The Influence of Buddhist School of Consciousness-Only on Shao Yong’s Concept of “Mind Constitutes the Supreme Ultimate”

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Abstract. Shao Yong’s Supreme Ultimate clearly contained elements different from classical Book of Changes founded by King Wen, and different from classical Confucianism founded by Confucius and Mengzi. A key difference was the redefinition of the Supreme Ultimate which received a new meaning borrowing from Buddhism in the hands of Shao Yong. This paper will take the study of “the influence of Buddhism on Shao Yong’s Supreme Ultimate” as its objects of research, and I am attempting, through research and investigation, to analyze the source, content, characteristics, and history of their relationship. I intend to clarify the fundamental paths of their ideological development, along with their essential features. This study will be conducted from two aspects: “mind constitutes the Supreme Ultimate” and “the influence of Buddhism on ‘mind constitutes the Supreme Ultimate’.” Finally, there will be a summary of the basic characteristics of the “Supreme Ultimate” that Buddhism had an influence on.

Mind Constitutes the Supreme Ultimate

A major thinker of Northern Song (960-1126), Shao Yong (1012-1077) was known as a famous scholar of philosophy of changes (yixue zhexue) and Neo-Confucianism. His major philosophical work was the Supreme principles that rule the world (Huangji jingshi 皇 极 经 世); this work incorporates, in some form and to some degree, all his major philosophical ideas. The foundation of Shao Yong’s philosophy of changes is the Supreme Ultimate. In the Xi-ci of The Book of Changes there appears the famous passage:

“In the system of the Changes there is the Supreme Ultimate, which produced the two elementary Forms. Those two Forms produced the four emblematic Symbols, which again produced the eight Trigrams.”

It is accepted by scholars that Shao Yong’s Supreme Ultimate is an application of this passage, graphically illustrated by means of diagrams. In Interpretation of Diagrams of the Book of Changes (Yixiang tushuo 易 像 图 说) there appears a “Diagram of Cosmic Evolution in Terms of the Eight Trigrams”, in which the divided and lines of the trigrams of the Book of Changes are used to symbolized the process of cosmic evolution. This diagram denotes that Supreme Ultimate through movement (动) and quiescence (静) produces Eight Trigrams: Qian trigram, Dui trigram, Li trigram, Zhen trigram, Xun trigram, Kan trigram, Gen trigram, Kun trigram. And Eight Trigrams produce all things. This process is found in Shao-yong’s Supreme principles that rule the world (Huangji jingshi):

“Heaven is produced from movement and Earth from quiescence. Through the alternating interplay of movement and quiescence, the course of Heaven and Earth is completely actualized. With the first appearance of movement, the yang is produced, and this movement having reached its apogee, the yin is then produced. Through the alternating interplay of the yin and yang, the functionings of Heaven are completely actualized. With the first appearance of quiescence, softness is produced, and this quiescence having reached its apogee, hardness is then produced. Through the alternating interplay of hardness and softness, the functionings of Earth are completely actualized…. ”
This paragraph shows that heaven through movement (dong 动) produces the yang. This movement, having reached its limit, is followed by quiescence (jing 静), and by this quiescence it produces the yin. When quiescence has reached its limit, there is a return to movement. Thus movement and quiescence, in alternation, become the source of each the other. The distinction between the yin and yang is mind, and their Two Forms (liang yi 两仪) stand revealed. With the first appearance of quiescence, hardness is produced, and this quiescence having reached its apogee, softness is then produced. Thus, Four Forms (si xiang) yin, yang, hardness and softness stand revealed.

Further evidence from the same text is as follows:

“The Supreme Ultimate having divided, the Two Forms there upon stand (revealed). Through the intercourse of the yang with the yin below, and the intercourse of the yin with the yang above, the four emblems are produced. Thus through the intercourse of the yang with the yin, and the yin with the yang, the four emblems of Heaven are produced. (Similarly) through the intercourse of hardness with softness, and softness with hardness, the four emblems of Earth are produced. In this way the eight trigrams assume finished form. The intermingling of the eight trigrams with one another results in the production of all things. Therefore the one divides to make 2, 2 divides to make 4, 4 to make 8, 8 to make 16, 16 to make 32, and 32 to make 64.”

This paragraph describes how the Supreme Ultimate produced the two forms yin yang and then these two forms produced the four emblems, which produced sixty hexagrams, and sixty hexagrams divides thirty-two, and thirty-two to make sixty-four hexagrams. According to this paragraph, the original pattern of cosmic order is the Supreme Ultimate.

However, what is the Supreme Ultimate? The answer for this is found in the chapter Xinxue dishi er (心学第十二) of Supreme principles that rule the world (Huangji jingshi shu), and in regard to this Shao Yong mentioned, “Mind constitutes the Supreme Ultimate.” This paragraph describes that mind constitutes the Supreme Ultimate. It is thus clear that in Shao-yong’s Supreme Ultimate, mind produced the two elementary Forms. Those two Forms produced the four emblematic Symbols, which again produced the eight Trigrams. The eight Trigrams made 16, 16 made 32, and 32 made 64 Trigrams. According to this, the mind is considered the nature of the word, and myriad things of the universe are the manifestations of the observer’s mind.

