

Life Consciousness of Literati in Tang and Song Dynasties and the Buddhist View of Impermanence

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Abstract: Since ancient times, the ideals of “regulate one's family, govern the country and bring peace to the world” and “the world is equally shared by all” have attracted scholars' attention, making them less concern about themselves in real life. In the face of ups and downs of life, scholars do not have the way to dispel worries brought by personal desires such as fame and wealth. Fortunately, the Buddhist view of impermanence offers life consciousness and the way of relief that Confucianism can not provide. This paper attempts to take Juyi Bai and Anshi Wang as representatives of literati in Tang and Song Dynasties to analyze their life consciousness and the Buddhist view of impermanence.

1. Introduction

As China's native culture, Confucian has been deeply influencing the thought and behaviors of Chinese literati. The traditional idea of attaching importance to worldly achievements and pursuing “morality, meritorious service and expound one's ideas in writing“ is imprinted in the heart of every Chinese. The ideal of “regulate one's family, govern the country and bring peace to the world” has distracted scholars' attention to themselves in real life. The Confucianism holds, “one cannot know what death is before knowing what life is.” Influenced by this thought, scholars do not have the life consciousness and ways of liberation in the face of ups and downs in real life. Fortunately, the Buddhist view of impermanence provides that way to make up for the deficiency.

2. The Traditional Outlook on Life of Literati

Under the influence of tradition, Chinese literati were endowed with strong social attributes. Later scholars often used this as a starting point to study the poets themselves and their literary works. In *The Analects of Confucius: Chapter 17*, “the Confucius said, 'My children, why do you not study the *Book of Poetry*? The odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them you learn the more immediate duty of serving one's father, and the remoter one of serving one's prince. From them we become largely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants.”[1] When the literati created, they first thought of their social functions. Their concern for themselves was mostly based on their feelings of home, country and the world. Yukai Zhou mentioned in his article, *Aesthetics of Pain: Body Writing of Yu Han's Poetry*, “in our ancient literature research, we often emphasize reflecting reality and expressing feelings, emphasizing the feedback of the external real world to writers, and emphasizing the influence of life and social experience on the content and style of writers' creation... But the writer is not only a social person, but also a natural person. He is a living body with flesh and blood.”[2] This shows that when poets express their emotions, and describe circumstances and life experiences in their poems, they can truly reflect on themselves and establish strong life consciousness when they successfully get rid of the social function of literature and get rid of shackles. The impermanence and disillusionment brought by the passage of time can be shown in the works, and these life experiences are just in line with the impermanence view of Buddhism. Therefore, literati can find a vent of emotion, and naturally generate the feeling of individual life and the reflection of fame and wealth.

“The bitter and short life is an important aspect of the sense of hardship in Chinese culture. Confucius sighed that, ‘the passage of time is just like the flow of water, which goes on day and night.’ Yuan Qu said, ‘I only feel that old age is approaching, and I worry that the good reputation will not be built.’ The worry and anxiety laid the basic content of ancient Chinese literati’s life distress.”[3] The literati were eager to make achievements and realize their own value but they could not. The reflection on life and self caused by the contradiction of time passing is always the best theme of literati’s self-recognition. In *Nineteen Ancient Poems* of Wei and Jin Dynasties, there are many poems describing life and honor. “Between heaven and earth, our lives rush past like travelers with a long road to go”. “Life is a journey, like dust, in an instant was blown away by the wind.” “Man is not as strong as stone. Life is fragile. How can you live long and not grow old? The life is ephemeral, and we should gain fame and fortune at once.” “How quickly the seasons change and the year goes by!” “Life in a hurry is like a journey. Our life is not as long as the stone.” These sentences are full of feeling of the short and changeable life. The desire and persistence of life and the fear of death make the literati consider their own value and the meaning of life in the context of contradictions, and pursue more in the mundane world.

