Beyond Utilitarian Compassion: The Daoist Practice of Animal Release

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Abstract

This article examines the Daoist practice of animal release (*fangsheng* 放生) as a cultural phenomenon, aiming to explore how it embodies the characteristics of diverse integration and harmony in diversity within Daoist culture, while also uncovering its contemporary relevance. Methodologically, the analysis unfolds across three dimensions of Daoist animal release: ideological, ritual, and ethical. Ideologically, it integrates the Confucian concept of benevolence, the Daoist idea of equalizing all things, and the Buddhist notion of reincarnation. Ritually, it incorporates Buddhist ceremonial norms while preserving distinct Daoist features. Ethically, it critiques "pre-arranged animal release" (預補放生) and proposes a harmonizing approach of "spontaneous release according to circumstances" (隨緣放生). The authors argue that Daoist animal release not only serves as an example of the creative integration of the three teachings (Confucianism 儒, Daoism 道, and Buddhism 佛) but also offers significant insights for the modern era: its ecological perspective of "no distinction between species" (類無貴賤) provides resources for ecological ethics; its shift from utilitarian release to spiritual cultivation promotes inner transformation; and its model of harmonious coexistence among diverse cultures offers a historical paradigm for mutual learning among contemporary civilizations.

Keywords: Daoism; Animal Release; Three Teachings; diverse integration; Ecological ethics

Introduction

Animal release, an essential component of traditional Chinese religious practices, centers on freeing captured animals destined for slaughter, to obtain divine blessings and protection. The concept of animal release in ancient China drew from two primary sources: the Confucian philosophy of "cherishing all living beings and valuing life" (愛物重生), which reflects the benevolent regard and care for life held by the humane; and Buddhist prohibitions against killing, coupled with the doctrines of karma and reincarnation, which emphasize that excessive killing will inevitably bring about disaster. Ming Dynasty scholar Xie Zhaozhe (謝肇制) noted a significant difference in the motivations behind the prohibition of killing in Confucianism and Buddhism: "Buddhists refrain from killing for the sake of reincarnation, whereas we refrain from killing simply because we cannot bear to see life unjustly taken" (佛家戒殺為輪回計，吾之戒殺則不忍其死於非命而已，Xie 2009, 306). Qing Dynasty scholar Qian Chengzhi (钱澄之) elaborated on the motivations for animal release in both traditions: "Confucianism advocates release out of compassion and the inability to bear suffering, while Buddhism advocates it out of fear of karmic consequences and the dread of retribution" (由儒家之说生怜悯心有不忍　不放者，由因果之说生恐怖心有不敢不放者，Qian 2006, 89). Nevertheless, these differences did not hinder the acceptance of the practice of animal release. On the contrary, they contributed to its emergence as a representative folk custom in traditional Chinese society. After the Six Dynasties period (六朝 222–589 CE), Daoism established its own cultural system of animal release by building upon traditional Chinese concepts while assimilating Buddhist doctrines and rituals. Rather than simply transplanting or piecing together traditional release concepts, it employed the wisdom of "harmony in diversity" (和而不同) to break through the cultural barriers between Confucian and Buddhist thought. This approach not only constructed a theoretical framework and ritual norms for animal release with distinctive Daoist characteristics but also enriched the diversity of Daoist culture.

However, compared to Buddhism, academic research on Daoist animal release culture remains notably insufficient. Currently, the practice of animal release in Buddhism has been systematically and thoroughly explored. Chinese scholars (Wei Dedong 1999; Feng Jun 2010; Sheng Kai 2013; Feng Guodong and Xiong Shuqi 2020) have established a fundamental narrative framework for Buddhist animal release culture from multiple dimensions, including its historical origins, the formation of its rituals, and its integration with traditional Chinese culture. Animal release is not only regarded as an act of saving animal lives but also as a significant practice within the Buddhist spiritual system, "achieving salvation through saving others." The ritual procedures of Buddhist animal release can be traced back to the Tiantai school monks Zhili (知禮) and Zunshi (遵式) of the Sui Dynasty (隋朝 581–618 CE). The basic structure encompasses seven stages: setting the seat (敷座), reciting mantras (誦咒), scattering and sprinkling (散灑), inviting the Three Jewels (請三寶), conferring the Three Refuges (授三皈依),

invoking the name of *Ratnasambhava* (稱寶勝如來號), expounding the Twelve Nidānas (說十二因緣), and repenting with vows (懺悔發願), all reflecting profound religious ethics and compassion for life.

Meanwhile, the international academic community often examines Buddhist animal release within the context of ecological ethics and social practices, particularly focusing on coastal regions such as Taiwan and Xiamen in China, analyzing the ecological and social issues it raises. For instance, Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes (2008) point out that animal release activities may lead to unintended environmental consequences and, from contemporary economic and public health perspectives, critique the phenomenon where compassionate motives are overshadowed by commercial interests. Katherine Swancutt (2020) views animal release as a poetic ethical practice that restrains violence and redefines human-animal relationships—an interpretive approach that shares certain resonances with Daoist perspectives on animal release. Avi Darshani (2021) focuses on the tension between Buddhist animal release in Xiamen and state regulatory policies, particularly noting how religious groups defend their rituals amid public criticism, reflecting the complex interplay between religious practices and secular governance.

