



The Representation of Taoism Ethical Values in the Dao De Jing and Their Relevance in the Film “Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child”

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Keywords

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Abstract

Film as a contemporary medium has the capacity to convey philosophical values to the present generation. This study aims to analyze the ethical values of Taoism in the Chinese animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* from the perspective of the *Dao De Jing*. The research employs a qualitative approach with content analysis methods. Data were collected through observation and note-taking techniques, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (2014) model. The primary source of analysis is the *Dao De Jing* 道德经 (dào dé jīng), the teaching of Laozi in its English translation, referring to Yao, Chen, and Song (2017), who identified eight Taoism ethical values: a merciful and loving heart, be frugal, honest, and simple, be humble, non-action, gentleness, authenticity, harmony, and nurture. The findings reveal three main points. First, seven ethical values are identified, with a merciful and loving heart emerging as the most dominant in character formation. Second, the moral message emphasizes that sacrifice for the common good is more valuable than personal ambition, that cooperation can overcome differences, and that moral education transforms character. Third, the film *Nezha* demonstrates the continuing relevance of Taoism ethics in the *Dao De Jing* for addressing social issues in modern society.

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INTRODUCTION

Film has undergone significant evolution since its emergence in the late 19th century, developing into a prominent form of contemporary media. From a simple documentary medium depicting everyday activities without sound, film has transformed into a complex artistic medium capable of communicating profound ideas and values (McQuail, 2011). This evolution marks a fundamental shift in the way humans convey philosophical messages and values to the wider public. Along with the expansion of philosophical study materials, there has been a growing recognition that film has the capacity to be an effective vehicle for conveying philosophical ideas embedded in everyday life, such as the concepts of friendship, love, death, purpose, and meaning (Cox & Levine, 2012).

In a global context, the phenomenon of film as a philosophical medium can be observed through the rise of the animated film industry in various countries, particularly China. China's animated film industry has undergone significant transformation in the past ten years, marked by improved production quality, government policy support, and the strengthening of content based on traditional values (Fan, 2014). Modern Chinese animation began to integrate contemporary animation techniques with distinctive Chinese visuals and values, creating a unique style known as the Chinese School of Animation (Wei et al., 2023). This approach successfully brings Chinese folk tales to life in an aesthetic and touching visual form (Aiqing & Whyke, 2024).

One of the most significant achievements of the Chinese animation revival phenomenon is the film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. 《哪吒之魔童降世》(2019) directed by Yang Yu. This film marks a significant milestone in the rise of Chinese animated films adapting classical myths for contemporary audiences. The film's success lies not only in its technical production and commercial success as one of the highest-grossing animated films in China, but also in its ability to integrate traditional philosophical values into a narrative relevant to contemporary audiences (Li et al., 2022).

The character of Nezha has a long history in Chinese mythological tradition. Shahar (2015) explains that Nezha was originally an Indian deity introduced to China through Buddhist scriptures during the Tang Dynasty (Shahar, 2015). He then underwent a process of sinicization, becoming a popular figure during the Yuan Dynasty. In traditional Chinese mythology, Nezha represents the cultural integration of Taoism and Buddhism, evolving into a character that reflects Chinese values (You, 2022).

What's interesting about the 2019 film adaptation of Nezha is its reinterpretation of the classic character. Unlike the traditional version, which depicts Nezha as a reincarnated god, this film presents him as...魔童(mó tóng) or the devil's child who must fight his bad fate, a symbol of resistance against stereotypes and social prejudice (Whyke et al., 2021). This transformation carries the main theme of the struggle against a destiny determined by others and self-acceptance in the face of social stigma. This film highlights the importance of moral choices with a central message.我命由我不由天(*wǒ mìng yóu wǒ bù yóu tiān*), which mean "My fate is determined by me, not by the sky." (Whyke & Mugica,

2021).

The philosophical values underlying this character transformation can be traced in the teachings of Taoism, particularly those contained in the Dao De Jing book 道德经. Taoism focuses on the search for harmony with the universe through the application of Laozi's principles (Wang, 2020). The eight ethical values of Taoism in the Dao De Jing include compassion, simplicity, humility, wu wei (无为), gentleness, authenticity, harmony, and a nurturing attitude (Yao et al., 2017). These values are relevant to understanding Nezha's transformation from a rebellious figure to a more empathetic and heroic person.

