

The Influence of Zen Thought and Speech Style on the Poetics of Song Dynasty: a Case Study of Mengde Ye's Shilin Notes on Poetry

Bining Li

Institute for Non-Orthodox Chinese Culture, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

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Abstract: In this paper, Mengde Ye's Shilin Notes on Poetry is taken as the example to discuss the influence of Zen on poetry notes in Song Dynasty. The paper analyzes the key issues of Zen, such as the theme of Zen, the characteristics of Zen speech and the way of Zen thinking, and on that basis, the paper discusses the influence of Zen on the theme, the way of speech, as well as the tendency of thinking of poetics in the Song Dynasty.

1. Introduction

On the basis of absorbing the influence of the former generation of Buddhism, Zen, which originated and developed in Tang Dynasty, was widely accepted by the literati and officials after Tang Dynasty and produced a great influence on the traditional Chinese poetry creation and theory. In particular, all notes on poetry of Song Dynasty, regardless of the theme, topic and writing style, are all influenced by Zen. Mengde Ye's *Shilin Notes on Poetry* is a typical example.

2. The Main Ideological Tendency of Zen and Its Speech Style

As a Chinese-style Buddhism, the Zen absorbed many important elements from the native Chinese culture in its emergence and development, so it could take root and sprout in ancient China. Because of these factors, the Zen replaced other Buddhist schools and was accepted by Chinese believers. This paper analyzes the main thought tendency of Zen from Zen itself and factors of traditional Chinese culture it absorbs, and discusses the speech style of Zen under the influence of this thought tendency.

The ultimate goal and main purpose of Zen are to achieve the "Xin Yin" (mind-to-mind communication) of Buddhism. Therefore, Zen has the instinct to reject language from the very beginning, for fear that language can obscure people's understanding and penetration of the original Buddha Dharma. It advocates dismissing of the written language, sudden enlightenment of the Buddhism, mind-to-mind communication and instruction without language. In fact, these ideas have internal logical connection. Zen has the instinct to reject logical thinking. It is precisely because Zen believes that all Dharmas are equal, and that everyone has the Buddha nature. Everyone has a tendency to Buddha. Therefore, it is necessary to point to the heart directly and find the way to Buddha through mind-to-mind communication. We do not need to seek Buddhism from external classics, which mainly refer to medical works and Buddhist classics. As long as we achieve the mind-to-mind communication, everyone can understand the Buddha Dharma even without the Sutra theory as the basis. Therefore, Zen is different from other schools and advocates instruction without language. Based on the basic characteristics of the above-mentioned Zen thoughts, the Zen will inevitably abandon the northern Zen represented by the gradual enlightenment of Shenxiu in its development process. The southern Zen and its descendants, who claimed sudden enlightenment, were doomed to flourish. Because from the point of view of mind-to-mind communication, "sudden enlightenment" is better than "gradual enlightenment". The essence of sudden enlightenment is to find yourself and return to the real look. This school did not lay focus on practices like incense burning, Sutra reading and worshipping. It went into the heart straightly and opened up everyone's original mind. Of course, the main reason why Zen advocates mind-to-mind communication is that, in the middle and late Tang Dynasty, the agricultural Zen became the main body of the participants,

while the agricultural workers with low cultural level basically did not have the ability to read profound works. The pursuit of “enlightenment” by Zen is similar with that of Taoism. Therefore, in the later stage of its development, it is more and more popular with literati. Instead of saying that scholars were attracted by Zen, the more accurate reason was that the ideological similarities between Zen and Taoism theory catered to the cultural taste of literati officials.