Just as the Buddhist practice of animal release reveals multiple layers of meaning and social reverberations, Daoist animal release similarly embodies profound ethical concepts and a unique cultural logic. However, compared to Buddhist animal release, systematic research on Daoist animal release remains relatively scarce. Most scholars (Schipper and Verellen 2004; Zhang 2014; Zuo 2019; Huang 2024) have only scratched the surface of its concepts and attitudes, failing to delve into its cultural origins, the formation and evolution of its rituals—elements that truly reflect the intrinsic characteristics of Daoism. In light of this, this article aims to adopt a philological perspective to explore the historical context of the formation of Daoist animal release culture, the creation and development process of its rituals, and its theoretical contributions to rectifying the shortcomings of traditional animal release practices. This research illuminates how Daoism synthesized and assimilated the animal release cultures of Confucianism and Buddhism, creatively transforming them to develop a cultural expression with distinct Daoist characteristics. This process not only highlights the structure and spirit of Daoist culture itself but also profoundly demonstrates its capacity for harmony and intrinsic vitality within a context of multicultural coexistence. However, Daoist animal release, as a religious practice equally deeply rooted in China's indigenous cultural traditions, has not yet received corresponding academic attention.

Unity in Diversity: How Daoist Animal Release Absorbs and Integrates the Philosophies of the Three Teachings

The earliest records of Daoist animal release can be traced back to the Lingbao School's scriptures during the Six Dynasties period. For instance, the *Dongzhen Taishang Basu Zhenjing Sanwu Xinghua Miaojue* (洞真太上八素真經三五行化妙訣

Wondrous Formula for Practicing Transformation by the Three and the Five)[1] states: "The benevolent cherish life, abhor killing, rescue the endangered, protect the growing, prohibit harm and slaughter, and shun envy. Such individuals can harmonize yin and yang, liberate the living to deliver the deceased, embody compassion, constantly dwell on virtuous deeds, accumulate benevolence to attain longevity, and ultimately achieve immortality" (*Daozang*, vol. 33, 475). Similarly, the *Dongxuan Lingbao Taishang Zhenren Wenji Jing* (洞玄靈寶太上真人問疾經 The Transcendent Person of the Most High Enquires into Illness) notes: "Those who liberate lives and deliver the deceased have long attained the True Dao" (*Daozang,* vol. 24, 679). By the Tang Dynasty, the *Zhengyi Fawen Jing Huguo Jiao Haipin* (正一法文經護國醮海品 Offering to the Seas for the Protection of the State, from the Zhengyi Ritual Canon) also emphasized: "Practitioners of the Dao should firm their faith, diligently cultivate merit, establish achievements for the state, rescue and protect the people, prioritizing others over themselves... Persisting in liberating lives and delivering the deceased, when merit is perfected, they will attain the Dao and ascend to heaven" (*Daozang*, vol.32, 702). These records reflect Daoism's emphasis on the value of life, its compassion, and its spirit of self-sacrifice, prioritizing others over oneself. Conversely, violating the doctrine of "prohibiting killing" (禁殺) not only prevents one from attaining immortality but also incurs divine punishment.

After Buddhism was introduced to China, Daoism incorporated its precept against killing and gradually established animal release as an important practice. For example, according to the teachings of *the Taishang Dongzhen Zhihui Shangpin Dajie* (太上洞真智慧上品大誡 Great Superior Rules of Wisdom), practitioners should always maintain a heart of compassion, pity all living beings, and help people overcome calamities through releasing animals. Doing so generates great merit. It enables people in this present life to turn danger into safety, recover from illness, escape poverty and become wealthy, and fulfill their heartfelt wishes.

The *Zhengyi Fawen Taishang Wailu Yi* (正一法文太上外籙儀 Compendium of the Exterior Registers of the Zhengyi Canon) introduces the concepts of "Five Virtues and Nine Merits" (五德九功) among which the first of the Five Virtues is "releasing animals to save lives, treating all sentient beings with an equal heart" (*Daozang.* 1988. vol.32, 211). The *Shangqing Hetu Neixuan Jing* (上清河圖內玄經 Book of the Interior Mystery of the River Chart, from the Shangqing Canon) also references "Nine Virtues" (九德) and "Nine Merits" (九功) listing non-killing as the primary virtue and releasing animals to save the dying as the foremost merit. Additionally, the *Taishang Dadao Yuqing Jing* (太上大道玉清經 Scripture of Jade Purity of the Great Tao of the Most High) describes various methods practitioners use to accumulate merit. Among them, "the sixth merit is to ransom and release animals, regardless of their value, size, or status—even including aquatic life—doing one's utmost to aid them. If no suitable water source is available, they should be moved to deeper waters so they may revive and thrive" (*Daozang*, vol.33, 365). These guidelines form essential precepts that Daoist practitioners must strictly adhere to

in daily life and represent a key means of accumulating merit. Furthermore, classical texts such as the *Wushang Biyao* (無上祕要 The Essence of the Supreme Secrets) classify failure to release animals and redeem the deceased as one of the taboos. Those who violate these, according to doctrine, will face interrogation and punishment by officials of hell.