Because of this, it is admitted by scholars that Shao Yong’s Supreme Ultimate is not wholly based upon the Book of Changes, which has never described that the mind is the Supreme Ultimate, or that the myriad things of the universe are the manifestations of the observer’s mind. Therefore, the problem of the influence of Shao Yong’s Supreme Ultimate well merits scholars’ attention.

The Influence of Buddhist School of Consciousness-Only on “Mind Constitutes the Supreme Ultimate”

When Shao Yong’s Supreme Ultimate is examined, it appears that it was influenced by Buddhist School of Consciousness-Only. The School of the Consciousness-Only corresponds to the Vijnanavada or Yogacara school of Indian Buddhism, which was one of pure idealism. It advocated that the whole universe exists only in the mind of the perceiver. According to the teaching of this School, the external world is produced when the alaya (storehouse) consciousness, which is in constant flux, is influenced (“perfumed”) by “seeds” or effects of good and evil deeds. The well-known The Thirty Verses on Consciousness Only which in Vasubandu’s (4th or 5th century) Sanskrit stated:


Dan Lusthaus’ English translation:

Due to the provisional expressions “atma and dharma,” there is the proliferation of their mutual operations. They depend upon consciousness for their alterations. That which actively alters is only
three: the consciousnesses that are called “differently maturing” (vipāka), “willing and deliberating,” and “distinguishing (vijñaptir) sense-objects (viṣāya).”

In the quoted passage, ātma refers to self, ego. Dharma refers to external world. “Differently maturing” consciousnesses (vipāka) is also called ālaya (storehouse) consciousness, which is so named because it is in this consciousness that the “seeds” of conduct and phenomena are matured at varying times.

According to this passage, all sentient beings suffer from two erroneous beliefs: first, the subjective existence of self or ātma, and secondly the subjective existence of external things or dharma. The purpose of this teaching is to destroy these two beliefs by showing that both are equally unreal (empty or śūnya). Vasubandu maintained that what we called the self and things have only on false basis and lack any real nature of their own; their manifestations are “all mental representations dependent upon the transformations of consciousness”.

The first transformation of consciousness is ālaya; it brings into fruition the seeds (effects of good and evil seeds). The second transformation is the “willing and deliberating” consciousness, which, while it depends on this transformation, in turn conditions it. It has nature and accompanied by the four evil defilements, self-delusion, self-view, self-conceit, and self-love. The third transformation is “distinguishing (vijñaptir) sense-objects (viṣāya)” consciousness. It is divided into six categories, in accordance with the six different sense organs and the six sense objects. They refer to the consciousness of sight, hearing, smell, taste and so on in the sense-center consciousness.

According to this principle, aside from what is transformed in consciousness, the ātma or self and the dharma or external world are both definitely nonexistent, because apart from what apprehends and what is apprehended, there is nothing else, and because there are no real things.

For this reason, everything is consciousness only. Consciousness, furthermore, is known as vijanāna in Sanskrit, it means distinguishing, perceiving, or recognizing, discerning, understanding, comprehending, or distinction. It is somewhat akin to what, in Chinese philosophy, is called mind as opposed to matter. It is in the Mengzi that the term “mind” was given its first explanation. In the Mengzi the mind was the faculty that thinks: The organs of the ears and the eyes do not think and are glued to things. One thing calls forth the other thing and thus the organ functions. The role of the mind is to think. Only when one thinks can one grasp [what the mind is about] and if one does not think one will never grasp it. The mind is contrasted with the ears and eyes and assigned its own specific role. Thus, both the seeming “self” or “ātma” and the seeming “things’ or dharma of the external world are products of the mind, which acts as their evolving agent.

Objectively speaking, in the pre-Qin (?-221BCE) and Han periods (206 BCE-220CE) in China, not only in Taoism but also in Confucianism, the mind was never considered the nature of the world, and the myriad things of the universe are never considered the manifestations of the observer’s mind. Although the Analects and the Laozi referred to the mind, neither text discussed its meaning. After the entry of Buddhism, the idea “the mind as that which produces all things” is given its first explanation. The beginning of the Tang dynasty (618-907CE) saw appearance of one of the greatest figures in the history of Chinese Buddhism, especially in the history of Chinese School of the Consciousness-Only.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the Buddhist concept of the Consciousness-Only had exerted a tremendous, profound and far-reaching influence in the history of Chinese culture. In particular, since the injection of fresh vitality into Buddhism by the School of the Consciousness-Only that was introduced by the pilgrim and translator Xuan Zang (596-664CE). The concept of the Consciousness-Only has become an inseparable part of the Chinese culture and exerted a deep influence upon the mentality of the entire Chinese population, among them is Shao Yong’s concept of the Supreme Ultimate, “mind constitutes the Supreme Ultimate”.

Conclusion

It is thus clear that an important characteristic of the Shao Yong’s thought was the interpretation of the Supreme Ultimate as being in the mind. The universe in its entirety is regarded by Shao Yong
as consisting of a single absolute mind. The aim of ShaoYong constituting mind as Supreme Ultimate is to realize the basic nature of enlightenment in humanity through direct experience and insight, the true nature of things. Therefore, it appears logical that Shao Yong’s concept of “mind constitutes the Supreme Ultimate” was influenced by Buddhist concept of “Consciousness-Only”.

References