

A Study of Buddhism Belief in Meishan Culture Based on Buddha Statuettes in Central Hunan Province During Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: “Meishan Culture”, characterized by primitive pantheism and witchcraft practices, has been a unique cultural phenomenon in Meishan area of central Hunan Province (China) since ancient times. Based on the wood Buddha statuettes and the praying texts inside the statuettes in central Hunan during the Ming and Qing dynasties, this paper explores the characteristics of folk Buddhist beliefs in this area. “Meishan Buddhism” with distinct regional characteristics had been coming into being after over one thousand years of blending. Integrating Buddhism, witchcraft, Taoism and Confucianism, “Meishan Buddhism” maintains a strong relation to individualism, reality and secularism, but detached from politics and any doctrines. It is widely spread among the folks since most of the followers are ordinary people. And their religious activities tend to be witchcraft-styled.

1. Introduction

“Meishan Culture”, a cultural concept put forward in the early 1980s, refers to the cultural phenomenon in Meishan area of central Hunan in ancient times [1]. It is recorded that Meishan refers to the area stretching more than 1,000 kilometers between Changsha in the east, Shaoyang in the south, Yuanling in the west, and Changde and Lixian in the north, with Xinhua and Anhua located in its center [2]. Religious belief is the main content of Meishan cultural system. Because of the unfavorable natural and cultural environment (its isolation from the outside world lasted until the Northern Song Dynasty), Meishan residents formed and maintained their primitive belief and religious customs of “believing in witches and offering sacrifices to ghosts” [3] for a long time, making Meishan culture quite distinct from other cultural forms. Specifically speaking, centering on the worship of ancestors, Meishan religion was guided by the pantheistic belief of animism. It sought for good fortune and avoided disaster for the family by means of offering sacrifices to ghosts and divines, with much emphasis on close relationships and utilitarian purposes.

Buddhism originated in ancient India in the sixth century B.C. At first, Hinayana Buddhism was very popular and it preached the doctrines of “Four Noble Truths”, “Five Implications without Self”, “The Eightfold Path” and “Twelve Nidanas” with the purpose of individual practice and moksha. Afterwards, Mahayana Buddhism emerged from the first century AD which emphasized the universality of all living beings and individual moksha simultaneously [4]. It is well known that Buddhism emphasizes practice and compassion, while Meishan belief centers on worshipping gods and ghosts and “in search of personal

welfare” [5]. Thus, what would happen if the two beliefs came into contact with each other? Would they give rise to any new form of religion? It can be said that the wood Buddha statuettes in central Hunan and the praying texts inside the statuettes are the testimony and demonstration of the people’s belief in Buddhism in Meishan. Therefore, with a focus on examining the wood Buddha statuettes in central Hunan mainly from the 18th to the 20th century, this paper tries to explore the adaptation and acceptance of Buddhism in Meishan culture as well as the characteristics of folk Buddhist beliefs in the area by sorting out the geographical distribution, types and styles of Buddha statuettes.

2. Wood Buddha Statuettes in Meishan Area

The abundant tree resources in Hunan provided economical raw materials for wood carving. In terms of subject, the preserved woodsculptures in Meishan area from Ming and Qing dynasties mainly include Meishan religion (also known as witchcraft, or *Shigong* [Master] religion, etc.) gods, Taoist gods, Confucian idols, Buddhist gods and ancestors. Similar to other gods, wood Buddha statuettes are also made up of two parts, namely the statuette itself and the the praying texts sealed in the niches on its back. Specifically, Buddha statuettes mainly include Avalokitesvara *Guanyin*, Sakyamuni Buddha, Amitabha Buddha and other types of Buddha, with a small size of dimensions within 20-30cm, hence popular among the households and easy to carry with when performing religious rituals. Besides, the praying text, also known as “wish” or “vow” (*yizhi, fayuanwen*, etc.), was kept to record the residence and name of the owner of the statuette, identity of the gods sculptured, and the time of its being unveiled or erected, as well as the purpose of making the statuette.

2.1 Time Period and Geographical Distribution

Since wood statuettes are usually made of some perishable materials such as camphor, sandalwood and boxwood, the most common wood statuettes that handed down to now were from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, especially from the Qing Dynasty. According to current research, the database of Hunan wood statuettes established by Mr. Alain Arrault of École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) contains more than 3,500 statuettes and praying texts [6], most of which were created during the time from the 18th century to the Republic of China (1912-1949). The main provenance of these statuettes was Anhua, followed by Xinhua and Ningxiang [7]. More than 800 wood statuettes have been collected by Hunan Museum. The time of their creation was from the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 20th century, most of which were created in Xinhua, Anhua and other counties in the central part of Hunan province. Therefore, it can be concluded that a large part of the wood statuettes originated from Xinhua and Anhua, the cradle of Meishan culture. At the same time, other provenances were also located in the central part of Hunan province, heavily influenced by Meishan culture. In addition, it is pointed out that although such wood statuettes were found sporadically in Guangxi, Jiangxi and Sichuan provinces, they could in fact be brought to these places because of the southern migration of the residents from central Hunan after the Song Dynasty. Therefore, it can be concluded that Hunan was the only place where such statuettes were produced, and they were created in large quantities [8].