Several previous studies have examined the film Nezha (2019) from different perspectives. Three aspects of Taoism thought in this film include the concept of self-determination, the use of talismans or spells, and the fantasy world of Taoism (Yuan, 2020). Taoism values such as ziran (naturalness), wu wei, and the balance of yin-yang can also be manifested in animated works through visual style and narrative rhythm (Li et al., 2022). In addition, Nezha has been analyzed as a symbol of youth identity struggle in facing social stereotypes (You, 2022). However, these studies remain general in nature and have not specifically examined the representation of Taoism ethical values in the Dao De Jing reflected in the film Nezha (2019).

Based on the above description, although the film Nezha (2019) has been widely appreciated from an artistic and cultural perspective, studies that specifically examine the ethical values of Taoism in this film, especially through the perspective of the Dao De Jing, are still very limited. Therefore, this study is important to offer an in-depth analysis of how Taoism ethical values are represented in the film's narrative and visuals.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative method with an interpretive content analysis approach. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret the meaning contained in the film's visual elements (Krippendorff, 2013). The researcher acts as the main instrument in identifying units of analysis such as dialogue, scenes, visual symbolism, and characterization that contain the ethical values of Dao De Jing.

The object of research is the film Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child 《哪吒之魔童降世》 produced in 2019. Data collection was carried out using three main techniques, namely documentation, observation, and note-taking (Mahsun, 2005; Sudaryanto, 2015). The steps for collecting data include: (1) watching the film in its entirety, (2) transcribing the Mandarin dialogue and Indonesian translation, (3) listening to and noting the dialogue and scenes relevant to Taoism ethical values, (4) taking screenshots of scenes containing representations of ethical values, and

(5) categorizing the data based on the interpretation of the Dao De Jing book translated by Andri Wang.

Data analysis was carried out using a model consisting of three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). First, data condensation was performed by reducing the transcription of dialogues and screenshots relevant to Taoism ethical values. Unrelated scenes or dialogues were eliminated to make the analysis more focused. Second, data presentation was carried out by classifying the data into ethical categories based on the Dao De Jing perspective to facilitate the identification of dominant ethical themes. Third, conclusions were drawn and verified by examining how the film represents Taoism ethical values through visual narratives, dialogues, and scenes to then formulate conclusions about the ethical values conveyed in the film.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. A Merciful and Loving Heart

The Taoism ethical value of "A merciful and loving hear" relates to the principle of kindness, which places concern for others above personal interests. In Taoism philosophy, this attitude is natural and selfless, so it is done sincerely without expecting anything in return. The following is a dialogue in the table reflecting the ethical value of "A merciful and loving hear."

Table 1. A Merciful and Loving Heart

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Lady Yin	别怕娘在这儿 <i>Bié pà niáng zài zhèr</i> Don't be afraid, Mom is here.	Dao De Jing Chapter 7 Sounds: 圣人后其身而身先。
Li Jing	仙长各位，李某人家门不幸，得子如此但孩子无辜，他也是受害者李某人实难就此痛下杀手。 <i>Xiān zhǎng gèwèi, lǐ mǒu rén jiāmén bùxìng, dé zǐ rúcǐ dàn hái zǐ wúgū, tā yě shì shòuhài zhě lǐ mǒu rén shí nán jiù cǐ tòng xià shāshǒu</i> Pastor, everyone... My family suffered a terrible fate, having a child like this. But believe me, this child is innocent; he is also a victim. I really can't bear to kill him.	<i>Shèngrén hòu qí shēn ér shēn xiān</i> Shengren always puts himself behind the people.