The above-mentioned characteristics of Zen thoughts determined that the way of speech it adopted was quite different from that of the Yixue (the Meaning Thought) school. Although Zen advocates “dismissing of the written language and instruction without words”, as Chanhua Huang said, “it did not mean to exclude all words and languages. It meant to take the language as the boat to cross the river”. Any religious sect that can spread far must take writing as the necessary medium. In *Zen Language* and *Zen Writing and Song Poetry*, Yukai Zhou expressed, Zen's dismissing of the written did not mean to completely abandon the writing. It objected the theory and classics of the Yixue school, which was closely related to Zen's rejection of the logical thinking mode of Yixue. The randomness and non speculative nature of the Zen thought, as well as the sudden enlightenment and the Agricultural Zen tradition in the early period, led to the popular style of speech. The content they speak does not have to be logically connected, which can be seen from the quotations and cases handed down from previous dynasties. In addition, it is precisely because Zen advocates that the “original meaning” of Buddhism can not be said, so the language of Zen is metaphorical and implicit, which has something in common with the Taoism in terms of language issues. “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao”; “there is differentiation between the speech and meaning”. In addition, the concept of “ordinary mind is Tao” advocated by Mazu Daoyi of Hongzhou Zen determines the richness of the content of Zen speech. Since Buddhism, that is, Tao, is hidden in all aspects of trivial daily life, the attention to these things is an embodiment of Tao. In a word, from the point of view of Zen thought, “dismissing of theory and classics of the Yixue school” leads to people's attention to the Buddha's nature. However, from the point of view of Zen communication, since “dismissing of language” is the dismissing of theory and classics of the Yixue school, it is also a necessary way to persist in the common language and rely on the common saying to retain and spread the Zen thought. It does not go against the concept of “dismissing language” of Zen thought. Therefore, it is an inevitable trend for the development of Zen to change from “dismissing language” to “relying on language”. The meaning of the two “languages” is different. The “dismissing of language” in Zen is flexible, non speculative and close to daily life. Next, we will continue to discuss the influence of Zen thought and speech style on Song Dynasty poetry theory, and mainly discuss the Zen tendency in Mengde Ye's *Shilin Notes on Poetry*.

3. Song Dynasty's Poetics Theory Absorbed the Zen Thought and Speech Style

The basic ideas and ways of expression of Zen produced profound impacts on the poem creation and poetics theories of the Song Dynasty. Zen also had a certain impact on the emergence and development of Neo Confucianism at that time. In the words of Yutong Zhou, the so-called Song school is “the school of Buddhism inside and Confucianism outside”. Although the judgment is arbitrary, it is not entirely unreasonable. It expresses the reference and absorption of Zen by Neo Confucianism in terms and speech. In such an academic background, it is not difficult to understand the absorption of Zen by poetry theory and creation. The Northern Song Dynasty is an important era of cultural integration in the history of Chinese culture. Under the circumstances of emphasizing culture but neglecting martial arts and the frequent failure of wars caused by it, the cultural reconstruction, the introversion development of culture and the trend of retro thoughts were popular among intellectuals at that time. Intellectuals were more introspective in culture. This idea of seeking for self-identity also made the intellectual class pay more attention to Confucianism and took great interests in Zen which had developed for hundreds of years. It was not only because the intellectual class regarded the Zen classics as classical literature the same as the Confucian classics, but also because Zen had the introspection feature. There is something in common between the introspection of Confucianism and the introspection of Buddhism. Based on the discussion of Zen thought and way of speaking, this section mainly analyzes the inevitability of absorption and

reference of Zen by the poetics theory of Song Dynasty from the point of view of the similarities between Zen and Chinese traditional culture.

As discussed in the previous section, Zen's rejection of logical thinking determines its insistence on non logical and flexible "understanding". This concept determines the pursuit of "artistic conception" by the creators and commentators of poems. The ideal poem should be "clear, profound, fresh, implicit and elegant". These features can only be appreciated by readers' perception. Since logical thinking has no place in Zen classics and poetic works, we can only pursue the artistic conception of poem creation and appreciation.

Secondly, the Zen's equal way of observation focuses on the natural and unrestrained way of living. The man lives in the world, but he should surpass the mundane life. "green bamboos are also the Dharmakaya; Prajna exists in yellow flowers." Its ideological background is that all Dharmas are empty and equal. This way of observation emphasizes, man should realize that all things and rules are equal, and then enter a free and easy life state. This way of observation expands the aesthetic field of poetry. In creation, poets depict daily life to highlight the free and unrestrained spirit. In the trend of the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, the poet's way of observation has developed from a static view to a dynamic view.