Daoism regards animal release as a way for practitioners to accumulate blessings and combines it with the traditional Chinese concept of "reciprocal retribution" (Chengfu 承負, Wu 2024). It means that the good or evil deeds performed by ancestors can affect the quality of life of their descendants. Through this, Daoism conveys the idea that "good deeds beget good rewards" (善有善報), encouraging people to do more good deeds. For example, the Scripture of the Jade Purity of the Great Tao mentions a blissful realm called "The paradise of new life" (種人天), which four types of people can enter. The first three types are devout people who are filial to their parents, widely benevolent, and uphold precepts while performing good deeds. The *Taishang Dadao Yuqing Jing* explains that the blessings we speak of are not always cultivated by oneself. It may be that their grandfather or an ancestor in a past life performed actions involving giving alms, releasing animals to save lives, aiding the poor and vulnerable, relieving the elderly and sick, or supporting practitioners—although these good deeds were not ultimately completed, the merit did not vanish, and the blessings extended to their descendants. Such individuals belong to families with profound accumulated virtue, which can last for nine generations. This concept of increasing blessings through animal release enriches Daoism's theory of reciprocal retribution: the good deeds performed by ancestors, especially acts such as animal release, transform into blessings for the happy lives of their descendants. If people wish for their descendants to continuously enjoy a happy life, they must persistently practice good deeds such as animal release during their own lifetime.

It is generally believed that Daoism incorporated a well-known fable about animal release recorded in the Buddhist Sutra known as *Jin Guangmingjing* (金光明經 Sutra of the Golden Light). This story recounts how Liushuizhangzhezi (流水長者子 Jalavāhana) saved a large number of dying fish by not only providing them with water and food but also expounding the Mahayana teachings to them. After hearing the Buddhist doctrine, the fish were reborn in Renlitian (忉利天 Trāyastriṃśa). Later, the fish manifested as *devas* and returned to his dwelling, showering him with countless jewels and displaying auspicious signs in gratitude. This story profoundly influenced the practice of animal release in Chinese religion, particularly reinforcing the tradition of releasing fish and aquatic creatures. Daoism further integrated this tradition with the symbolic meaning of fish in Chinese folk culture. Due to their prolific reproduction, fish are often regarded as auspicious symbols of prosperity and numerous offspring. Consequently, releasing fish gradually acquired the connotation of praying for descendants. Meanwhile, Daoism emphasizes that saving one fish is equivalent to saving numerous lives, thereby accumulating more merit. For instance, the Song Dynasty Daoist

text *Taishang Shuo Xuantian Dasheng Zhenwu Benzhuan Shenzhou MiaojingZhu* (太上說玄天大聖真武本傳神呪妙經注 Scripture of the Divine Spell Personally Transmitted by Zhenwu, Great Saint of the Dark Heaven, and Spoken by the Most High) states: "According to the Chapter on Protecting Descendants, if a family has few members and lacks thriving offspring, this can be resolved through animal release and redeeming lives" (*Daozang.* vol.17, 120). The Yuan Dynasty text Book *Zitong Dijun Huashu* (梓潼帝君化書 Book of Transformations of the Divine Lord of Zitong) more explicitly interprets animal release as "not killing fish, and especially not harming fish roe" (*Daozang.* vol.3, 293). It also records a miraculous tale: a wealthy merchant purchased a large quantity of fish roe and released it into rivers, an act equivalent to saving a hundred thousand lives. Ultimately, he was rewarded with a twelve-year extension of his lifespan.

Daoism also promotes animal release as a means of healing and prolonging life. For example, the *Scripture of Zhengyi Weiyi Jing* (正一威儀經 Scripture on the Liturgy of the Zhengyi Masters) records: "If a master falls ill or encounters calamity, disciples should attend to them by burning incense, making offerings, repenting for wrongdoings, and releasing animals, praying for longevity and deliverance from misfortune" (*Daozang.* vol.18, 255). The *Taishang Lingbaotianzun Shuoyanshou Miaojing* (太上靈寶天尊說延壽妙經 Marvelous Scripture on Longevity, Preached by the Most High Lingbao Tianzun) also states: "If men and women in the world wish to extend their lives, dispel disasters, and accumulate blessings, they should sincerely burn incense, maintain vegetarian fasting, practice the Dao, give alms, release animals, accumulate merit, and recite scriptures as offerings" (*Daozang*, vol.6, 308). Daoism further integrates this concept into medical practice. As written in the appendix "An Essay on Practicing Compassion through Action" (力到行方便文 Texts exhorting people to perform daily acts of kindness) of the *Secret Recipes of Xianzhuan Waike Mifang* (仙傳外科祕方 Secret Formulas for External Medicine, Transmitted by the Immortals), compiled by the early Ming dynasty Daoist priest Zhao Yizhen (趙宜真): "The suffering of all living beings is no different from that of humans. If killing can be avoided, it should be. Insects, birds, and beasts should all be treated equally. Those who commit excessive killing will face judgment in the hell" (*Daozang* vol.26, 718). Daoist medical texts combine the everyday good deed of animal release with the common people's desire to preserve life and prolong longevity, encouraging both the accumulation of merit and reinforcing Daoism's auxiliary role in social education. The underlying logic is that by saving other lives, one can equivalently exchange for their own extended lifespan. Through the act of animal release, people sow seeds of good causes, hoping to reap favorable outcomes in the future and thereby resolve suffering. This religious notion that "doing good deeds will inevitably bring good retribution" (施皆有報) aligns with the most fundamental emotions and expectations of the people.