In minutes 00:14:23 – 00:14:49, Li Jing's words to the residents , 孩子无辜，他也是受害者...实难就此痛下杀手 (*tā yě shì shòuhàizhě, Lǐ mǒurén shí nán jiù cǐ tòng xià shāshǒu*). “This child is innocent, he is also a victim... I really can't bear to kill him”, represents the value of A merciful and loving hear as written in Chapter 7 of the Dao De Jing: 圣人后其身而身先。 (*Shèngrén hòu qí shēn ér shēn xiān*). Shengren (sage) always puts himself behind the people. This means that a sage puts the interests of

others above his own. Although Nezha is believed to be a threat due to his birth fate, Li Jing refuses to act cruelly because he realizes that the child did not choose his own fate. This attitude is in line with the view. This scene reflects the ethical value of compassion, where concern for others, especially family, is placed above personal interests or social pressure. This attitude is in line with the Taoism view that true moral action should not be driven by prejudice or revenge, but by empathy and the intention to protect the innocent.

2. Be Humble

The Taoism ethical value of be humble relates to the principle of selflessness and flowing with nature. In the Dao De Jing, this attitude is natural and selfless, so it is done sincerely without expecting anything in return. This value encourages one to place oneself below others, acknowledge one's limitations, and avoid arrogance, bringing one into harmony with the harmony of the universe.. Presentation of dialogue in a table that reflects ethical value Be humble are as follows.

Table 2. Be humble

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Taiyi zhenren	师尊早已跳出三界外通过此门才能找到他师尊在上弟子太乙求见 <i>Shī zūn zǎoyǐ tiàochū sānjiè wài tōngguò cǐ mén cáinéng zhǎodào tā shī zūn zài shàng dìzǐ tài yǐ qiújiàn</i> The Great Master has long since transcended the three worlds, only through this door can we find him. The venerable Great Master, Taiyi's disciple requests an audience.	Dao De Jing Chapter 33 Sounds: 知人者智，自知者明。 <i>Zhīren zhězhì, zìzhīzhěmín.</i> Knowing others is wisdom; knowing yourself is enlightenment.
Changsheng Yun	好个太乙你可知罪 <i>Hǎo gè tài yǐ nǐ kězhī zuì</i> Good Tàiyǐ, do you know your mistake?	
Taiyi zhenren	弟子确实有罪但要不是妖邪半路抢夺 <i>Dìzǐ quèshí yǒuzuì dàn yào bùshì yāoxié bànlù qiǎngduó</i> I know I was wrong, If it's not a ghost	
Changsheng Yun	不要找借口 <i>Bù yào zhǎoh jièkǒu</i> Don't look for excuses	

At minute 17:46 - 18:06, Taiyi Zhenren be humble admits his mistake: 弟子确实有罪 (*dìzǐ quèshí yǒu zuì*) "I was indeed wrong". This confession demonstrates self awareness and the courage to admit shortcomings without defending oneself or making excuses. This attitude reflects the Taoism value of humility, which is knowing and accepting oneself honestly and without arrogance. According to the Dao De Jing perspective, 道德经(Dào Dé Jīng) Chapter 33 知人者智，自知者明 (*Zhīren zhězhì, zìzhīzhěmín*) This means that those who know others are intelligent, and those who know themselves are wise. This attitude reflects the value of humility in Taoism: wisdom comes from self-

understanding, not from arrogance or self-denial.

3. Non-Action / Wu Wei (無為)

The ethical value of Taoism which refers to Wu Wei without action is related to the principle of acting naturally and spontaneously, without coercion or excessive effort. In the book Dao De Jing 道德经(Dào Dé Jīng), this attitude is characterized by unforced action and harmony with the flow of the universe. This value encourages one to let go of personal desires and ego, act in harmony with the Tao, and achieve maximum effectiveness with minimal effort. The presentation of the dialogue in the table reflects the ethical values of Non-action / Wu wei (無為) are as follows.

