

The character differences in the aesthetics of Zen Buddhism between China and Japan can be seen in the concepts of "qu" and "ji"

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Abstract

The integrity of Chinese culture itself has led to Buddhism being predominantly associated with religion, while in terms of aesthetics, there were numerous theoretical works during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties in China, with highly active thoughts. Works such as Lu Ji's "Wen Fu," Zhong Rong's "Shi Pin," Liu Xie's "Wen Xin Diao Long," and Xie He's "Gu Hua Pin Lu" emerged as a large body of aesthetic and artistic works. Therefore, the influence of Buddhism on Chinese aesthetic consciousness is prominently represented by the Zen thought influenced by native Daoist philosophy, which also reflects a positive aspect in facing real life. It presents an aesthetic taste of "joy" and "carefree." The core of Chinese aesthetics is not limited to the ethical aspect of Confucian aesthetics, but rather stems from the Daoist concept of "harmony between heaven and man" and the perception of nature. Before the introduction of Buddhism, Japan did not form a complete and systematic aesthetic concept. Moreover, the natural environment of the disaster-prone Japanese archipelago was not superior. With the entry of Buddhism into Japan and its dominance in Japanese culture, a pessimistic attitude towards the world quickly permeated the aesthetic consciousness of Japan, which lacked a conscious ideological system. This difference in aesthetic expression is manifested in the characters of "qu" and "ji" .

Keywords

Comparison between China and Japan: Artistic Spirit, Aesthetics, Zen, Taoism.

1. Differences in Zen Aesthetics between China and Japan

Early Confucian influences had a significant impact on Japan, but their aesthetic preferences, which focused on the political aspirations of "governing the country and bringing peace to the world," were not embraced by the Japanese. Japanese scholar Saito Seiichi believes that "Chinese (literary and artistic) thoughts are always imbued with a political atmosphere, everything is related to governing the country and bringing peace to the world, and nothing is not ultimately attributed to the royal path" [1]. Ye Wei-qu believes that there is a certain resistance to Chinese poetics in Japanese waka. They rarely blindly adopt Chinese poetic thinking methods or simply cut and tailor Chinese Confucian literary thoughts. Instead, they consciously downplay the influence of Chinese poetics [2].

To some extent, compared to Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, as a part of the Buddhist teachings, aligns more closely with the original attitude towards nature in Shintoism in Japan. Therefore, when Buddhism became the main structure of traditional Japanese culture, the introduction of Zen Buddhism truly catered to Japan's pre-existing view of nature without stepping out of the framework of Buddhism. When Zen Buddhism was introduced to Japan during the Heian period,

a time of active social development and exploration of new paths, the culture of "monoaware" (the pathos of things) began to decline. Under the combined influence of the dominant position of Buddhism and the natural view of Shintoism, the concise and natural concept of Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes "not relying on words, directly pointing to the mind, and realizing enlightenment through seeing one's true nature," was quickly accepted. Zen Buddhism eventually became the main aesthetic ideology of the Japanese people, giving rise to aesthetic consciousness such as "yugen" (mystery and depth) and "jaku" (tranquility and serenity).

2. The "qu" in Chinese aestheticSection Headings

The "qu" in Chinese aesthetics refers to a quality that is pursued in art. It can be understood as a quality achieved through quick and flexible variations. It is a subjective preference expressed in various forms of art, such as calligraphy and poetry. The pursuit of "qu" reflects the aesthetic preference of Chinese literati, which is characterized by optimism, wisdom, freedom, vitality, and cleverness. The concept of "qu" is closely related to the idea of "reversal" in the Daoist philosophy, which emphasizes going against the norm and achieving artistic creativity. The pursuit of "qu" is an important aesthetic preference in Chinese artistic creation.