In summary, the Daoist concept of animal release integrates traditional Chinese beliefs such as cherishing life and reciprocal retribution, while also incorporating

Buddhist principles like the prohibition of killing, karmic retribution, and expedient means of spiritual practice. This has formed an inclusive ideological system. Its diverse and integrated nature made Daoist animal release culture more accessible to grassroots society. For instance, during the Tang and Song dynasties, the practice of animal release became particularly widespread. At large-scale events, tens of thousands of people gathered by lakesides, releasing millions of birds, fish, and turtles. Today, remnants of animal release ponds and related inscriptions from that era can still be found. At the time, officially organized animal release activities primarily emphasized bestowing kindness and benevolence upon all creatures, with their core focus being reverence for the ruler and praying for the emperor's longevity and blessings. These activities were regarded as acts of virtuous compassion rather than highlighting their Buddhist origins. Daoism, which maintained close ties with the imperial court, was naturally influenced by this trend. Daoist temples across the country constructed animal release ponds, using them as means to pray for the emperor's prolonged life.

The Distinctive Daoist Animal Release Ritual: An Indigenous Creation Based on the Buddhist Paradigm

The practice of animal release can be traced back to the salvation rituals of Daoism during the Six Dynasties period, where it often formed part of the repentance process, though detailed records of the specific procedures are lacking. According to some Daoist scriptures, acts such as animal release and lamp lighting could help atone for the sins of the deceased, accumulate merit, and facilitate their rebirth in paradise. The frequent pairing of "animal release" and "lamp lighting" (燃燈) in texts reflects how Daoism incorporated Buddhist rituals during its development. In Buddhism, practices such as animal release, lamp lighting, incense offering, and flower presenting are all means of expressing devotion, accumulating merit, and repenting for wrongdoings. Interestingly, early Buddhist texts provide limited detailed accounts of lamp lighting ceremonies. Instead, it was Daoism that integrated China's ancient tradition of lamp and candle worship with Buddhist thought, giving rise to the "Lingbao Lamp Liturgy" (靈寶燈儀). As scholar Wang Chengwen （王承文） noted, the Daoist lamp liturgy evolved by integrating Buddhist teachings into the framework of the Celestial Master Dao tradition (Wang 2001, Ji 2003). Similarly, the Daoism animal release ritual likely developed and matured by drawing inspiration from Buddhism in a comparable manner.

It was not until the Song Dynasty that Daoist texts began to document complete animal release rituals. The Golden Register Animal Release Ritual, compiled in the early Song Dynasty, was specifically used to pray for blessings on the emperor's birthday. The "Golden Register" (金籙齋) generally refers to prayer ceremonies held for the emperor, and the officially organized animal release activities in the Song Dynasty were often associated with the emperor's birthday. People in the Song Dynasty often released pigeons and birds to celebrate birthdays. This custom was not only practiced during the

emperor's birthday but was also adopted by nobles, officials, and even common people to mark their own birthdays. At that time, animal release was not limited to fish but also included birds, beasts, and even livestock. Through animal release, the people expressed respect for life and prayed for blessings for the emperor and the nation. Using animal release to celebrate birthdays also implied an emphasis on new life and the auspicious meaning of continuous renewal. The animal release process recorded in the Golden Register Animal Release Ritual (金籙齋放生儀 The rites for the liberation of living beings) includes steps such as purifying the venue, conducting the ceremony, releasing the animals, and chanting scriptures. The *Lingbao Lingjiao Jidu Jinshu* (靈寶領教濟度金書 Golden Book of Salvation according to the Lingbao Tradition), compiled by Lin Lingzhen (林靈真) of the Southern Song Dynasty, also includes a complete set of animal release rituals. The basic structure of the two rituals are very similar, with the main difference lying in their purposes: the former was to praise the emperor's virtues, extol his benevolence and respect for life, and pray for the nation's peace and stability; the latter was for ordinary believers to accumulate merits in the hope of avoiding disasters and receiving divine blessings through animal release. It is certain that animal release rituals were typically performed after large-scale Daoist ceremonies. Daoist believers held the conviction that through such rituals, they could genuinely accumulate good deeds, gradually increase their blessings, and thereby receive positive rewards.