Thirdly, the origin of agricultural Zen determines that the Zen adopts the common language in speech. Later generations of Zen masters have pondered and discussed the words and deeds of eminent monks. The spirit of this kind of study enriched the materials of poetic language, and impacted the tendency of "viewing vulgar as elegance" in the poetic theory of Song Dynasty.

Fourthly, the origin of the agricultural Zen determines that the Zen monks like to appreciate the original meaning of "Buddhist principle" in their nostalgia for the natural landscape. The love for natural landscape coincides with the complex of literati and officialdom who obtained peace in the natural landscape and stayed away from the secular bustle. Yukai Zhou explained in the *Zen Language*, "natural landscape is the bridge between poetry and Zen. Zen can deepen the artistic conception of landscape poems; landscape poems can purify the language of Zen gatha. The mountains and rivers with clear sound and far-reaching charm constitute the pure land of the world of poetry and Zen." In addition, "it is the common interest of scholar bureaucrats and Zen monks in the natural landscape that makes their aesthetic interest produce influences upon the Zen poetry and bring fresh and elegant language style to Zen sentences." Zen monks quote sentences from famous poems, because they usually take the speech and deeds of Zen masters as a tool to practise meditation. It is similar to the tradition of Song Dynasty poetics on discussing famous sentences in poems. There is a magic pill, which can turn iron into gold.

In a word, Zen had a far-reaching influence on the poetics theory of Song Dynasty through its thoughts and speaking styles. Finally, it should be noted that the deep reason behind the influence of Zen on poetics is our instinctive rejection of logical and speculative theory. Before the Song Dynasty, there were literary works with rigorous theories, such as *Wen Xin Diao Long*. But in the Song Dynasty, similar works disappeared, which shows that the abstract theoretical speculation influenced by metaphysics of the Wei and Jin Dynasties did not occupy the mainstream of Chinese thought history. On the contrary, due to the practical tendency of Confucianism, as well as the influence of Zen's non speculative and non logical thinking mode, such as advocating intuition and enlightenment, after the Song Dynasty, most of the poets began to comment poems at will. They were unrestrained and free to express their opinions. Their witty words were like pearls of wisdom, which revealed the theoretical elements in the process of specific aesthetic appreciation and criticism. The poets of Song Dynasty reviewed poems depending on their perceptual experience. Our discussion on the tendency of Zen in Mengde Ye's *Shilin Notes on Poetry* should be carried out based on the basic thought and speech style of Zen, as well as the characteristics of Song Dynasty's poems under the influence of Zen.

4. The Zen Tendency of Mengde Ye's Shilin Notes on Poetry

As a scholar at the turn of the two Song Dynasties, Mengde Ye's thought was also influenced by the trend of Confucianism and Buddhism. After all, the reading and understanding of a large

number of poems are the foundation of writing notes on poetry. After all, the poems should be engraved on the writers' mind before he can write poetry criticism. Mengde Ye transformed the Zen thought of pondering words and deeds into the accurate research on poems. In addition, at that time, there were other Zen thoughts and ways of speaking which provided new methods of poetry appreciation and evaluation. This section discusses the Zen tendency of the book from the influence of Zen thought and speech style on *Shilin Notes on Poetry*.

Firstly, from the perspective of poetic thoughts, this work focuses on the conception and Qixiang (the main scene and atmosphere). It objects to the imitative and deliberate writing, and praises the innovation out of nature. The book refuses to take poetry as a word game, but does not against the general use of allusion. Ye attaches importance to the observation of Qixiang, and advocates poetry themes which are closely related to real life. The idea should be influenced by the Confucian view of poetry and the Zen thought of "ordinary mind is Tao". In the aspect of artistic thinking, it enlightens later *Canglang Notes on Poetry*. In addition, as a person who was deeply related to the New Party, scholars of later generations hold that Ye favored Anshi Wang in poetics and "held different attitudes towards Shi Su, Xiu Ouyang and other poets." This is not true. Although the struggle between the old and the new parties had a great influence on him, judging from Ye's evaluation of Wentong, Guang Sima and Xiu Ouyang, it can be found that he still adhered to the literary vision in poetry evaluation and comment poems with objective literary standards, which had nothing to do with the conflict between parties .