2.2 The Percentage of Buddha Statuettes

The number of wood Buddha statuettes in Hunan Museum accounts for about one eighth (12.5%) of the total statuettes, while the percentage is only 1% in EFEO’s collection. The reason for such a huge difference is that the collection of statuettes in Hunan Museum were smuggled goods confiscated by Changsha Customs. In order to cater to the overseas markets, those art dealers consciously chose Buddhist artworks that were appreciated by the Western collectors; while EFEO may be more interested in statuettes featuring local gods with distinctive regional and ethnic characteristics for research purposes. Therefore, the percentage of wood Buddha statuettes is very low among all the wood statuettes (definitely even lower than the percentage in the collection of Hunan Museum). In other words, Buddhist statuettes are only a minor pedigree in system of Meishan religious culture.

2.3 Types and Styles

In fact, it can be observed that Buddha statuettes maintain independent genealogy and styles among other statuettes. Generally speaking, Buddha statuettes in central Hunan include Sakyamuni, Bhaisajyaguru, Amitabha Buddha, Samantabhadra, Manjushri, Ksitigarbha, Arhats, Devatàs, etc. Among them, some Avalokitesvaras like Child-Sending *Guanyin*, *Guanyin* of Southern Sea, Water-Moon *Guanyin* and *Guanyin* Holding Willow Branches were popularly worshipped by the folks. The wood Buddha statuettes show a completely different style from other statuettes featuring witches, Taoists and ancestors in Meishan area. For example, The statuette of Lord *Guanyu* in Fig. 1 wearing military clothing looks dignified and brave. In Fig. 2, statuette of Father-in-Law is dressed in ordinary clothes as that of the Qing Dynasty landlords with a loving face. In Fig.3, the Meishan God *Zhang Wulang* looks more like a wild tribal hero than a god, untamed but very interesting. Compared with the majesty of Taoist statuettes, the secularity of ancestor statuettes and the mystery of witchcraft statuettes, Buddhist statuettes usually show a sense of solemnity, grace and ethereality. In addition, it is obvious that Buddha statuettes have been made by following certain rules in terms of appearance, posture, handprint and decoration compared with other statuettes. For example, the statuette of Amitabha in Fig. 4 is the standard samadhi of Buddha. In Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, Water-Moon *Guanyin* and *Guanyin* of Southern Sea respectively wear a crown with Buddha images. In addition, lotus pedestals and boat-shaped backlights are also typical elements of *Guanyin* statuettes.



Fig.1 Lord *Guanyu*, 1841, Hunan Museum



Fig.2 Father-in-law, 1839, Hunan Museum



Fig.3 *Zhang Wulang*, 1947, EFEO



Fig.4 Amitabha, 1901, Hunan Museum



Fig.5 Water-Moon *Guanyin*, Qing Dynasty, Hunan Museum



Fig.6 *Guanyin* of Southern Sea, Hunan Museum

Nevertheless, local traditional culture still can be found in Buddha statuettes. For instance, the backlight originated from ancient India was mostly patterns featuring flames, flying Apsaras and Buddhist stories. However, they were replaced by the unique pattern of Meishan double-snake (Fig. 7) which resulted from the influence of snake totem in *Chiyou* Belief in Meishan area [9]. To take another example, *Guanyin* in Fig.8 tends to look like the locals, without the standard features of long eyes and high nose, and the earlier necklace of gems on its chest was changed into the silver petal-pattern neckring commonly used by local Miao ethnic group.



Fig.7 double-snake pattern backlight



Fig.8 Guanyin's neck decoration and silver neckring of the Miao ethnic group

3. Buddhism Belief in Meishan Culture

There is no doubt that the exchange of two cultures will inevitably influence each other. Meishan culture was influenced by Buddhism. On the other hand, Buddhism has been transformed and assimilated by Meishan culture with its inherent continuity and subjectivity. Then, “Meishan Buddhism” was eventually formed with distinctive regional characteristics.

3.1 Individualism and Secularism, but Detached from Doctrines and Politics

After examining 1,039 pieces of the records of making Buddha statuettes in Hunan from the Qing Dynasty, the Research Center of Chinese Village Culture of Hunan University concluded that the main reasons for creating these statuettes included praying for safety and good health, livestock, wealth, more family members, officialdom so on [10]. Thus, it can be seen that praying for blessings and averting calamities for families and individuals is the chief purpose of making Buddha statuettes and engaging in religious activities among the folks in Hunan. In fact, Chinese Buddhism beliefs are generally translated into services for the interests of individuals, families and clans, which is not unique to the central part of Hunan. However, the Buddhism in Meishan region still shows some distinctive features, compared with those in other parts of China.

