Chan Buddhism in Literati Culture During the Song Dynasty

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Abstract: Chan Buddhism had become a reinvented popular Buddhist school of the Song dynasty, and it had also integrated with the indigenous culture of Song China. It had become an inseparable part of the indigenous Song culture of China and had exerted direct or indirect influence upon Chinese culture and even the mentality of most of the Chinese population. Thus, this paper takes Chan Buddhism in Song dynasty literati’s culture as its objects of research; in the paper, the research will be approached by focusing on four aspects: 1) the tea ceremony (chadao), 2) Chan poetry, 3) Chan painting, and 4) the art of calligraphy (shufa yishu).

Introduction

“Chan” is known as “dhyāna” in Sanskrit. It means meditation, which was the basic practice of early Buddhism and the Indian Yoga tradition. The aim of Chan is to realize the basic nature of enlightenment in sentient beings through direct experience and insight into the true nature of things. During the Song dynasty, Chan Buddhism had great influence upon the cultural activities of the literati, which included the Tea Ceremony (chadao), Chan Poetry, Chan Painting and the Art of Calligraphy (shufa yishu), etc.

1. The Tea Ceremony (Chadao)

The tea ceremony’s art of drinking tea takes self-development and realizing the Chan as its purpose. It was the union of the Chan of drinking tea and drinking tea as a practice of the Chan. The Song dynasty emperor Zhaoji (1082-1135) personally wrote a book on the Chan of drinking tea call the Tea Classic (Chajing) which promoted and guided the tea ceremony process. Therefore the drinking tea and the tea ceremony became popular among the Song literati. “Drinking Tea Drawings” was painted by Gu Hongzhong (tenth century) and “Scholars’ Gathering” was painted by emperor Huizong (1101-1125). They all show the literati drinking tea and practicing Chan Buddhism.

Song dynasty Chan masters also advocated “the taste of Chan and tea is one” (chanca yiwei), and introduced the spirit of Chan into the tea ceremony with the aim to achieve harmony, reverence, purity and tranquility.

1) Harmony: one’s movements should be slow and gentle, so as to be in harmony with others and nature.

2) Reverence: one should show reverence of others and nature. One has to bend to enter through the low door of the tea room. This shows equality and reverence for everyone’s Buddha nature.

3) Purity: one attains mental purity by not having worldly thoughts.

4) Tranquility: one attains the tranquility of no-thought by concentrating on the direct experience of every movement.
Through the influence of Chan, tea-drinking has been turned into a meditative practice. It expresses the Chan Buddhist art of living that gives the direct experience of simplicity and harmony in life and realizing the mind to see self-nature.

2. Chan Poetry

The development of Song poetry was definitely not merely the formulation of style and rhyme. Its success was in its ability to have people practice Chan. The poet practiced Chan, letting Chan enter the poem; The Chan practitioner wrote poetry, letting the poem speak Chan; In Chan there was poetry and in poetry there was Chan. Chan was the poem and the poem was Chan. It was true cultivation of Chan, the Chan experience and enlightenment, and from this came many great poets as follows: Wang Anshi (1021-1086), Zhou Bangyan (1056-1121), Ou Yangxiu (1007-1072), Fan Chengda (1126-1193), Huang Tingjian (1045-1105), Xin Qiji (1140-1207), Li Qingzhao (1084-1151), Su Shi (1037-1101) and Lu You (1125-1210)...

Within their poetry and the meaning of the poem there came about the beauty of the realm of Chan. From this they attained the non-thought state and obtained liberation, which was the realm of heightened realization.

With the Song dynasty came a reinvented Chan school with meditation becoming vogue. In the process of practicing Chan literati discovered that Chan and writing poetry were similar mental states. They called this enlightened, which is to say that with Chan meditation one becomes enlightened to the Chan realm and with writing poetry one becomes enlightened to the poetic realm.

Therefore, Yan Yu (Southern Song dynasty, date unknown) suggested, “Poetry and Chan are one.” He believed that the essence of Chan was to attain enlightenment and that poetry also sought enlightenment and that not knowing Chan one would not be able to know poetry. [5] Since then an intimate connection between poetry and Chan was seen. Regarding this, Wu Ke’s (around 1109) “A Learning Poetry Poem” (xueshi shi) reads, “Writing poetry is like Chan, meditating on a bamboo bed or cushion one is not concerned with time. Up until one has realized self-nature, then anything that appears is seen as a transcendental state.” [6]

3. Chan Painting

Painting during the Song dynasty developed greatly. It primarily included paintings of landscapes, people, birds and flowers, etc. The paintings predominately encompassed the spirit of Chan. The most representative of Chan paintings was the “Snow Mountain Xiao Temple Drawings” (Xiaoshan xuejing tu) [7] and the “Snow Scene Cold Forest Drawings” (Xueshan hanlin tu) [8] by the renowned artist Fan Kuan. The subject-matter was usually temples and landscapes. They expressed transcendence into realms of purity. The main scene of the painting would normally be an anterior view of huge mountains in the front of which there would be cliffs with flowing water, huge boulders and trees and a Chan temple. Below the mountains, space would be reserved for fields. The entire painting would be rigorously balanced and organized. They expressed the essence of the Chan realm which is pure, harmonious, and peaceful, offering freedom from secular life. When seen these paintings would instill in the viewer a sense of liberation for illusory thoughts of ignorance, anger and greed. Therefore critiques in the Xuanhe Art Books (Xuanhe huanpu) [9] assessed that it was the painting of Fan Kuan that were most successful in express a feeling peace, harmony, purity and joy which is the most difficult to paint of all the various types of paintings.