In rituals for the salvation of deceased souls, the animal release segment is typically arranged after the step of "salvation through sublimation" (鍊度). For instance, *The Lingbao Wuliang Duren Shangjing Dafa* (靈寶無量度人上經大法 Great Rites of the Book of Universal Salvation) mentions that after salvation through sublimation, one should perform the animal release ceremony. Another Daoist text from the Southern Song Dynasty, *Shangqing Lingbao Dafa* (上清靈寶大法 Great Rites of the Shangqing Lingbao), also records that the animal release ceremony is generally scheduled on the third day of the ritual, following the sending-off and cremation ceremonies, serving as the final segment of the day. Some rituals place the animal release ceremony toward the end of the entire ritual as an important act of expressing gratitude and repaying kindness. The *Lingbao Yujian* (靈寶玉鑑 Jade Mirror of the Numinous Treasure) notes that the concluding phase of the ritual should involve "offering thanks through a ceremony and redeeming lives by releasing animals" (酬恩設醮，贖命放生, *Daozang*, vol.10, 147), meaning that animal release is used to express thanksgiving and appreciation. This arrangement has been widely adopted in later Daoist redemption rituals. The book also details the complete procedure for animal release:

> (1) All Daoist priests gather before the altar, led by the priest in charge of music chanting the "Pacing the Void Lyrics."(步虛詞)
> (2) The priest responsible for announcing the ceremony invites the deities and opens the proceedings. Following this, Daoists sequentially recite the names Heavenly Worthy of Life Preservation (長生保命天尊), Heavenly Worthy of Carefree Happiness (逍遙快樂天尊), and Heavenly Worthy of Abundant

> Blessings (福生無量天尊). For each Heavenly Worthy (天尊) mentioned, a passage from the release prayer and blessed text is read. The names of these Celestial Worthies all symbolize attaining freedom and entering a state of joyful existence without constraints. It is as if invoking their names can bring about spiritual salvation.
> (3) A presiding priest, dressed in ritual vestments (法服), recites specialized Daoist verses for animal release, formally beginning the liberation of the animals.
> (4) All the Daoists chant scripture and pray together to accumulate merits for the participants in the religious ceremony. (*Daozang,* vol. 10, 159)

The ritual is structured with precision and distinct rhythm, embedding the act of animal release within a solemn religious framework. It emphasizes that this practice is not merely an act of kindness but also a significant religious undertaking for accumulating merit and communicating with the divine.

Particularly noteworthy is that during the Southern Song Dynasty, a Daoist priest named Jiang Shuyu (蔣叔輿) recorded the complete steps of the animal release ritual in the thirty-first volume of his book, *Wushang Huanglu Dazhai Lichengyi* (無上黃籙大齋立成儀 Standardized Rituals of the Supreme Yellow Register Retreat): Opening of the Incense Burner (發爐), Making a Declaration (啓白), Reciting the *Siweidingzhiji* (思微定志經偈, a text that promotes the concept of retribution for good and evil and encourages abstinence from killing), the actual release of animals, and finally Closing of the Incense Burner (復爐). The book also includes the incantations to be recited by the priest during the release, such as: "Today, the patron of this retreat, motivated by a heart of repaying kindness, has organized this grand retreat and personally donated funds to redeem the animals. We have cared for them well and now release them into clear waters, hoping that this virtuous deed will aid in the deliverance of departed ancestors" (*Daozang*, vol.9, 567). This is followed by a note in small characters: If the priest is performing the release personally, an additional line should be included: "As stated in the scriptures, releasing animal and delivering the deceased are primary practices for Daoist cultivators. I personally undertake this and dare not neglect it" (*Daozang*, vol. 9, 567). Another passage reads: "There are also devout laymen and women who, out of compassion, have individually contributed funds to purchase turtles and fish, joining me at the water's edge to release them together and grant them renewed freedom" (*Daozang*, vol. 9, 567). A further note adds: If no lay devotees are actually participating, the phrase "Men and Women of Pure Faith" (清信男女) should be omitted. This passage was retained because it originates from the ritual texts of the earlier Celestial Master Lu, and the compiler did not dare to arbitrarily delete it. It is especially significant that Jiang Shuyu mentioned that he referenced the content of the "Ritual Codes of Heavenly Master Lu," (陸天師科) where Heavenly Master Lu refers to the renowned Daoist priest Lu Xiujing (陸修靜) of the Liu Song Dynasty (406–477 CE) . If this claim is reliable, it implies that by at least the 5th century, daoism may have already developed complete animal release ceremonies—potentially even earlier than the

practice of animal release activities in Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, judging from Jiang Shuyu's specific distinctions between different types of animal release needs in his writing, it appears that by the Southern Song Dynasty, Daoist animal release ceremonies had already become quite widespread. Daoist priests had thoughtfully considered various scenarios, developing corresponding procedures and preparing tailored ritual texts for each specific need.

In summary, Daoist animal release culture demonstrates a rich diversity of ritual forms and a spirit of inclusivity and harmony. As early as the Six Dynasties period, animal release practices were often integrated into rituals for redeeming the deceased and repenting for sins. Although fixed ritual protocols had not yet been established at that time, they were already combined with activities such as lamp-lighting, sutra chanting, and almsgiving, drawing inspiration from Buddhist concepts of offering while remaining deeply rooted in indigenous traditions. By the Sui and Tang dynasties, Daoist animal release rituals were frequently paired with lamp-lighting ceremonies, reflecting daoism's absorption and innovation of Buddhist rituals. In the Song dynasty, structured and specialized Daoist ritual protocols for animal release emerged. Although these rituals followed similar procedures, their functions varied: some focused on praising sages and seeking blessings, while others aimed to accumulate merit in the hidden realm for the patrons. The timing of these rituals was also highly flexible, some were held after the redemption of the deceased or at the conclusion of fasting ceremonies, while others served as expressions of gratitude to divine benevolence or as preludes to the dispersal of the ritual altar. The animal release rituals of the Lingbao School, in particular, emphasized practical needs, distinguishing between scenarios such as Daoist priests releasing life on their own behalf, on behalf of devotees, or in collective ceremonies. They also retained oral prayers that could be flexibly adapted. All of these aspects illustrate how life-release practices have long been integrated into various levels of society, embodying daoism's cultural characteristics of respecting life, harmonizing with nature, and promoting symbiotic coexistence.

