



COMMENT ON “THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TANG-SONG POETRY AND ZEN BUDDHISM THOUGHT”

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COMMENT ON “THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TANG-SONG POETRY AND ZEN BUDDHISM THOUGHT”

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The heyday of Chinese Zen Buddhism occurred during the Tang and Song dynasties. Among the various Buddhist sects, the influential Eight Schools that emerged during the Tang Dynasty had profound effects, with cultural figures, like Wang Wei, Liu Yuxi, Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi and others all deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism.

Although Zen Buddhism originated from Mahayana Buddhism, it adopted “Zen” as its sect name and “not establishing words, teaching outside the scriptures, directly pointing to the human mind, seeing one’s nature and becoming Buddha” as its core ideology. Emphasizing “cultivating the mind” and “seeing one’s nature,” Zen Buddhism advocates sudden enlightenment. Because Zen Buddhism holds that all sentient beings possess Buddha nature and that all natural landscapes embody the true nature, practitioners do not need to exhaust themselves in understanding the profound principles or engage in intense meditation in temples. Instead, they can directly and naturally perceive and feel the pulsation of their true nature, which is what is meant by “the ordinary mind is the way.”

Compared to Indian Zen, the significance of “Zen”, in Zen Buddhism, is extraordinary, serving as both the essence and the means of achieving enlightenment. Consequently, “Zen” has become a concept of rich inclusiveness and dialectical thinking within the Chinese Zen Buddhist philosophical system. As Indian Zen became sinicized, the connotations and extensions of “Zen”, in Zen Buddhism, became more diverse and

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inclusive, evolving into a unique ideological system. Therefore, as a blend of Confucian and Daoist life consciousness within Chinese Buddhism, the affirmation of Zen Buddhism of Buddha's inherent nature, in all beings, and its intention to awaken beings directly lead Zen Buddhism to regard human life as the ultimate goal of concern. Simultaneously, practices, such as "cultivating the mind", "seeing one's nature" and "sudden enlightenment" are viewed as paths to transcend mundane existence. The life philosophy implicit in the core theories of Zen aesthetics (such as mind-nature theory and realm theory) resonates with the pursuit of life transcending life and death through the direct understanding of Zen through poetry, painting, music and other artistic works by Tang and Song Zen monks and literati.

Mr. Ma Benteng believes that the creation of artistic conception is the best reflection of the main characteristics of Chinese aesthetic culture, and artistic conception is also the core concept of traditional Chinese aesthetics. However, the theory of artistic conception emerged and developed within the atmosphere of Buddhist Zen culture (Ma, 2010, p. 2). In the historical process of Chinese civilization, the absorption of heterogeneous foreign cultures has played an important role, and the influence of Buddhism on ideological and cultural aspects in China has been profound. Politically, Buddhism, unable to compete with the Confucian ideology aimed at governing the world, often served as a tool for stabilizing the people's hearts and consolidating political rule, thereby being unable to attain the position of religious dominance over politics, as seen in specific periods in Europe. Nevertheless, Zen Buddhism has a strong literary nature, and its literature extensively employs literary expressions, allowing mutual influence and cross-fertilization with literature, thus compensating for the deficiencies of indigenous culture.

Jiaoran was a renowned poet-monk and literary theorist in the middle Tang Dynasty of China. He was deeply influenced by the Zen Buddhist ideology, among which the most significant aspect was that the theory of Zen enlightenment inspired his theory of poetic realms. In Buddhist scriptures, "realms" typically have three meanings: firstly, it refers to the heavenly Buddha land, the fantastic realm within religion, known as the Western Pure Land. Secondly, it refers to the objects perceivable, recognizable, and distinguishable by the six consciousnesses, such as the realm, represented by consciousness, or the realm, represented by visual perception. Buddhism holds that only consciousness is true in the real world, meaning that the realm represented by consciousness, the mind realm, is true. In contrast, the rest, represented by visual perception or consciousness, is objectively unreal. Thirdly, it refers to Nirvana, the true nature's realm. Buddhism considers this realm the highest level of human existence, representing a high level of spiritual attainment and cultivation. "The mind is everything; everything is the mind," as the motto of Chinese Zen Buddhism, combines the "mind" with "form" to achieve unity, which is one of the theoretical forms of the "realm of true nature (Cheng, 2021, p. 153)."

Jiaoran’s theory of “poetic realms” takes “mind” as both the starting point and the destination of cognition. However, what is this “mind”? In Buddhism, “mind” often refers to the true heart in all sentient beings and even in all things in the universe, also known as the true heart, pure heart, bodhi mind, Tathagata mind, etc. The essence of Zen Buddhist thought is to develop one’s spiritual world, advocating the practice of meditation, with the core being the realization of enlightenment, reaching the life’s highest realm by realizing the enlightenment of the mind. The so-called “original mind” refers to the pure heart; according to Buddhism, all sentient beings have a pure heart, which is the “original mind” of oneself. The purpose of Zen Buddhism is to let sentient beings recognize their pure hearts first and, then, return to their pure hearts, ultimately achieving Buddhahood. Therefore, the “mindfulness” of Zen Buddhist thought is the source of Jiaoran’s theory of poetic realms.

In his work “Discussions on Poetry,” Jiaoran proposed, “articles concern their inherent nature,” elevating poetry to a level related to “inherent nature (Xu, 2007, p. 56).” “Enlightening the mind to see the true nature” is the essence of Zen Buddhist thought, emphasizing the importance of first understanding one’s mind and then discovering one’s own Buddha nature. As Mr. Zha Minghao mentioned in “The Transformation of the Group of Tang and Five Dynasties Poet-Monks,” Jiaoran regards poetry as an effective tool for “enlightening the mind to see the true nature” and “practicing Zen and asking the Way.” On the other hand, Jiaoran believes that, only when each poet enlightens their mind, they can produce poetry of supreme excellence with a pure “mind (Zha, 2008, p. 25).” Thus, the “enlightening the mind to see the true nature” of Zen Buddhism is closely linked with the “artistic realms” of poetry.

During the Tang and Song periods, Zen Buddhist thought continuously permeated and fermented into the literary and artistic fields, causing changes in traditional Chinese aesthetic standards, with “artistic conception” becoming a new aesthetic criterion for poetry. During the Southern Dynasties, Tao Yuanming’s poetry was not highly regarded by Liu Xie and Zhong Rong. However, during the Tang and Song periods, literary figures, such as Meng Haoran, Bai Juyi, Su Shi and others, highly praised Tao’s poetry. This was because Zen Buddhist thought valued the individual nature’s self-verification, emphasizing the characteristic of subjective spiritual consciousness. This influenced Tang and Song’s artistic criticism to pay more attention to the sensitivity and perceptiveness of the “mind” towards all things. In comparison, Wang Chong’s mechanical materialism, in the Han Dynasty, neglected the importance of the “mind.” This is our comment to Tian (2024).

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