Firstly, it can be seen from the praying texts that people's prayers to Buddha statuettes in Meishan have little to do with Buddhism. Actually, the contents of prayers and the use of Buddhist terms in the records in the past dynasties generally show the influence of Buddhist doctrines. For example, in the inscriptions from the Northern Dynasty and the Sui and Tang dynasties, it can be seen that people's wishes to the statuettes often contain Buddhist concepts such as happiness and being free from suffering, Buddhahood and awakening, abhyudaya, Western Pure Land and universal compassion. On the contrary, in most of the texts inside the Buddha statuettes in Meishan area, people just pray for their families rather than praying for all living beings. People are only concerned about their families and usually pray for the safety and wealth of their family members. There is no praying for the next life and no wish for the life in the other world. In addition, it is worth noting that most of the people making the Buddha statuettes in central Hunan just pray for the living persons.

Secondly, the content of the praying texts also has nothing to do with politics. It can be said that the rise and fall of Buddhism in China is always closely related to the imperial powers. However, Meishan area has been long isolated from the outside world since ancient times. Though it came under the rule of the imperial power in 1074, its isolated state continued for a long time. Thus, the area was not as submissive and sensitive to imperial rule as the central plains in China. By examining the praying texts, it can be seen that Meishan locals almost never pray for the whole country and the emperor. In other words, Meishan people's belief in Buddhism was based on solving their own difficulties, seeking family blessings, rather than the “political awareness” of praying for the nation or the imperial court.

In fact, religion is the belief in supernatural entities and eternity such as Paradise of Christianity, Jannah of Islam, Nirvana of Buddhism, Becoming Immortals of early Taoism. However, compared with other areas, it can be seen that the real purpose of Meishan people's belief in Buddhism or any other religions was to pursue the well-being and prosperity of the living family members and relatives. Actually, it clearly shows the utilitarianism, familism and egoism in the "Chinese thinking" because of the sole concern for the "present world". Political factors failed to exert any influence on Meishan Buddhism. Moreover, in such a transformed Buddhist belief, it is completely insignificant whether the followers truly understand the Buddhist doctrines and methods of practice as well as whether they are pious or not.

3.2 Integration of Buddhism, Witchcraft, Taoism and Confucianism and Popularization of the Belief

Influenced by the philosophical spirit of expediency in traditional Chinese culture, people usually worshipped some "efficacious" divines and turned to them for help when they encountered difficulties or unknown things. They did not care which religion these divines belong to. Although the Buddha statuettes in Meishan area still retain certain patterns and styles in appearance, it can be concluded from the analysis of these praying texts, apart from those statuettes that serve as specific divines such as Child-Sending *Guanyin*, there is no essential difference in terms of the "super power" among the Buddha statuettes, Taoist statuettes, witch statuettes, statuettes of family members, statuettes of ancestors and other statuettes worshipped by Meishan people.

The statistics regarding nearly 1,500 cases of the praying texts in the database of EFEO shows that the reasons for creating statuettes in central Hunan are as the following: praying for safety of the family (900⁺ cases), for religious rites (200⁺ cases), for the recovery of family members (130⁺ cases), and for granting children, smooth childbirth and well-being for offspring, etc (around 30 cases) [11]. This finding is also in line with the above summary on Buddha statuettes by Hunan University. Therefore, it can be concluded that the aims of erecting Buddhism, Taoism, local witchcraft and other statuettes are consistent as a whole. As a result, Meishan Buddhism also presents the unique phenomenon that people worship different gods in different situations according to various needs, and they even worship Buddhist gods and gods from other religions in a temple at the same time. In addition, "Bodhisattva" has been used to refer to all the local deities in Meishan area because of the influence of the Buddhist dharma name, such as "the Bodhisattva of wealth", "Bodhisattva of snake" and so on.

3.3 Ordinary Folks as Believers and Witchcraft-Styled Religious Activities

At first, Buddhism managed to get the support of the upper-class rulers in order to establish itself in China. Then by the middle period of China's ancient history, Buddhist followers included people from all the levels in the society, such as monks and nuns, imperial members and nobles, local officials and folks. In contrast, Meishan Buddhism had a distinct feature of "common people's belief". In fact, most of the known wood statuettes in central Hunan were produced and worshipped by ordinary folks at their households. It's very rare that some statuettes were commissioned by monks or nuns and there is no statuettes by any officials in Meishan area.