Secondly, the way of speaking of Mengde Ye's *Shilin Notes on Poetry* is the same as many other notes on poetry at that time. They made casual comments, but can hit the nail on the head. These works have the theoretical tendency. As Yukai Zhou explained in the *Zen Language*, "Zen monks quote sentences from famous poems, because they usually take the speech and public case of Zen masters as a tool to practise meditation. It is similar to the tradition of Song Dynasty poetics on discussing famous sentences in poems. There is a magic pill, which can turn iron into gold." That is the commonality between Zen meditation and poetry evaluation in the form. Behind this kind of commonality is the commonality of ideological tendency. That is the equal dharma: "green bamboos are also the Dharmakaya; Prajna exists in yellow flowers." From the philosophy we can understand the true meaning of existence. Yukai Zhou pointed out, "the most important influence of Zen to poetry is 'enlightenment' ". In the eyes of literati at that time, poetry and Zen theory were interlinked. Both of them are presentation, not interpretation. Both of them are illogical; the images make poetry closer to the true "Tao". Therefore, poetry is another form of Zen theory.

Third, for the selection of terms, the *Shilin Notes on Poetry* also draws on some Zen terms. "There are three kinds of languages of Yunmen. First, all things are revealed in one mind. Second, humans must cut off the flow of delusion and get insight. Third, rules change according to actual situations." It enlightens later generations, especially Yu Yan in analyzing poetics metaphorically with Zen.

In a word, Mengde Ye's *Shilin Notes on Poetry* was deeply influenced by Zen, especially the "written Zen", in terms of ideology, speech style and the choice of critical terms. Zen's dismissing of the written means to object the theory and classics of the Yixue school, rather than completely abandoning the writing language. On the contrary, the poetry language, which is illogical and intentional, can be used to refer to the original meaning that can not be said, that is, Buddhism. In the view of Zen monks, the appreciation of poetry words and sentences has internal similarities with studying the words and deeds of senior, eminent monks. Under the influence of this trend of thought, the literati officials have great interest in exploring the artistic characteristics of poetry. It can be said that the generation of poetry notes is closely related to the way of thinking and speaking of Zen at that time. Ye's *Shilin Notes on Poetry* is an example.

5. Conclusion

From the beginning of "dismissing of the written language, mind-to-mind communication and instruction without language" to the later idea, "ordinary mind is the Tao", Zen experienced a process of approaching to the secular and away from its religious nature. The interaction between

Zen and literati in Song Dynasty served as an important link of this process. In this process, the concept of “the ordinary mind is the Tao” of Zen inspired the literati to pay attention to their daily life, and apprehend the true meaning of existence in daily life. It provided new themes and artistic conception for literati poetry. The speech style of Zen was similar to the way of writing poetry notes in Song Dynasty. It advocated exploring the beautiful artistic conception of poems through the evaluation of specific words and sentences, which was the same as the essence of Zen's exploration of existence in daily life. That is the equal dharma, “green bamboos are also the Dharmakaya; Prajna exists in yellow flowers.” Zen “transforms religious life into daily life, experiences religious language as artistic language, and transforms sentences containing profound philosophy into poems. Zen destroys the seriousness of religion and the profundity of theory.” Analyse from the acceptance of Zen by the intellectuals in the Song Dynasty, following conclusions can be found. “If intellectuals entered the world of Zen not because they strongly agreed the transcendence and freedom of the pure mind, but because they had an instinctive preference for the artistic life style of Zen, they would bring the scholars' natural artistic pursuit and literary preference into the dialogue; the dialogue with profound philosophical thinking would be regarded as a literary exercise to express wit and ingenuity. If Zen masters and believers could not really regard Zen as a serious ideological problem, and mistakenly regarded the language game as a real game, Zen would become the material for literary writing and could not enlighten our thinking of the universe and life.” These sentences of Zhaoguang Ge may be the best interpretation of Zen's influence on the poetry creation and poetics theories in Song Dynasty.

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