Table 3. Non-Action / Wu Wei (無為)

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Ao Bing	你生来就是魔丸这是命中注定 <i>Nǐ shēng lái jiù shì mó wán zhè shì mìng zhōng zhù dìng</i> You were indeed born as a Demon Pill, This is destined.	Dao De Jing Chapter 29 Sounds: 將欲取天下而為之 <i>Jiāng yù qǔ tiān xià ér wéi zhī</i> Don't force form on the world, and that anything in excess doesn't last long.
Nezha	去你个鸟命,我命由我不由天是魔是仙我自己说了算 <i>Qù nǐ gè niǎo mìng , Wǒ mìng yóu wǒ bù yóu tiān Shì mó shì xiān Wǒ zì jǐ shuō le cái suàn</i> Damn fate! My fate is determined by myself, not by the heavens whether I am a devil or a god, only I decide	

At minute 01:33:58 - 01:34:08, Ne Zha attitude contrasts with his principles. 無為(*wúwéi*) or natural action. 無為(*wúwéi*) emphasizes that forcing change in the world will only destroy it, which is in line with the Daoist view, as Ne Zha's attempts to force control over his destiny against ridicule and humiliation are depicted as actions that will bring destruction. This principle teaches that true harmony is achieved by flowing with the Dao, not by angry resistance. This scene presents a dialogue between the human view of changing fate and the Daoist view of harmony with nature, which enriches the ethical meaning of Ne Zha story.

4. Gentleness

The ethical values of Taoism that refer to gentleness are related to the principle of minimizing resistance and avoiding violence. In the Dao De Jing 道德经(Dào Dé Jīng), this attitude seeks harmony and is a greater force than violence. This value encourages one to be like water, which, although soft, is able to erode rocks and flow through the smallest cracks. The dialogue presented in the table that reflects the ethical value of Gentleness is as follows:

Table 4. Gentleness

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Li Jing	仙长，收了混天绦和火尖枪，在他学会控制情绪前不能再使用这些强大的神器 <i>Xiānzhǎng, shōu le Hùntiān Líng hé Huǒjiānqiāng , Zài tā xué huì kòngzhì qíngxù qián Bù néng zài yòng zhèxiē qiángdà de shénqì</i> Master, take back the sky shawl and the fire-tipped spear, before he learns to control his emotions. No more use of this powerful weapon	Dao De Jing Chapter 36 Sounds 柔弱勝剛強 <i>Róuruò shèng gāngqiáng</i> The weak and soft defeat the strong and hard.
Nezha	有啥稀罕的还你就是 <i>Yǒu shá xīhan de hái nǐ jiùshì</i> What's so great about just taking it?	

At minute 43:23 - 43:31, In this scene, Li Jing decides to take back the hun tian ling 混天绦(Hùn Tian Ling) and Huo Jian Qiang 火尖枪 (HuǒJian Qiang) from Ne Zha until he was able to control his emotions. This act of gentleness wisely reduces potential danger by avoiding direct confrontation, while protecting his child and the environment from the damage the weapon could cause. In line with the teachings of Chapter 36 of the Dao De Jing 道德经(Dào Dé Jīng) 柔弱勝剛強 (*róu ruò shèng gang qiang*) the weak and gentle defeat the strong and hard. This means that strength is not always shown through fighting or violence; instead, a gentle but firm attitude can control great power and maintain harmony. Meanwhile, Ne Zha's dismissive response 有啥稀罕的还你就是 (*yǒu shá xīhan de Huānnǐjiùshì*) "What's so great about it?...just take it" shows that he has not yet fully understood that gentleness can be the most effective way to defeat excessive force".

5. Authenticity

The concept of sincerity in Taoism, which is related to authenticity, emphasizes the sincerity to live according to one's true self without pretense. The teachings of the Dao De Jing 道德经 This attitude is presented as natural, honest, and reflective of the fundamental essence of humanity. This value teaches a person to have the courage to accept, express, and act according to their character, without being influenced by external expectations or judgments. The dialogue presentation in the table that reflects the ethical value of Authenticity is as follows.

Table 5. Authenticity

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Li Jing	儿啊你今后路还很长别在意别人的看法你是谁只有你自己说了才算永远不要放弃 <i>Er a nǐ jīnhòu lù hái hěn cháng bié zài yì biérén de kànfǎ nǐ shì shéi zhǐ yǒu nǐ zìjǐ shuōle cái suàn yǒngyuǎn bù yào fàngqì</i>	Dao De Jing Chapter 20 Sounds 唯之与阿，相去几何？美之与恶，相去何若 <i>Wéi zhī yǔ ā, xiāngqù jǐhé? Měi zhī yǔ è, xiāngqù hé ruò</i>

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
	My child, your life journey is still long. Don't care about other people's opinions. Who you are is up to you alone, and never give up.	How big is the difference between 'yes' and 'sure'? How big is the difference between 'good' and 'bad'?