3. The Introduction and Localization of the Concept of Impermanence in Buddhism

Ancient China has its own set of concepts about life and changes in good and bad luck, so it is often said that “life is impermanent” and “misfortune and fortune are impermanent”. “Impermanence” means that everything in the world is in a state of change; nothing can keep forever. After Buddhism was introduced into China, the concept of impermanence was further deepened and was combined with the original concept of impermanence in China. [4]

Jiuxiangguan Poem, or the *Poem of Nine Nimitta*, is a Buddhist document in Dunhuang. It is a concrete representation of impermanence. The poem divides the process of life from the cradle to the grave into nine stages (babies, kids, prime age, aging, disease, death, distension, rotten and white bone), and describes each stage in detail. Through the changes of different stages, we can understand the principle of impermanence of life.

Chu Xiang believes that the essence of “nine nimitta” in Buddhist scriptures is, through exaggerating all kinds of filthy and horrible appearances of corpses, they can make people feel disgusted physiologically, so as to eliminate all kinds of desires and greed for the human body. He also said, “it is highly undesirable to incorporate these disgusting and ugly descriptions into poetry.” [5] As Mr. Xiang analyzed, after combining with the Chinese cultural tradition, *Jiuxiangguan* poetry deleted descriptions that caused discomfort. The four stages of life course, namely the prime age, aging, disease and death are the motif of Chinese literati’s creation all the time. The unique life consciousness of Chinese people is undoubtedly an obstacle to the spread of Buddhism in China, which regards life as a sea of bitterness and pursues the other side of the world. In this way, when monks preach Buddhist doctrines to Chinese people, they have to take appropriate measures to counteract secular people’s love and dedication to life. [6]

Chinese literati who believed in Confucian culture always paid attention to the meaning of “life”; they feared the concept of “death”. Death is often a mysterious taboo. For example, Fu Du, who was in and out of the Confucian circle all his life, did not leave a lot of poems about life and death. The poem, *Seven Songs Written in Tonggu County During the Reign of Qianyuan*, was written in very poor circumstances. But it just describes difficulties of the journey, and there is no description of the impermanence of life. However, in literary creation, for literati who are extremely sensitive and rich in the inner world, the life consciousness created by the survival and death is always a creative theme which can not be ignored, especially Juyi Bai, who is familiar with Buddhism.

4. The View of Life and Death in Tang Dynasty Represented by Juyi Bai

Faced with the passage of time and the short life, Juyi Bai always had infinite exclamations. However, he could still put himself in the crowd and treated this problem calmly. He thought that the

whole world was the same, and he was no exception. Therefore, he was calm and restrained. The Poem, *Sense of Time*, is an example.

“In the morning, the sun rises to the sky, and at dusk it falls down to the ground. Looking into the bright mirror, suddenly I find that I am thirty-four years old. Don't say that I am not old. Although my hair is still black, the rosy face has already withered. How long our life can be? Living in the world is just like the sojourn.” [7]

The natural phenomenon of sunrise and sunset leads to the poet's feeling of time. Looking into the mirror, he sighed the approaching of his old age. In the world, he is just a traveler, which shows the poet's helplessness for the passage of time and the decease of life.

Juyi Bai once wrote *Three Laments* to express his anxiety and sadness about aging. At that time, the poet lost his mother and his daughter; his heart was full of grief. In the face of his own aging, the poet said, “I heard that good doctors were called as Bian Que. All diseases can be cured, but there is no cure for old.” In the face of the short time and his weak body, the poet hopes that there is a wonderful doctor who can prolong the longevity. The multiple attacks also make Juyi Bai pay attention to his own life; he cannot keep calm any longer.

For Juyi Bai, the shadow of death covers him all the time. Facing the death of his relatives, friends and neighbors, the poet's inner feelings were very complex, mixed with fear, sadness, despair and other emotions. This sigh about the impermanence of life is very obvious in *Revisiting the Old Residence of Weishang*.