From Animal Release to Generating Life: Daoist Pluralistic Ecological Ethics and Its Transcendence of Anthropocentrism

Folk animal release activities often take place on the birthdays of Daoist and Buddhist deities, reflecting the profound influence of religious culture on folk traditions. For instance, the *Xuantian Shangdi QishengLu*（玄天上帝啓聖錄 Record of the Epiphany of the Supreme Ancestor of the Dark Heaven) mentions that Tanzhou (潭州 , an Ancient Chinese place name of an area located in the present-day Hunan region) held four animal release gatherings each year, corresponding to the major celebrations of the Perfected Lord of Numinous Response (真武靈應真君), Sakyamuni Buddha (釋迦牟尼佛), the Lord of Mount Tai (東嶽泰山掌命府君), and the Dragon Lords of the

Four Seas and Nine Rivers (四海九江龍君神母). On these occasions, people would purchase live birds, fish, and turtles to release them back into nature, a practice known as the "animal release Organization" (放生會). Animal release is not only a folk custom but has also evolved into a form of diplomatic activity. During the Northern Song Dynasty, when Japanese envoys came to pay tribute, the imperial court would organize animal release assemblies on the third day of the third lunar month and the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, accompanied by variety shows to showcase Chinese culture.

However, animal release activities have also sparked considerable controversy. Some people specialize in stealing animals that others have just released, while others directly criticize the practice as a vulgar street activity that goes against moral etiquette. Moreover, the continuous hoarding and trading of animals for release have led to many animals dying prematurely in cages. Criticism of animal release has been growing in society, mainly focusing on two aspects: the contradiction of "capturing animals for the purpose of release" (預補放生) and the ethical question of whether animal life or human life holds greater value. Therefore, Daoism calls for restraint and guidance on folk bad release behavior to make it healthier and more meaningful.

The ancient Chinese intellectuals' reflections on capturing animals for the purpose of release originated from a profound critique of the anecdote "Jianzi Releasing Captive Animals" (簡子放生, Zhao Jianzi, a powerful official of the Jin state in the late Spring and Autumn Period) in *Liezi* (列子, Also known as the "True Scripture of the Void and Supreme Virtue," it is a classic text that records historical anecdotes from the Warring States period) records the following story: A citizen of Handan presented a turtledove to Jianzi on New Year's Day. Jianzi was very pleased and gave the man a generous reward. A guest asked him why he did so. Jianzi said that releasing the bird on New Year's Day was a way to show his kindness. The guest said that the people, knowing that Jianzi wanted to release the birds, would compete to catch them, and as a result many would die. If Jianzi truly wanted them to live, it would be better to forbid the people from catching them in the first place. Catching and then releasing them—the good would not make up for the harm.

The most severe issue with using animal release to showcase imperial virtue lies in this: once those in power display a certain preference, the common people will swiftly follow the trend and act for profit, capturing and hoarding animals in advance, even trading them repeatedly. Lin Xiyi (林希逸) of the Southern Song Dynasty once sharply criticized, "Nowadays, too many people make this mistake. For instance, releasing fish and turtles into the isolated mountain lakes, some of which are even traded multiple times a day" (*Daozang,* vol. 14, 801). This outcome fundamentally deviates from the original intention of humane compassion. True great love should be based on respect for life, not reduced to mere formality.

Unfortunately, many people overlook the warnings that animal release may lead to excessive capture and killing. Instead, they focus more on how the practice can demonstrate human compassion for all living beings and invoke divine blessings. Thus,

on special occasions such as the birthdays of deities or emperors, people organize the release of pre-captured animals back into the wild. The *Xuantian Shangdi QishengLu* documents a scene from an animal release assembly organized by Yuan Yan (元晏, a local official in Tanzhou) which was a grand spectacle where the crowd seemed immersed in a merrymaking celebration of life:

On the day of the animal release, the streets were filled with people buying, selling, and leading birds and beasts. They brought these pre-captured animals to the riverbank, chanting about the merits of release as they set them free into the river. However, some of the birds and aquatic creatures either fell heavily after briefly flying or floated belly-up on the water. Some people picked up these animals to examine them and found that the birds were either tightly bound by glue nets, unable to move, or riddled with arrow wounds. The fish, shrimp, crabs, and shellfish were in even worse condition—their scales torn off by fishhooks, their tails damaged by nets.