At minute 01:10:23 – 01:10:31, in this scene, Li Jing advises Nezha not to care too much about other people's judgments and to remain true to his true self. He says, 你是谁只有你自己说了算(*nǐ shì shéi zhǐ yǒu nǐ zì jǐ shuō le cái suàn*), shows the encouragement for Nezha to live according to his true nature, rather than depending on outside opinions. He also added, 永远不要放弃(*yǒng yuǎn bù yào fàng qì*) never give up, which strengthens the spirit of steadfastness in facing life's journey. This message is in line with Dao De Jing 道德经(*Dào Dé Jīng*) Chapter 20 唯之与阿，相去几何？美之与恶，相去何若(*Wéi zhī yǔ ā, xiāng qù jǐ hé? Měi zhī yǔ è, xiāng qù hé ruò*). How far is the difference between 'yes' and 'sure'? How big is the difference between 'good' and 'bad'? This means being free from social image and external judgment. In Dao De Jing 道德经(*Dào Dé Jīng*), sincerity means being in harmony with one's true nature, while harmony means maintaining it. Li Jing's advice teaches that understanding and accepting oneself is the foundation for moving forward on life's path.

6. Harmony

The concept of harmony in Taoism ethics emphasizes living in harmony with nature and all beings within it. The teachings of the Dao De Jing 道德经 Harmony is described as a state of balance and complementarity without conflict. This value teaches humans to seek balance in life, appreciate diversity, and understand that each element has its own role. With this awareness, one can live peacefully and be at one with the harmony of the universe. The presentation of the dialogue in the table that reflects the ethical value of harmony is as follows.

Table 6. Harmony

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
People	预祝李大人喜得贵 Yù zhù lǐ dà rén xǐ dé guì Congratulations to Mr. Li on getting a noble son	Dao De Jing Chapter 49 Sounds 圣人无常心，常以百姓心为心。 <i>Shèngrén wú cháng xīn, cháng yǐ bǎixìng xīn wéi xīn</i> A wise man has no fixed heart, always taking the people's heart as his own.
People	李管家！ Lǐ guǎnjiā ! Mr. Li! (cheering happily)	
People	我是来给三公子说亲的 Wǒ shì lái gěi sān gōngzǐ shuō qīn de	

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
	I came to match make the third young master	
People	我们新作了一首曲子 Wǒmen xīnzuòle yī shǒu qǔzi We made a new song	
Li Jing	谢谢谢谢，多谢父老乡亲关爱！ Xièxièxiè xiè, duōxiè fùlǎo xiāngqīn guān'ài! Thank you, thank you, thank you for your attention!	

At minute 06:53 - 07:03, In this scene, the people express their congratulations and goodwill to Li Jing with great respect and attention, while Li Jing responds with sincere thanks. This interaction reflects the harmonious relationship between a leader and his people, where both respect each other and maintain social balance. This message is very much in line with the teachings of Dao De Jing Chapter 49. 圣人无 常 心, 常 以 百 姓 心 为 心 。 (*shèngrén wúcháng xīn, cháng yǐ bǎixìng xīn wéi xīn*). A wise man has no fixed heart, always taking the hearts of the people as his own. This signifies that a wise leader always holds the hearts of his people as his own, maintaining balance and harmony in society. This scene reflects the value of harmony in Daoism, where good relationships between individuals and society are maintained through mutual respect, support, and togetherness.

7. Nurture

The concept of nurture in Taoism describes the attitude of caring for and educating with selfless love. Dao De Jing 道德经 emphasizes that true love is not based on control, but rather on allowing space for natural growth. This value encourages one to be a nurturing companion, not a coercive ruler, thus creating an environment that supports every creature's development according to its natural nature. In this way, humans can play a role in harmony with the harmony of the universe.