The painting “Listening to the Chinese Zither” (Tingqin tu) [10] by Emperor Zhaoji is the most successful in expressing the essence of Chan. In the painting, a person has lit an urn of incense
under a pine tree and someone is elegantly playing a Chinese zither. Three people are tranquilly listening to the music. They are quietly reveling in the purity of the sound of the zither. The entire painting gives one a sense of the refined Chan message of liberation from the mundane to enlightened self-nature.

4. The Art of Calligraphy (shufa yishu)

The art of calligraphy during the Song dynasty placed emphasis on self-cultivation. Besides the ability to write, a peaceful, pure and broad minded character was also required of the Chan calligrapher. At the same time the moral make-up of the calligraphy was also important. The first of the eight requirements of a calligrapher mentioned in *A Continuous Book on Calligraphy* (*Dushu pu*) is high moral character.[11] It was believed that high moral character would bring about the mindful, tranquil, and wise spiritual state of calligraphy. The opposite of this is to say that if the calligrapher was ordinary then the calligraphy would be of a lower grade. The renowned Song dynasty artist who was also a calligrapher, Huang Tingjian, stated that literati who renounce the secular world were capable of producing anything, but there was no cure for one who was secular. In order to attain such lofty personal character with a mind that was calm and transcendent, calligraphers incorporated the spirit of Chan Buddhism into their work. The Chan concept that “mind is Buddha, mind is Dharma,” is similar to the calligrapher’s concept that “attaining the marvelous is in the mind,” according to Huang Tingjian.

The famous calligraphers of the northern Song dynasty were Su Shi, Mi Fu, Cai Rang and Huang Tingjian, etc. Su Shi left behind a work that is representative of the highest attainment of Chan calligraphy of that period called, “A Poem of Cold Meals in Huang Zhou” (Huangzhou hanshi shi). [12] The poet used his skillfully a fluent and fluid style that was unusual at that time. The sizes of the characters were not uniform and the ink was both light and heavy as if flowing with the feeling. This work was finished in one breath. It gives one a sense of fluidity, liberation, and the force of life.

According to Chen Ping’s PhD. Dissertation entitled “A Study of Huang Tingjian’s Calligraphy” (Huang Tingjian shuxue yanjiu)[13], Ke Dingjun’s MA. Thesis entitled “A Study of Huang Shangu’s Chan Poetry” (Huang shangu zhi chanshi yanjiu )[14], Chen Lijuan’s MA. Thesis entitled “Huang Tingjian’s Acceptance of Chan Buddhism and his Poetry” (Huang Tingjian de fojiao chanxue jieshou he shige chuangzhuo)[15], Huang Tingjian was a Chan Buddhism practitioner, whose calligraphy was deeply influenced by Song dynasty’s “lettered Chan” (wenzichan). By introducing the Chan Buddhist concept of “realizing mind and seeing self-nature” into his calligraphy, Huang Tingjian aimed at realizing the basic nature of sentient beings’ enlightenment through direct experience and insight into the true nature of things.

The essence of Huang Tingjian’s calligraphy was “The Pine Breeze Pavilion” (Songfeng ge)[16]. According to *A Critical Biography of Huang Tingjian* (Huang tingjian pingzhuan)[17], in 1102, he made pilgrimage to Lingquan Temple[18] and lived in the Pine Breeze Pavilion behind the Temple. One night while he was pondering the skill entailed in calligraphy, a breeze from the pine trees brought to him the sound of the Linquan Temple bell which made him feel as if his entire body peeled. It is believed by scholars that he was suddenly awakened, liberated from his illusional thoughts, enlightened to the true nature of mind and realized the essence of calligraphy. At that moment he took his pen in hand and wrote The Pine Breeze Pavilion poem which is renowned for its calligraphy style. The way he wrote showed that he captured the essence of calligraphy, which in the Chan Buddhism would be called, “the mind that should attach to nothing.” [19] He was no
longer limited by trying to emulate renowned calligraphers or traditional styles and was liberated to create his own style.

It is as the renowned scholar Kang Youwei (1858-1927) stated, “Of all Song calligraphers, Shan Gu [Huang Tingjian] is believed to be the greatest. His calligraphy has infinite creativity. It embodies the deep spirit and allure of the ‘Orchid Pavilion Preface’ samadhi without its mundaneness. It derives from ‘The Call of the Crane’ yet adds a new dimension.”[20]

In his PhD. dissertation entitled “A Study of Huang Tingjian’s Calligraphy” (Huang Tingjian shuxue yanjiu), Chen Zhiping indentified Chan Buddhism’s influence on “The Pine Breeze Pavilion”(Songfeng ge) and stated that the marvelous nature of his calligraphy was influenced by the Chan Buddhist concept of “realizing the mind and seeing self-nature.”[21]

Conclusion
In conclusion, Song literati studied Buddhism and practiced Chan. Chan Buddhism has almost single-handedly influenced them, including their ways of thinking. The spirit of Chan is shown in almost every well-known literati’s cultural activity, such as poetry, the tea-ceremony, the art of calligraphy and Chan paintings, etc. Each of these can be a form of meditation. The Chan ideas of simplicity, purity and harmony are deeply rooted in the cultural backbone of the Song literati.

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