A Daoist priest criticized Yuan Yan, "Is this really animal release? This is nothing but intentional killing (故杀), deceitful killing (诳杀), foolish killing (昧杀), and greedy killing (贪杀)! " (*Daozang*, vol.19, 624). If this were truly a release, why can't these animals even fly or swim properly? Think about it: birds are meant to fly in forests, and fish and shrimp are meant to swim in rivers. Whether in the sky or water, their lives are as precious as human lives. Unless they are destined to perish, for instance, fated to be cooked and eaten, they should accept their fate. But now, because of this animal release assembly, even more animals have pointlessly lost their lives! This misguided practice stirred greedy and thoughtless individuals to devise cunning plans. They cared nothing for sin, focusing only on immediate gains, lying in wait at night, casting nets to catch fish, and confining aquatic creatures in pens, indifferent to their starvation. As a result, fewer than ten out of ten thousand fish survived, and even among those ten, hardly one truly lived. Those that did survive were often severely injured. Year after year, with such practices, are you accumulating merit or committing evil?

This well-known Daoist event, called "Yuan Yan's Awakening" (元晏悟化), exposed the hypocrisy of traditional animal release practices: seemingly compassionate yet inherently cruel, superficially about salvation but ultimately causing greater harm. Subsequently, the Tanzhou region completely abolished the grand animal release ceremony and instead organized "charity gatherings for the poor" (施貧會). Shao Jingbang (邵經邦) of the Ming Dynasty also reflected in *Hongdaolu* (弘道錄). Later generations also had people who prohibited the killing of birds and sparrows and erected animal release tablets, but why do these actions always seem unconvincing? It is because the administrators fail to understand that one must first love their own family, then extend that love to the people; only after loving the people can one further extend love to all living beings. But if it is done in reverse, without genuinely practicing benevolence, merely occasionally entertaining the idea of 'animal release' while eagerly seeking good outcomes—they are not motivated by sincere compassion for life but by the utilitarian goal of gaining rewards through release. Naturally, this is unconvincing.

More seriously, numerous practitioners, driven by profit, engage in large-scale capture, causing animals to suffer injuries during capture, contract diseases in captivity, and struggle to survive even after release due to compromised health. Ultimately, this misguided practice of animal release, having lost its original purpose, has become a significant driver of ecological destruction.

Daoism recognized the potential drawbacks of premeditated animal release very early on and established clear guidelines to address this issue, emphasizing that such acts should be done spontaneously rather than deliberately. The Daoist classic *Taishang Dongxuanlingbao Fashenzhilun* (太上洞玄靈寶法身制論 Regulations for the Body of the Law) points out that "the best way to accumulate merits is to refrain from harming other living beings. The essence of saving lives lies in genuine compassion from the heart" (*Daozang,* vol. 6, 921). However, at that time, many believers, especially with the arrival of summer in the fifth month of the lunar calendar, often announced animal release ceremonies in advance. As a result, even before the scheduled release, people began capturing animals on a large scale. By the time the release took place, many animals had already died or been injured during capture and transportation. What was originally intended as an act of kindness and merit accumulation ended up causing more harm and sin. Only when one happens to encounter animals about to be slaughtered and feels compelled by compassion should they be purchased and released. Masters must also forbid their disciples from casually organizing large-scale animal release events; otherwise, the organizers will be held accountable. Violators of this rule were to be confined in solitary quarters for two hundred days. This spontaneous and non-coercive approach to animal release is worth learning from.

Daoism also engages in profound reflection on the fundamental significance of animal release from the perspective of the equality of all life. It emphasizes that humans are not inherently superior to animals, nor should animals be viewed as existing merely to serve human needs. Gao Shouyuan pointed out: humans ought to possess universal benevolence toward all beings, not merely displaying kindness through animal release; the myriad things generated by heaven and earth do not exist solely for human use (*Daozang,* vol. 15, 160). He further elaborated on the concept that "there is no innate hierarchy among species" (類無貴賤), arguing that no being exists for the sake of another. Humans eating chickens, and chickens eating insects, is simply a natural law rather than a divine arrangement. The human assumption of superiority and disdain for other species is based solely on intellectual strength – "survival of the fittest" (弱肉強食)—which does not reflect the true way of nature. Just as mosquitoes bite humans and tigers and wolves eat meat, can it be said that heaven specifically created mosquitoes for humans or meat for tigers and wolves? Daoism holds that although humans and other creatures differ in form, they share interconnected emotions, and all life desires self-preservation. However, with the decline of morality in the world and human greed, the relentless hunting and consumption of living beings lead to incessant killing, which contradicts the ultimate pursuit of harmony among all things. This Daoist

idea actually serves as a positive correction to "anthropocentrism" (人類中心主義), reminding people to respect all forms of life. A deep understanding of this point also helps rectify some superficial religious practices. True spiritual cultivation should not be merely about formalities but must begin with purifying the heart, maintaining goodwill, and cherishing all beings.

Unlike Confucianism, which refrains from killing out of compassion, or Buddhism, which dares not kill due to the doctrine of karma, the core of Daoist animal release philosophy emphasizes the natural principle of "perpetual vitality" (生生不息). Shen Changqing (沈長卿) of the Ming Dynasty wrote about this in *On the Dingyang Animal Release Association* (定陽放生會社): "The essence of animal release is simply to preserve the vitality within our hearts and eliminate the intent to kill, thereby aligning with Heaven's virtue of cherishing life" (Shen, vol. 1131, 593). This perspective not only echoes Daoism's core teaching that "the Way of Immortality values life" but also demonstrates an inclusive spirit that harmonizes the three teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Because this Animal Release Association worshipped the Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin (呂洞賓, One of the Eight Immortals in Daoism) whom they regarded as the first to truly integrate the three teachings.