Chinese aesthetics values "qu" , while Japanese aesthetics seeks "ji". The *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary defines "qu" as "speed, from running, taking sound" [3]. It carries the meanings of "roaming" and "flexibility" and can be understood as a quality in artistic aesthetics achieved through quick and flexible variations. In Zhuangzi's "Autumn Floods," six ways of describing the world are mentioned, including "dao guan" (observing the Dao), "wu guan" (observing things), "su guan" (observing customs), "cha guan" (observing differences), "gong guan" (observing skills), and "qu guan" (observing preferences). "Qu" represents a subjective preference. During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, influenced by the rise of humanistic consciousness and the philosophy of Xuanxue, the aesthetic of "qu" with its inherent flexibility and variation was greatly emphasized. In this period, the aesthetic categories of "qu," "flavor," "spirit," and "charm" were combined. In the evaluation of calligraphy and painting, "qu" was used to describe excellent qualities. For example, in the book "Jin Shu," there is a comment on Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy: "Although Wang Xianzhi's skill is not as good as his father's, it has a charming quality" [4].The term "meiqu"used here is a complimentary evaluation of the quality of Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy, indicating that although his skill is lacking, his taste is excellent . In Liu Xie's "Wenxin Diaolong," it is stated, "Observing his careful and varied expressions, his deep understanding of sorrow and suffering, his storytelling resembling transmission, his concluding words imitating poetry, his concise four-character verses, and the rarity of slow sentences; therefore, he is able to be righteous and elegant in his meaning, adhering to tradition while bringing a sense of novelty" [5].The term "qu" used here expresses a pursuit of aesthetic quality. During the Song Dynasty, this concept of "qu" was taken to the extreme in aesthetics, encompassing various forms such as "fengqu" (humorous and witty), "qingqu" (emotional and refined), "chanqu" (Zen-like), "yiqu" (meaningful and profound), "yequ" (natural and rustic), and "qiqu" (strange and unique). Regardless of the preference, "qu" is always at the core. Su Shi, building upon the flexible and versatile nature of "qu," emphasized the word "qi" (strange) and proposed the idea that poetry should pursue a sense of strangeness and novelty, deviating from the norm while still adhering to the Dao [6].The beauty of poetry lies in its ability to defy conventional logic while still adhering to the Dao. The fundamental principle of creation is to achieve victory through unconventional means. This concept of going against the norm while still aligning with the universal principles is referred to as "fan chang he dao" . It involves surpassing people's everyday understanding and conforming to the laws of the universe. By doing so, poetry becomes novel, striking, and innovative, yielding remarkable effects and effortlessly leading people into a profound artistic

realm [7]. All of the above can be attributed to the ideological logic of "fan zhe dao zhi dong" in the Dao De Jing. This concept of going against the norm reflects the aesthetic preference of Chinese literati, which is characterized by optimism, wisdom, carefreeness, vitality, and cleverness. The pursuit of "qu" is a crucial aesthetic preference for Chinese literati in artistic creation. This can be compared to the difference between Chinese Zen Buddhism and traditional Indian Buddhism, where "hui" and "ding" play different roles.

3. The "ji" in Japanese aesthetic

The pursuit of "ji" in Japanese aesthetics reflects the overall absorption of Chinese Zen Buddhism by the Japanese people, as well as the combination of traditional Japanese aesthetic consciousness and Buddhist enlightenment.

In Chinese culture, "ji" means silence and tranquility, as mentioned in the Tao Te Ching: "There was something undefined and complete, born before heaven and earth. Silent and boundless, standing alone without changing, circulating everywhere without danger, it can be considered the mother of the world" [8]. In the Zhuangzi, it is said: "The empty, the still, the serene, the lonely, the inactive - these are the root of all things" [9]. Here, "ji" is an objective expression of silent tranquility. It is believed that this state of emptiness is peaceful and natural, free from joy or sorrow. This is what makes it the foundation of Daoist thought. In the Chinese context, "ji" does not possess emotional qualities or artistic aesthetic concepts. It may be seen as a state of "no thoughts" or freedom.

The Japanese concept of "ji" is different from that of China. While Chinese Zen Buddhism, influenced by Daoist thought, presents a free and unrestrained attitude in aesthetics, Japanese Zen Buddhism has influenced all aspects of its cultural life. However, as mentioned earlier, the pessimistic view of the world in Buddhism has influenced Japan's aesthetic style. Additionally, the introduction of Zen Buddhism to Japan was in the form of "dual cultivation of Zen". Although it later became the dominant force in Japanese aesthetic and artistic thought, it also incorporated various traditional Buddhist elements beyond Zen philosophy. As a result, the Japanese concept of "ji" carries some melancholic emotions on the foundation of the Chinese concept of tranquil emptiness. In the earliest literary works such as the "Manyoshu" and "Kokin Wakashu," "ji" and "wabi" were synonymous, expressing a sense of pessimistic loneliness associated with poverty and destitution, conveying pain and sorrow. When combined with the development of Zen philosophy in the field of aesthetics, this bitterness is merged with simplicity to form the beauty of "kudan" and "kongji" (dryness and emptiness). Teng Jun pointed out that the core of wabi is Zen, and the negation spirit of Zen is reflected in the field of aesthetics through wabi. The idea of "nothingness" in Zen philosophy negates all existing forms of beauty, while the idea of "endless possibilities within nothingness" allows wabi to create countless free and unrestricted artistic forms [10].