Table 7. Nurture

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Taiyi zhenren	哪吒这事我有责任。我已决定收他为徒，带他修身养性改掉魔丸恶习。成为一个斩妖除魔的正义之士。 Nǎ zhā zhè shì wǒ yǒu zérèn. Wǒ yǐ juéding shōu tā wèi tú, dài tā xiūshēnyǎngxìng gǎi diào mó wán èxí. Chéngwéi yīgè zhǎn yāo chú mó de zhèngyì zhī shì. This matter of Nezha is my responsibility. I have decided to accept him as my disciple, guiding him in his training and self-improvement. I will change the bad habits of the Demon Pill's nature. I will become a hero who will slay demons and uphold justice.	Dao De Jing Chapter 63 Sounds: 為無為，事無事，味無味。大小多少。 Wéi wúwéi, shì wúshì, wèi wúwèi. Dàxiǎo duōshǎo Doing without doing, taking care of things without dealing, feeling without feeling. Consider the big as small, the many as few.

Figure	Scene	Dao De Jing Chapter
Lady Yin	这有必要吗?最后时光让他开开心心不是更好 <i>Zhè yǒu biyào ma? Zuìhòu de shíguāng ràng tā kāi kāixīn xīn bùshì gèng hǎo</i> Is this necessary? Wouldn't it be better to let him be happy in the last days?	
Taiyi zhenren	我不想他这么浑浑噩噩过一生 <i>Wǒ bùxiǎng tā zhème húnhún'è'èguò yīshēng</i> I don't want him to just live without meaning.	

At minute 30:21 – 30:40, In this dialogue, Taiyi Zhenren expressed his responsibility towards Nezha by saying, 哪吒这事我有责任(*nǎ zhā zhè shì wǒ yǒu zé*) This Nezha problem is my responsibility and 我已决定收他为徒带他修身养性(*wǒ yǐ juéding shōu tā wèi tú dài tā xiūshēnyǎngxìng*) I have decided to accept him as a disciple, guiding him in his practice and self-improvement. This attitude demonstrates Taiyi Zhenren's determination to nurture and guide Nezha to change from his bad habits and become a just and dignified person.

The ethical value of nurture is clearly reflected in Taiyi Zhenren's gradual and responsible guidance and support for Nezha. This aligns with the principle in Dao De Jing Chapter 63, which states: 為無為, 事無事, 味無味。大小多少。(wéi wúwéi, shì wúshì, wèi wú wèi. dàxiǎo duōshǎo). This means doing without doing, taking care of business without taking care, feeling without feeling. Consider the big as small, the many as little. This means starting from small things; facing the difficult while it is still easy. This principle emphasizes the importance of starting development and change with small, simple but consistent steps, so that problems can be overcome before they become serious and complex. Taiyi Zhenren who chose to guide Nezha from the beginning with patience and responsibility reflects the way to face the difficult while it is still easy, so that Nezha can develop into a good person and useful to society.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully identified seven of the eight Taoism ethical values in the Dao De Jing represented through narrative, dialogue, and character development in the film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019). The values of A Merciful and Loving Heart and Nurture emerged as the dominant values that drove the moral transformation of the main character. The absence of the values of be frugal, honest, and simple indicates that the film prioritizes heroic narratives and internal conflicts over the simplicity of life as emphasized in Laozi's teachings. The findings of this study strengthen the argument that contemporary animated films can function as an effective philosophical medium in transmitting classical ethical values to modern audiences.

The film *Nezha* demonstrates the relevance of Taoism teachings in addressing contemporary social issues, particularly those related to social pressure, the search for identity, and the importance of empathy in an increasingly individualistic society. The limitations of this study lie in the limited focus of analysis on the film's textual and visual aspects without involving audience reception. Further research is recommended to: (1) explore Taoism ethical values in other Chinese animated films to identify broader patterns of representation, (2) conduct reception studies to understand how audiences from various cultural backgrounds interpret these values, and (3) analyze the comparative representation of Taoism and Confucian ethical values in contemporary popular Chinese films.

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