What makes this animal release manifesto unique is its view that "killing" is an acquired habit rather than an innate human nature. The author uses himself as an example: "When I was sixteen, I still did not eat pork. My family, pitying my frail health, earnestly persuaded me to reluctantly comply. Yet, after just three days without meat, I began to crave it again, this is habit, not nature" (Shen, vol. 1131, 593). In other words, killing is not an inevitability but stems from customed behavior, which can be changed through discipline and awareness. The text further depicts the cruelty of killing: animals are cut with knives and boiled in pots, suffering and crying out in agony yet unable to escape. Consider the morsel of meat picked up with our chopsticks: our enjoyment is limited, but the animal's suffering is boundless. Even with delicacies laid before us, the thought of this makes them hard to swallow. The author points out that by treasuring one's own life and extending this care to all living beings, even an ordinary person can attain sagehood. Daoism thus transforms animal release into a daily practice of compassion and further issues a warning: "If vitality withers and energy dissipates, Heaven and Earth will lose their foundation for existence" (Shen, vol. 1131, 593). From a Daoist perspective, animal release expands from personal cultivation to a public philosophy concerned with the entirety of life and respect for ecological cycles.

What Daoism is most renowned for is its genuine concern for the lives of ordinary people, particularly evident in its reinterpretation of animal release and prohibition of killing from the perspective of life nurturing. It connects these practices with "longevity" (長命) and "Health Preservation" (養生) integrating them into daily life. Daoism emphasizes that people should curb their desires and actively engage in what is within their capacity, thus cultivating their character. Extending from this, Daoism opposes indulgent hunting and killing for the sake of gluttony, believing that such actions only

lead to a loss of mental clarity. It advocates using animal release to restrain desires, viewing it as a prerequisite for life nurturing. For example, Daoist priest Wang Chongyang (王重陽) once wrote in a poem: "Knowing you can reflect on yourself, the lives of creatures are no different from humans" (知公能作自身觀, 物命於人沒兩般, *Daozang,* vol.25, 693). This means that all living beings share the same essence of life as humans, and animal release is not only an act of compassion but also a way to accumulate merits and prolong life. Daoist priest Yin Zhiping (尹志平) also wrote in a poem that even a small fish, when released back into nature, embodies immediate freedom—why expect it to become a giant whale in the future? (乞得纖鱗免受烹, 放歸溪水任遊行, 莫言他日成鯨去, 目下從容也暢情. *Daozang,* vol.25. 503). Meanwhile, Daoist priest Zhang Sanfeng (張三丰) explicitly stated in his Essay on Carefree Living: "By practicing animal release and refraining from killing, one will certainly cultivate their nature and prolong their life" (能放生而戒殺, 亦養性兮延年, Li 2017, 278). Daoism liberates the practice of animal release from the heavy concept of samsara, turning it into a lighter, more joyful life ritual—free from the burden of sin and karma, but instead, through letting go and restraint, experiencing the ease of life and the joy of authenticity. It is precisely this wisdom, so close to human life, that makes the path of animal release more accessible to ordinary people.

Conclusion

Daoist animal release culture, rooted in traditional Chinese Confucian and Daoist thought and enriched by Buddhist wisdom, has formed a diverse and inclusive system of practice. It is not merely a religious ritual but also an embodiment of life ethics: from accumulating merit through "releasing life to transcend death" (放生度亡) to promoting health and longevity via "redeeming life to extend one's lifespan" (贖命延壽), and further to familial ethics centered on "bearing consequences and blessing descendants"(承負報應). Daoist animal release consistently emphasizes compassion and reverence for life. However, historically distorted practices such as "prearranged animal release"(預放生) driven by profit have prompted Daoism to reflect on the essence of this act—true virtue should not be reduced to a formalistic tool but must return to the Daoist core of "equality of all beings" (萬物平等), which breaks away from anthropocentrism and acknowledges the equal value of all life. Daoism advocates "releasing life in accordance with conditions" (隨緣放生)and "cultivating the mind as the priority" (修心爲本), promoting an evolution from "daring not to kill" (不敢殺 out of fear of karmic retribution) to "bearing not to kill" (不忍殺 out of inner compassion) and further to "not interfering with the natural order of animal life" (不扰物生 respecting the freedom of all beings). This offers profound insights for contemporary ecological ethics: protecting life is not the exclusive responsibility of religion but a universal principle for harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. Today, Daoist animal release culture continues to remind us that the core of

ecological ethics lies in transcending utilitarianism, respecting nature's inherent character, and nurturing all beings with the "inherent virtue of cherishing life"(好生之德), rather than causing harm under the guise of good deeds. This philosophy belongs not only to Daoism but should also serve as a shared resource for global ecological civilization construction.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Note

[1] All English versions of Daoist scripture titles cited in this thesis are sourced from Kristoffer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen (eds), *The Daoist Canon: A Historical Companion to The Daoist Canon*（*Daozang tongkao* 道藏通考）, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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