In everyday life, the Japanese people find Zen beauty and interest in cutting a piece of green bamboo as a flower vase or arranging a few wild flowers as ikebana. Zen Buddhism serves as a catalyst for the formation, development, and maturity of Japanese aesthetic culture. When the Japanese people go out to enjoy cherry blossoms in early spring, their hearts can feel a sense of fleeting life as the cherry blossoms flutter in the wind. When they gaze at the silent and vast ocean at the seaside, their minds immerse in the artistic realm of Zen. When they sit leisurely in a tatami room, sipping tea and gazing at wildflowers in a bamboo vase, they experience a scene of clarity and profundity, naturally entering a state of Zen. Therefore, the pursuit of Zen has become an ideal and artistic way of life for the Japanese people. Qiu Zihua pointed out that the Japanese people not only bring Buddhist Zen thinking and aesthetic taste into the realm of art but also extend it to all aspects of daily life, becoming the epitome of artistic beauty and the core of Japanese artistic spirit [11].

In summary, the relationship between Chinese art and Zen Buddhism is more reflected in indigenous thoughts, while Japan has established its own philosophical and aesthetic system based on the foreign culture of Buddhism. However, even though Zen Buddhism originated in China, it cannot completely escape the influence of traditional Buddhist practices such as "zazen" and "nembutsu," and it is also unable to free itself from the consciousness of suffering in traditional Buddhism. Japanese aesthetics is actually a fusion of Zen Buddhism, traditional Buddhism, and indigenous Shinto thoughts. Compared to the spiritual essence of Chinese aesthetics, Japanese aesthetics places more emphasis on external forms and has a sense of "sorrow" in its aesthetic implications .

However, the premise of the differences in artistic spirit between China and Japan is achieved within the same framework of Eastern artistic spirit. Under the influence of Zen Buddhism, compared to the Western focus on perspective and the scientific approach of natural representation, the artistic spirit of China and Japan can actually be seen as the same type of Eastern artistic spirit within this space. Even though Japan emphasizes form more than China, it still highlights simplicity and the emphasis on meaning over form compared to the West. "The way of the great simplicity" is still a prominent characteristic of Japanese Zen art in the global context. In the comparison between East and West, the delicate emotions of "sensitivity" and "sorrow" between China and Japan can be temporarily ignored, as well as the comparison of the subtle emotions of "interest" and "solitude". Instead, we can compare Western representational art that reproduces nature with Eastern abstract art that refines nature's "imagery" or "abstraction" .

4. Conclusion

Zen Buddhism has had a profound influence on Japanese aesthetics. The Zen concept of "directly pointing to the mind, seeing one's nature and becoming a Buddha" and the expression of beauty through "simplicity" and "emptiness" have made Zen Buddhism the main aesthetic ideology of the Japanese people. The compatibility between the introduction of Zen Buddhism and the original attitude towards nature in Shintoism further strengthens the position of Zen Buddhism in Japanese aesthetics. The simple and natural concepts of Zen Buddhism were quickly accepted and formed aesthetic consciousness such as "yugen" and "jaku" in Japan.

In contrast to Chinese aesthetics, which pursues "interest" (qu), Japanese aesthetics pursues "solitude" (jaku). Chinese aesthetics emphasizes the quality achieved through rapid transformation, while Japanese aesthetics focuses more on external forms and carries a sense of sadness in its aesthetic meaning. This difference can be traced back to the influence of Zen Buddhism on the aesthetics of both countries. The core of Chinese aesthetics comes from the Daoist understanding of the unity of heaven and man and the perception of nature, while Japanese aesthetics, under the influence of Zen Buddhism, places more emphasis on form and the expression of tranquility.

Japanese aesthetics is actually a fusion of Zen Buddhism, traditional Buddhism, and indigenous Shintoism. Although Japanese aesthetics places more emphasis on external expression, within the framework of Eastern artistic spirit, it can be seen as the same type of Eastern artistic spirit as Chinese aesthetics. Both pursue simplicity, emphasize meaning over form, and reflect the commonalities of Eastern artistic spirit.

Zen Buddhism has had a significant impact on Japanese aesthetics, shaping a unique aesthetic consciousness. There are clear differences between Chinese and Japanese aesthetics, with Chinese aesthetics pursuing interest and adaptability, while Japanese aesthetics pursues tranquility and the expression of sadness. These differences stem from the different influences of Zen Buddhism on the aesthetics of the two countries.

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