The Influence of Lay Buddhism on the Paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara

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ABSTRACT

The image of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara, was first created during the localization of Buddhism in China and water and the moon as symbols of Zen emptiness has been capturing the imagination of later generations. During the Song and Yuan dynasties when Zen Buddhism was further spread under the patronage of lay Buddhists, the paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara started to be admired as aesthetic works, into which scholar-officials projected their thoughts and feelings. Artists in the Song and Yuan dynasties borrowed the painting techniques from paintings themed with Gaoshi (high-minded scholars), which resulted in the increasing resemblance of Avalokitesvara to lay Buddhists.1

INTRODUCTION

The Tang Dynasty witnessed the first Paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara. The History of Painting Masterpieces in the Past Dynasties (Lidai Minghua Ji) documents that it was Zhou Fang who first created the image of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara. [1] The Tang literati also played a significant role in the creation of the image. Besides, the rise of Zen Buddhism in the late Tang Dynasty also led to frequent interaction between Zen Buddhists and the literati, who sought seclusion and enjoyed planting bamboo, among other plants, in their courtyards. [2] The use of bamboo, water and mountains as the background in the paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara coincided with the then literati’s interests. As a result of the localization of Buddhism in China, major changes had happened to painting techniques and the image itself since the Song Dynasty. Water-Moon

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Avalokitesvara is no longer an image modeled on a single masterpiece, but transformed by a combination of factors including aesthetic tastes and intellectual thoughts of the Tang Dynasty. Infinite imagination is fueled by the image of “the moon in the water” that symbolizes “emptiness,” “illusion,” and “illusory existence.” This paper aims to examine the inherent relationship between the paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara and the impact of the literati and lay Buddhism after the Song Dynasty.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE LITERATI AND LAY BUDDHISM ON THE PAINTING TECHNIQUES OF WATER-MOON AVALOKITESVARA

The early Chinese paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara share three commonalities: first, all of them were discovered in the western regions of China; second, they were created for religious purposes; third, they are predominantly white and red (see Figure 1). The Song dynasty marked the transition of painting techniques, as nearly all the post-Song works are ink-wash paintings (Figure 2). Since then, the paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara began to be admired for their aesthetic appeal, which is attributable to the thriving of lay Buddhism. Buddhist paintings prior to the Five Dynasties were mostly frescoes in Buddhist

Figure 1. Water-Moon Avalokitesvara (late 9th century—early 10th century), ink and color on paper, 53.3cm X 37.2cm (Courtesy of Musée Guimet).

Figure 2. Water-Moon Avalokitesvara (Yuan Dynasty) by Yan Hui, ink and color on silk, 111.1cm X 76.2cm (Courtesy of Nelson Akins Museum of Art).
temples and grottoes, which, used for preaching Buddhism, are largely based on stories from Buddhist scriptures, the image of Sukhavati and the statue of Buddha, and they are commonly characterized by vibrant colors and majestic grandeur.[3]

The change in painting techniques after the Five Dynasties is primarily driven by the rise of Zen Buddhism [4], whose doctrines of “directly reaching the self-nature” and “attaining nirvana by seeing the self-nature” weakened the originally absolute worship of Buddha. [5]Zen Buddhists believe that one, while living an easy and boundless life, can achieve sudden enlightenment through “directly reaching the self-nature” and “attaining nirvana by seeing the self-nature,” without the need to chant scriptures, uphold precepts, and worship Buddha—an idea that is congruent with the literati’s life philosophy and aesthetic pursuits. [6]During this period, Zen Buddhism built a large following among scholar-officials and the general public and many people engaged in Buddhist meditation and practice, while numerous others were searching and exploring the path to enlightenment.[7]Scholar-Buddhists, known as Ruseng, also played a crucial role in increasing communication between Buddhists and the literati and to a large extent set the direction for the development of Buddhism. Since the Song Dynasty, local Buddhist images that cannot be found in Buddhist classics began to emerge, such as “Budai Heshang” (the Cloth Bag Monk) and “Changdai Guanyin (the Long Band Guanyin),” furthering the public belief in Avalokitesvara. The image of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara of this time features a wealth of literary and artistic elements and finds better expressions in ink-wash paintings.

LIGONGLING’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE CHANGES IN THE IMAGE OF WATER-MOON AVALOKITESVARA

During the reign of Emperor Renzong of the Song Dynasty, Buddhist and Taoist paintings began to show increasing elements sought after by scholars. Li Gongling (1049-1106), a prominent artist living in this period, was very famous for his paintings of horses, but he shifted his artistic focus to Buddhist paintings in his old age. Under his influence, many painters followed in his footsteps to express their own feelings in their paintings rather than creating functional paintings.

Li Gonglin’s transition marks an important watershed in the paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara, which are then different from former creations in three aspects: the posture; the combined use of the Willow Branch and the Jar of Purity; and the appearance of a straw mattress. These changes can be explained by changes in people’s perception of Buddhism. When the pursuit of enlightenment and the way of Bodhisattva as preached in Avatamsaka Sutra (Huayan Jing) during the Song Dynasty transformed the image of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara, the Willow Branch and the Jar of Purity as the symbols of Esoteric Buddhism gradually lost its prominence and had been since separated from the hands of Avalokitesvara and were placed as part of the background.[8] “The moon in the water” is finally molded into a symbol of “emptiness,” “illusion” and “illusory existence,” suggesting
“emptiness” is the main reason behind the creation of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings.[9] It also shows that Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings are more concerned about Zen after Li Gonglin.