Meanwhile, the Buddhism worshipped by the ordinary people in Meishan area shows the strong influence by witchcraft. Specifically, Meishan religious ideas are primitive and backward, and the multi-spiritual beliefs in traditional witch religion and the praying charms to summon gods so as to ward off evil spirits have been widely respected and applied in Meishan area for a long time. In such a religious environment, Buddhism in Meishan area eventually managed to integrate itself with the local witchcraft so as to become a folk religion which was almost indistinguishable. First, there are always complex symbols (tailmans) at the end of the praying texts. For instance, in Fig.9, there appeared at the end a large number of mysterious symbols which were used to summon the gods. Thus, although Buddhist gods were worshipped in Meishan area, the inscriptions on the praying texts were actually a kind of formulas generated under the influence of worshipping local gods, whose essence is to help the master to summon

the gods of heaven and earth so as to fulfill the purpose of performing the rituals.

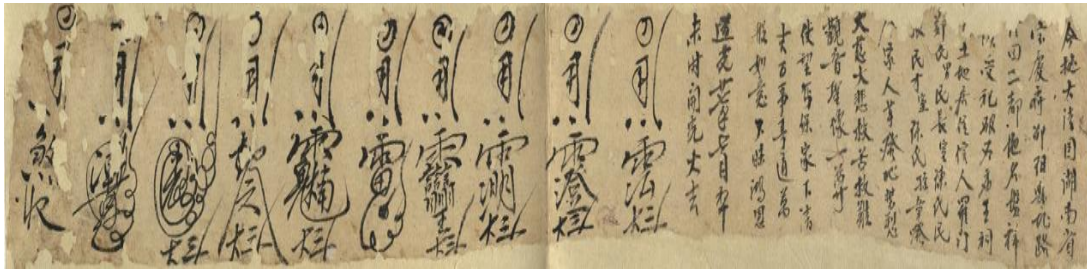


Fig.9 The tailmans on the praying texts, Shaoyang, 1847, Hunan Museum

Second, the Buddha statuettes were not made or commissioned by Buddhist temples, but by some lay *chushi* or *shigong* (master). Meanwhile, the place of worship has been transferred from temples to family shrines or ancestral halls. Moreover, it was not Buddhist monks who performed the unveiling ceremonies of Buddha statuettes, but masters who could perform Buddhist, Taoist and witchcraft rituals at the same time. Actually, these masters were witches who could summon ghosts and gods of heaven and earth. Moreover, the whole process from making Buddha statuettes to their unveiling was similar to a witchcraft-styled show. The master had to fill the hole in the statuette with “viscera”, including not only the record of making the statuette, but also bird spirits (crow’s mouth and cicada shell), plant spirits, animal spirits (Chinese herbal medicine), tea and rice from the family who commissioned the statuette. Then, they had to drip chicken blood on the charms, and finally sealed the hole in the statuette. The unveiling of statuettes involves the rituals of selecting offerings, burning incense to invite gods, giving life to the statuettes, placing the statuette and expressing thanks to gods, etc. In the course of these rituals, the master has to take specific mantras, footwork and hand-holding vows in every step [12]. Therefore, the praying texts and rituals were in essence a variation of Witchcraft “inviting gods from heaven and summoning gods from the earth” in Meishan area.

4. Conclusion

Though the wood statuettes and their respective praying texts from the Ming and Qing dynasties, we can conclude that although the Buddha statuettes in Meishan area still retain their distinctive form and style, the intrinsic spirit of Buddhism had been blended and adjusted in the process of “Meishanization” such as its doctrines, belief purposes, religious activities, religious sites, rituals and systems and the composition of followers. Buddhism had been eventually integrated and transformed as only one part in the religious culture in Meishan, with little distinction from other beliefs and other powerful deities worshipped by the folks in this area. Meishan Buddhism became a special religious form, which was different from Indian Buddhism and Buddhism in other areas of China. Compared with other areas in China, Meishan Buddhism is prominent in practicality, folklorization, and witchcraft and it is completely detached from Buddhist doctrines, where the influence of Meishan culture on Buddhism is undoubtedly overwhelming and subversive. Thus, faced with the primitive and powerful witchcraft culture and Taoist culture in Meishan area, the surface structure of Buddhism (such as the appearances and form of Buddhist gods as shown in those statuettes) was kept while the deep structure of Buddhism (Buddhist doctrines, rules and conventions) was abandoned in Meishan Buddhism. In other words, the process of “Meishan Buddhism” is actually the process of “de-Buddhism”. According to their concepts and intellectual level, local people chose to selectively use some elements of Buddhism while deliberately or unintentionally removing something inappropriate or useless. Borrowing Nietzsche’s concepts of “Apollonian Spirit” and “Dionysian Spirit” in ancient Greek civilization, Buddhism, just like “Apollonian Culture”, which managed to seek the truth of life and the universe and led its followers to practice so as to become enlightened, finally developed into the “Dionysian Culture” full of simplicity, roughness, worldliness, and humaneness in the primitive cultural environment of Meishan area.

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