



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

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As Tian (2024) recalls, zen is indeed a branch of Buddhism with its roots in India. Still, the academic circles generally believe it gained significant traction in China during the early Eastern Han Dynasty. Initially, its influence was limited to the society’s lower echelons, failing to capture the upper class’s attention. This was partly due to the dominance of Confucianism in Chinese culture during the Han Dynasty, while Confucianism prioritized values that conflicted with certain Buddhist principles. For instance, Confucianism emphasizes the importance of maintaining familial ties and fulfilling social responsibilities. At the same time, Buddhism, particularly in its traditional forms, advocates renunciation of worldly pleasures and obligations, often culminating in a monastic life. This philosophical misalignment challenged the widespread acceptance of Buddhism in Chinese society. Additionally, China’s feudal structure, centered around the emperor, clashed with the reverence of Buddhism for the Buddha as the ultimate spiritual guide. Moreover, the prevalent belief within Indian Buddhism that enlightenment requires strenuous and prolonged spiritual practice may have deterred many from embracing it wholeheartedly. Buddhism demanded a complete detachment from worldly affairs, making it less appealing to the general populace. However, the above challenges were more effectively addressed as Buddhism evolved into Zen.

First and foremost, from an ideological standpoint, many individuals are deterred by the arduous journey to enlightenment as originally espoused by Buddhism. In the “Altar Sutra,” enlightenment entails introspection, recognizing Buddha’s innate nature within

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one's mind. According to Zen Buddhism, everyone possesses Buddha's nature, eliminating the necessity of laboriously embarking on enlightenment. Contrary to traditional beliefs, Zen asserts that "everyone has Buddha nature and can attain enlightenment." This notion challenges the hierarchical view of divinity in teachings, promoting the idea that enlightenment is accessible to all, thus sparking an ideological revolution (Shi, 2012, p. 52). This bridged the gap between Buddha and the masses, swiftly captivating the general populace and facilitating rapid and extensive dissemination of Buddhism.

From an institutional perspective, Buddhism emphasizes monastic practice, while Zen focuses on integrating practice into daily life and labor. Zen teachings often highlight the simplicity and beauty of ordinary tasks, as seen in the saying, "Carrying water and chopping wood is nothing less than a wonderful way" (Dao, 2010, p. 69). During the Tang Dynasty, Zen masters Mazu Daoyi and Baizhang Huaihai established the Jungle System. Monks moved away from urban areas and settled in rural jungles, where they cultivated their land and achieved self-sufficiency. Zen Master Baizhang proclaimed, "If you do not work, you shall not eat," promoting the self-reliance of temples. This shift from dependence on alms to self-sufficiency reduced reliance on the outside world. Monks lived collectively, sharing equal status, labor and practice, seamlessly integrating spiritual discipline with daily life. This practice, which balanced agriculture and Zen, resonated with China's agrarian society, fostering widespread acceptance of Buddhism and garnering support from many monks.

Zen Buddhism, especially Zen poetry, profoundly influenced Chinese literature and art. Zen poetry represents a unique fusion of Zen Buddhism and poetic expression. Unlike conventional religious verse, Zen poetry emphasizes contemplation and inner experience in understanding Buddhist principles. During the Song Dynasty, amidst a rich blend of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Zen poetry took on a distinct trend toward localization and secularization. In this era, characterized by the widespread influence of literal Zen, interactions between monks and laypeople were common, literati delved into Zen philosophy and Zen monks engaged in poetic composition, which became fashionable. The tension, between worldly existence and enlightenment, and the harmony, between religion and nature, mirrored the inner conflicts in scholar-bureaucrats in feudal society. These themes permeated Zen poetry, painting, music and other artistic expressions during the zenith of the popularity of Zen Buddhism. Intellectual elites, straddling the roles of monk and secular, infused Zen concepts and principles into poetic construction, interpreting poetry through Zen and vice versa a deliberate practice during the Tang and Song Dynasties. Rough estimates from the *Complete Poems of the Song Dynasty* suggest the existence of around 800 poet monks and a staggering collection of approximately 20,000 Zen poems, illustrating the vast scope and influence of Zen poetry during this period.

Zen poetry primarily embodies the principle of “non-separation” advocated by Zen, emphasizing the inseparability of words from the Zen experience. However, this non-separation does not entail attachment to the conceptual form of words. Therefore, when scholar-officials and Zen monks seek to integrate Zen into poetry or achieve harmony between poetry and Zen, they must grapple with this non-separation without becoming entangled in conceptual constructs. Unlike Zen painting and music, Zen poetry is relatively straightforward in its semantic expression, making it the most accessible to conventional judgment habits.

In contrast to Zen poetry, Zen painting and Zen music possess distinct characteristics in conveying the stages of enlightenment. From a certain perspective, they represent another facet of Zen, most direct to the heart: the approach of “not establishing words” championed by Patriarch Bodhidharma. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, when Zen Buddhism sought artistic mediums to disseminate its teachings, it leaned towards art forms that could evoke empathy in the audience, whether in terms of artistic communication effectiveness or intuitive perceptibility. Zen painting and music undoubtedly exemplify the ideal means to convey the Zen philosophy of “not establishing words but communicating from heart to heart” (Pi, 2003, p. 165).

Therefore, Zen poetry, paintings and music, during the Tang and Song Dynasties, imbued with Zen Buddhism and its aesthetic principles, all employed the Three Nothings method advocated by the Zen tradition to aid in the cultivation of the practitioner’s mind and explore the true essence of the teachings of the sect. The Three Nothings entail no thought as the origin, no form as the body and no abiding as the foundation, with the underlying principle of no abiding (Pi, 2003, p. 95). Meanwhile, individuals pursuing Zen and enlightenment could be roughly categorized into two groups. One group consisted of dedicated Zen practitioners, while the other comprised literati and officials who immersed themselves in nature, music, literature and art. Among them, there were many well-educated individuals skilled in various artistic pursuits, such as music, chess, calligraphy and painting. They served as the backbone of endeavors, such as expressing Zen through poetry, depicting Zen through painting and enjoying Zen through entertainment. Although these two factions may appear distinct, they share a common spiritual dimension. Whether they were Zen monks, residing in monasteries, or literati and officials, navigating the social sphere, they utilized art to merge Zen principles, elucidate Tao through artistic expression and infuse Zen into the realm of art. In their collective pursuit of realizing the goals of Zen philosophy, they demonstrated remarkable consistency and inclusivity. As the practitioners, who actualized the fusion of Zen and art during the Song Dynasty, the profound quest for the life’s origin, undertaken by individuals in Zen monasteries and the literati group, ushered in an unprecedented era in ancient times.

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