“The old residence is located by the Qingwei river. I return after ten years, and I am almost lost in my way. The trip is reminiscent of my early experience. The willow branches and peach trees have grown into tall forests. It is frightened to find that those children in my memory are adults now. Half of my old friends are dead. We are living the floating life like passers-by; people are hurrying to and fro. The light of daytime fleets like pearls in hand. I looked up to mourn what I met; it is sorrow to find that people and things are changing day by day, and I grow old inevitably. The rosy cheeks are gone; enormous white hair grows up. The only thing remains unchanged is the mountain peak standing out out the gate.” [8]

Ten years later, the poet returned to his former residence in Weishang, but he could not find the way to the residence. Peaches and willows which were planted in the past grew into forests. Young kids at that time have grown up. For older people, “half of my old friends were dead; the other half grew white hair”. In the face of such “changing”, the poet “looked up to mourn what I met”. But he also thought that he would eventually reach the “twilight” year. Only the mountain can remain unchanged. He felt so sad and desolate.

Thank to the help of Buddhism, poets who have experienced ups and downs are able to face all kinds of setbacks and tribulations in life without losing ambition. Instead, they constantly faced the miserable life and surmounted difficulties and pains. For example, in *Yanzuo Xianyin*, “now the temples have gray, and only wine can help me to have rosy cheeks. I really want to learn about meditate from Buddhist monks; thousands of worries can be thrown into the clouds.” [9] In the face of his thin hair and withered shape, wine is just a temporary anesthesia. It cannot make people rejuvenate and stay young forever. Only “learning Zen” can we throw “thousands of worries into the clouds”. In the atmosphere of Buddhism and Zen culture, Juyi Bai uses Zen theory to eliminate the pain and anxiety caused by his self life consciousness.

5. The Influence of Zen in Song Dynasty on Literati's Life Consciousness

Zen Buddhism was more developed in Song Dynasty. It had a complete theoretical system, and was more in line with the general psychological pursuit of literati at that time. A lot of scholars made friends with eminent monks at that time, and even became their Buddhist heirs. For example, Anshi Wang was the successor of Jiangshan Zanyuan of Linji Zong; Shi Su was the successor of Donglin Changzong of Huanglong School of Linji Zong; Tingjian Huang was the successor of Huanglong Zu.

Anshi Wang lost his father when he was young, and his two elder brothers died early. Therefore, as the eldest son and the elder brother in the practical sense, he took on the role of elder brother and

father under the influence of Confucian ethics. Therefore, Anshi Wang had a different kind of feeling towards his brothers and his family, and also had different life consciousness in the reunion and separation with family members.

Influenced by Zen Buddhism, Anshi Wang's poems often show the tendency of retreat. As an old man accustomed to the vicissitudes of life, Wang was helpless and vulnerable in the whirlpool of political reform, which made him more able to experience the life that others can't feel. His poem *To Ji Fu* is an example.

“My rosy cheeks are gone like the strong wind; white hair grows faster than weeds. The thing I learned from books is useless, and I cannot take up secular things like farming. I get down from the horse near the Wushigang road, and walk below magnolia trees. Today, it is really happy to recall the past; I can even hear rooster crow in the depths of yellow sands.”[10]

Old friends are gone; white hairs grow silently. These are the characteristics of the passage of time. From the weak body, the poet further leads to the frustration of life and the suffering of uncertain fate. “The man becomes old before becomes successful”. Recalling the past when he held the hands of friends and enjoyed the moment cannot relieve his sorrow at all.

Because of his poor family, Anshi Wang must take on the important task of supporting his family by seeking official advancement. In the *Second Letter to Zhang Taifu*, Anshi Wang wrote, “I am unfortunate to lose my father, while my mother and younger brothers are unhealthy. We do not have enough clothes and food, so I have to become an official”. [11] From this, we can see his helplessness and responsibility for the family. The poet's decadence increased with the gradual depression of the reform. At the end of the poem, he used Zhuangzi's allusion of Wojiao Chuman, namely “the battle between barbarians who live in the tentacle of a snail” to ease out his anxiety and stay away from these disputes. These are his perception after experiencing the gains and losses of the reform, which are more vivid reflected in his Buddhist poems.

