* quote: "All things are produced by the Tao, and nourished by its outflowing operation. They receive their forms according to the nature of each, and are completed according to the circumstances of their condition. Therefore, all things without exception honor the Tao and exalt its outflowing operation." This emphasizes the importance of both Tao and order. Therefore, in Taoist culture, "square" and "round" not only symbolize heaven and earth but also represent social order and regulation.

In the film's ancestral temple scenes, the director uses a circular design for the main temple building, with the circle representing "heaven" and the ethereal world, symbolizing awe and reverence for the heavens. Meanwhile, the square base and walls of the temple represent the earth. The perfect combination of square and round in the architecture symbolizes social order and the philosophy of "round heaven, square earth." Additionally, the director features two circular buildings in the film, one towering high and the other with a low, sunken visual effect. This design reflects the Taoist concept of yin and yang, adding to the spiritual and mystical beauty of the film's Taoist cultural elements.

## 4.2. The Application of Taoist "Qi" Culture

One of the most important concepts in Taoism is the culture of "Qi." The director incorporates this concept into many scenes, infusing them with a sense of mystery and spiritual energy. In Taoist culture, Qi primarily refers to air, gas, or breath but is often translated as a metaphysical concept of "vital energy," referring to the supposed energy circulating through the body, though it also encompasses universal energy, including heat, light, and electromagnetic energy. The definitions of Qi often involve breath, air, or the relationship between matter, energy, and spirit. Therefore, different types of Qi carry different spiritual energies, including positive energy like celestial Qi, and negative energy such as demonic or evil Qi.

Firstly, the film's scenes featuring negative energy, like "evil Qi" and "demonic Qi," are crucial to its atmosphere. The most grandiose scene in the film is King Zhou's Longde Hall, designed to reflect his tyrannical nature. To achieve this, the director combines exaggerated architectural elements to create an oppressive atmosphere. The palace is colossal, making the characters appear diminutive, which intensifies the sense of overwhelming power. Moreover, the hall is filled with menacing \*Taotie\* patterns and sculptures, whose ferocious expressions and dark brown tones contribute to a sinister and terrifying mood. These \*Taotie\* designs reflect King Zhou's cruel temperament, filling the scene with "evil Qi." Additionally, the film portrays "demonic Qi" in the Deer Terrace, a place of indulgence for King Zhou and Daji, where she performs seductive dances to captivate him. The director designed two massive arched bridges on either side of the main building, with small pavilions atop them. These elegant, curving bridges resemble the wings of the mystical Xuan bird, adding to the "demonic Qi" of the scene and highlighting Daji's alluring nature.

On the other hand, scenes filled with positive energy, or "celestial Qi," also play an important role. The Kunlun Immortal Realm exudes celestial Qi, where the director emphasizes the status of the deities by surrounding them with halos of Qi. The ground of this scene is designed with a mirror effect, allowing the audience to see the deities' reflections, a feature that echoes Taoist notions of "emptiness." Taoism teaches that one must transcend desires to perceive the true nature of all things, as expressed in the \*Tao Te Ching\*: "The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way; The names that can be named are not unvarying names. It was from the Nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang; The named is but the mother that rears the ten thousand creatures, each after its kind. Only he that rids himself forever of desire can see the Secret Essences; He that has never rid himself of desire can see only the Outcomes." Through the Taoist concept of Qi, the director adds an aura of mysticism to the set designs, making them spiritually resonant.

## 5. Conclusion

The distinctive oriental aesthetic of the Chinese film \*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms\* (2023) offers audiences a fantastical visual feast of the Shang Dynasty.

Director Wu Ershan employs "spirituality" as the core visual design concept, crafting a film rich in the color and grandeur of Eastern mythological epics, perfectly blending cinematic art with epic storytelling. The concept of "spirituality" permeates all aspects of the film's set design. From the level of artistic conception, the director imbues the scenes with a sense of spirituality through color and visual aesthetics. The use of ancient totemic symbols and mystical metaphysical concepts further enhances the spiritual and mysterious quality of the sets, transmitting the energy of spirituality throughout the film's visual landscape. The fusion of ancient and modern elements, the interplay of reality and fantasy, and the integration of traditional Eastern epic aesthetics with contemporary special effects technology evoke cultural pride in Chinese audiences and bring ancient Eastern mythological epics back to life, radiating the spiritual and powerful resonance of ancient oriental sounds.

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