**WATER-MOON AVALOKITESVARA AND THE RECLUSIVE LIFE OF THE LITERATI AND LAY BUDDHISTS**

The water and the moon in Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings are sought after by scholars because such imagery inspires poetic imagination. [10] The state depicted in these painting also has a strong resonance with hermits who pursue non-attachment and a reclusive life that is free from worldly hustle and bustle. Bai Juyi (772-846), a renowned poet of the Tang dynasty, once expressed his feelings in the poem appreciating the Paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara: “Upon the pure water, between the white light, my eyes laid upon the image, and all turns empty. Your disciple Juyi, determined to convert, through my ups and downs, you shall be my master.”[11]

Bai Juyi led a secluded life on Xiangshan Mountain in Longmen after several political frustrations and in his poem we can feel his retiring and pessimistic attitudes. The An-Shi Rebellion in the Tang Dynasty led to political chaos and intense infighting within the ruling class. Those scholar-officials, entangled in overt and covert conflicts and therefore pessimistic about the prospects of both the corrupt empire and themselves, gradually shifted their interests to Buddhism and found comfort in the reclusive lifestyle of fishing and other entertainment. In other words, the birth and spread of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings has its deep societal roots[12] and carries with them profound cultural and spiritual significance.

A large number of ink-wash Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings date back to the Yuan Dynasty, when social inequality was rife because the court divided the population into four classes, with the Mongols at the top, followed by foreigners, the Northern Chinese and the Southern Chinese. The Southern Chinese were survivors of the Southern Song Dynasty and were therefore suppressed as the lowest class under the Yuan system. Hence, it is not hard to imagine their indignation and helplessness, which also explains why there was a wide-spread escapist sentiment under Yuan rule. [13] Water-Moon Avalokitesvara works by Yan Hui is a good example (see Figure 2). Yan Hui was once a painter for the Yuan royal family, but it would be inappropriate if we characterize him as a mere professional painter. Zhuang Su, living in the transitional period between the Yuan and Ming dynasties, wrote that “(Yan Hui) was expert at painting landscapes, people, deities and devils and was held in high regard by scholar-officials.”[14] He conveys the restless and anxious feelings of the Han Chinese under Mongolian rule through his paintings of natural scenery.[15] From Bai Juyi’s eulogic poem and the characteristics of Yan Hui’s paintings, we can conclude that Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings during this period reflect scholar-officials’ disappointment and helplessness, as well as their aspiration for a secluded life.
Japanese scholar Yôko Yamamoto concludes after an in-depth study that there exists a close connection between Gaoshi paintings and Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings. Because of the influence of Taoism, from the Six Dynasties to the Tang dynasty, hermits often surrounded their dwellings with bamboo, which is also found, together with water and mountains, in the background of The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove and the Picture of Gaoshi painted by Dai Kui of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Such elements as bamboo, rocks and water are also found in the background of paintings by Zhou Fang and the like, in which Avalokitesvara whose face is like that of an ordinary person sits on a rock with calm and composure.[16]

Gaoshi paintings also underwent a shift in the Song Dynasty. Li Tang’s Linquan Gaoyi became the prototype for the subsequent creation of Gaoshi paintings. The painting portrays a man in white leaning against a pine tree and lost in thought, which demonstrates the artist’s shift of focus by accentuating the refined tastes and interests of the painted figures.[17] A similar change is also observed in Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings, in which the early dominance of Avalokitesvara was reduced and eventually gave way to the depiction of the background, rendering the painting similar to a work of landscape.
The bamboo was widely chosen as the backdrop for early Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings, but it was later frequently replaced by pine trees after the Yuan Dynasty. A comparison between Li Tang’s Linquan Yaoyi and Yan Hui’s Painting of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara reveals their similarities. The Water-Moon Avalokitesvara sits in a much relaxed way with his hands holding a knee, a posture much like that of figures seen in Gaoshi paintings, and differs from other Bodhisattvas that usually sit in a full-lotus position. From these paintings, we can see that since the Song dynasty, Water-Moon Avalokitesvara had been painted to show an increasing resemblance to Gaoshi and that Buddha and Bodhisattvas were no longer presented as saints with an inaccessible distance from common people, but more like reclusive Gaoshi. Buddhist paintings of the Yuan Dynasty are more reflective of the real world and such changes can also be felt in Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings.

CONCLUSIONS

Jianrong Xu mentions that “(the success) in the creative transformation of the tradition primarily depends on how consciously the traditional cultural structure is transformed by the cultural subject.” Water-Moon Avalokitesvara paintings are a good example to show how Buddhism was adapted in China and how its evolution was influenced by the thoughts of different times. In this process, Zen Buddhism that was popular in the Song and Yuan periods, combined with lay Buddhism, had a transformative impact on the paintings of Water-Moon Avalokitesvara. “The moon in the water (Shuiyue),” which is suggestive of Zen emptiness, is a concept that is perfectly aligned with the philosophical, aesthetic and literary tastes of both scholar-officials and lay Buddhists—a reason why the Gaoshi painting techniques were adopted by Water-Moon Avalokitesvara painters. In Chinese Buddhist culture, Avalokitesvara is a symbol of mercy, wisdom and salvation and therefore offers a natural refuge for the southern Chinese literati and scholar-officials who could not find a way out politically under Mongolian rule and thus resorted to escapism in large numbers to console themselves.

REFERENCES