For ancient scholars, to go into the society and do something for the public, and retreat from the officialdom and protect themselves, is an inevitable and fundamental contradiction. When the political ideal conflicts with the social reality, seclusion is their ideal choice. Therefore, the beautiful courtyard and quiet temples can attract literati, where they can get spiritual comfort as well as physical and mental sustenance. Confucius said, “if you use it, you will do it; if you give it up, you can hide it.” Anshi Wang was deeply influenced by Confucianism. His thought of retiring was already revealed when he went back to Jiangning to visit his father's tomb. His poems *Renchen Cold Food*, *Goose in the Pond*, *Two Horses with Strong Teeth*, and *Five Poems to Zhu Chang Shu* also expressed the fatigue of political career and yearning for retired life. It is recorded in *Xu Zang Jing* that he read a lot of Buddhist classics and visited eminent monks and celebrities when he was in mourning for his mother's death.

“Anshi was also called as Jiefu. He read books when he was in mourning for his mother's death. He often visited Jiang Shan Mountain and went outing with Zen master Zan Yuan. One day, he asked the master what he meant. Yuan said, 'you have three obstacles which prevent you from achieving Prajna. You need one or two reincarnation until you can become skilled.' Gong said, 'Please explain in detail.' Yuan said: 'You have strong ambition and you are deeply connected with the secular world. People like you regard the governing of the country as their duty, and want to serve the public. If you can't realize you ambitions, you will be suffered by anxiety and frustration. With the restless mind, you still hold the ambition of managing the world. When can you understand the Buddhist under that situation? People are easy to get angry, and learning principles is the premise of understanding Tao. But it is stupid if you are limited by what you have learned. The fame and wealth should be regarded as your hair; you need to live without desires like monks. In that way, you can get close to Tao. After that, if you keep learning Buddhism, you can understand Tao.' Gong thanked for Yuan again. Later in the first Lengyan get the purpose.”

The eminent monk believed that Anshi Wang learned from the world and was determined to reform, but he still had the ambition. Jinggong (another name of Anshi Wang) was also deeply impressed by his words. Later, he learned a lot of Buddhist scriptures and had some understanding. After that, Wang suffered from his illness, the political failure and the early death of his son. He also

clearly realized that the failure of the reform was inevitable. In his extreme confusion, he resigned the position of prime minister again in the ninth year of Xining (1076) and retired to Jiangning .

At that time, he could truly enjoy the leisure of being retired. There's no need to worry about the criticism and attack of Confucian scholars and officials, so he put his heart and soul in Buddhism. The poem *My Heart* goes like that. "When I am young and childish, I regard nothing as good. In fables you can learn principles of the world, but I am too young to understand them. At first I keep my mind and do good things, even in dangerous situations. Afterwards, I suffered a lot and realized that I could not protect myself. However, it is called popular learning, which means that it should be discussed in poverty. Later, I understand that I need to keep the childlike innocence; the state of self-sufficiency can help me to forget that I have grown old." [8] The poem means, all things are empty. He always keeps the heart of a child, and makes others unable to reach it. In his later years, he became enlightened and never lingered on anything. This understanding of Buddhism also made him realize that there were different reasons for entering and retreat from the official career. Living in lakes and mountains and enjoying farming and fishing is also a good choice. Moreover, this life style also represents the life consciousness at the bottom of his heart.

The poet expresses his depression and mental exhaustion through poems, and weakens his character with Buddhist poetry to show his reconciliation with the secular world. This concept integrated with Buddhist thoughts also dispels his obstinacy and strength, making Buddhist poetry a good prescription for Anshi Wang in his difficult career.

6. Summary

In his *Visit to the Red Cliff*, Shi Su once expressed the feeling through the mouth of his friends. "We are nothing but insects who can only live in this world for one day; we are only specks of grain in the vastness of the ocean. I am grieved because our life is so transient, and envy the mighty river which flows on forever." This view represents the lament and impermanence of individuals' life in the face of nature, time and life. How to treat the infinite time, the eternal nature and the limited life equally? How to break the infinite and limited time and space, and get out of the tiny sadness of self life consciousness? These are exactly the problems that literati's life consciousness and Buddhism's impermanence view want to solve.

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