

On fung Yulan's View of Zen

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Abstract: As a local religion in China, Zen combines Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese Taoism, which has a great influence on Chinese thought. Mr Fung Yulan's study of Buddhist philosophy is systematically explained in his *History of Chinese Philosophy*, *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*, *New Edition of Chinese Philosophy History* and *Six Books of Zhenyuan*. Mr Fung Yulan's study of Buddhist philosophy always takes the development of Zen as the main line to explain his own Zen thought. His view of Zen is in a continuous development state and perfected through his focus on the combination of Zen and Chinese people's own ideological tendency, which is reflected in *History of Chinese Philosophy*, the framework of interpretation with Marxist philosophy, which is reflected in *New History of Chinese philosophy*, as well as the unification of internal logic and deep social factors. The study of Fung Yulan's view of Zen is of great significance for us to deeply grasp his philosophical characteristics and the essence of Zen thought.

1. Introduction

In the seventh chapter of *History of Chinese Philosophy*, "Buddhism in the Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Debate on Buddhism", Mr Fung Yulan analyzed and expounded the transformation of Buddhism by Chinese Buddhism and Chinese people's ideological tendency. The interpretation of Zen was only introduced by Huineng, Shenhui and Zongmi, and there was no independent chapter. He believed that the introduction of Buddhism into the Northern and Southern Dynasties and deep study led to the change of Chinese thought. This change made that "since then, even in the early Song Dynasty, the first-class thinkers in China were all Buddhists."^[1] The localization of religion, which originated in India, has been integrated with Chinese thought tendency and became Chinese Buddhism. Chinese three traditional ideological tendencies, that are looking at the world from the perspective of realism, paying attention to activities, and believing that all people can be Yao and Shun, led to the transformation of the elements contrary to them in the process of Buddhism spreading in China, and thus became Chinese Buddhism. Mr Fung Yulan's compilation of the Buddhist part in *History of Chinese Philosophy* is based on the transformation of Buddhist thought by the three ideological tendencies. As for the relationship between Buddhism and Taoism, he held that when the Buddhist doctrines were explained, the way of "Ge Yi" was usually taken, which was the most popular Taoist school at that time. Fung Yulan considered that the similarity between Taoism and Buddhism was the foundation of Zen.

At this time, Mr Fung Yulan's study of Zen did not sublimate to the study of "negative method". The interpretation focused on the history of Zen and the practice method of "Wu Nian". It can be seen that Mr Fung paid less attention to Zen at this time.

2. Studies of Zen in Brief History of Chinese Philosophy and Six Books of Zhenyuan

Compared with the history of Chinese Philosophy in the early 1930s, Mr Fung Yulan made a clear distinction between "Chinese Buddhism" and "Buddhism in China" in *Six Books of Zhenyuan* and *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*. He believed that "Buddhism in China" had no influence on Chinese thought, and its dissemination was limited to a few people and existed for a short time. What played an important role in the spiritual development of the Chinese people was "Chinese Buddhism", which was reformed by combining with Chinese thoughts. It was developed with the traditional Chinese philosophy and was the localization of Buddhism in China. Therefore, Mr Fung

Yulan stressed the study of Chinese Buddhism. Zen came into being in the combination of Taoism and Taoism. Therefore, the interpretation of Zen in *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy* and *Six Books of Zhenyuan* was more specific. The emphasis was also shifted from the transformation of Zen by Chinese ideological tendency to the analysis of metaphysics in Zen methodology. In *Xinyuandao* and *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*, Mr Fung Yulan expressed that the origin of Zen could be traced back to Dao Sheng and Seng Zhao. The meanings in “good is not rewarded”, “attain buddhahood in the way of sudden enlightenment” and “on the nature of Buddhism” are the theoretical basis of Zen in Tang Dynasty. He believed that with this background, the rise of Zen was an inevitable phenomenon. While, he was still skeptical about the history of Zen.

Fung Yulan thought there were two kinds of explanations of “Wu”. The first is that “Wu is nothing. It is atyanta-sunyata and formless”.^{[2]884} As the mind of a saint was consubstantial with “Wu”, his mind was void just like “Wu”. This was Seng Zhao’s view. Second, “Wu” could generate dharma from the mind.^{[2]884} Therefore, dharma was the original mind of all beings, and everything was determined by the mind. Those who held the first view often said that “there is no heart and no Buddha, only the understanding of nature”, while those who held the second view often said that “the person with an enlightened mind can become a Buddha”. Fung Yulan believed that Dao Sheng’s understanding of the Buddha nature was similar to the second one. “The second statement is not as good as the first one. The latter is totally beyond the image.”^{[2]884} These two kinds of views were fully embodied incisively and vividly in Hui Neng’s and Shen Xiu’s gatherings. At the same time, different views on “Wu” also represent two major schools of Zen, namely the Southern Sect and the Northern Sect. Shen Xiu held “Wu” was that “the person with an enlightened mind can become a Buddha”, while Hui Neng agreed with Seng Zhao that “there is no heart and no Buddha, only the understanding of nature”. No matter what views they held, they all advocated that the first meaning can not be said, practiced, or gained.

The first meaning or the first sentence of Zen is the so-called “thoughts surpassing Buddha”. This “thought” can not be expressed in language. If it is interpreted, it will be restricted. Fung Yulan considered that this unspeakable way of preaching can be called “silent teaching”, which was similar to the “debate without words” and “method without talking” in the way of Taoist teaching. Although the first meaning can not be said, there must be a way to express its meaning, otherwise this first meaning does not exist. “Teaching without words” is also a kind of teaching, so there must be teaching methods. Fung Yulan called the method of expressing the first meaning of Zen as the negative method, which could only be understood but couldn’t be said. It is the opposite of the positive method, that is, the logical analysis method. Fung Yulan explained it in *Xinzhian*. The metaphysics of this negative method gave us the knowledge of ignorance. Fung Yulan focused more on this negative method in Chinese Zen philosophy during this period, because there were very few metaphysical parts in Chinese philosophy than in western philosophy. This is also his recognition and attention to the unique characteristics of Chinese philosophy. At the same time, Fung Yulan believed that the spirit of Chinese philosophy can be reflected in Zen. He put forward in *Xinyuandao* that “the spirit of Chinese philosophy” was constantly exploring how to unify “wisdom” and “mean”. “To achieve extreme wisdom while follow the golden mean” is the highest standard pursued by Chinese philosophers. Zen further unifies the opposition between the wisdom and the mean.

3. Studies of Zen in New Edition of Chinese Philosophy History

In *New Edition of Chinese Philosophy History* published successively after the 1980s, Fung Yulan interpreted Zen with Marxist philosophy as the basic theoretical framework. The study of Zen not only reflected the continuity of the study on *History of Chinese Philosophy* and *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*, but also further deepened the interpretation of Zen, making the structure more rigorous and complete. In the *New Edition*, Mr Fung Yulan’s interpretation of Zen was carried out from three stages of the development of Chinese Buddhism. He held that the development of Chinese Buddhism and Buddhism had mainly experienced three stages, namely “Ge Yi” stage, “Jiao Men” stage and “Zong Men” stage.

Fung Yulan mentioned the first “Ge Yi” stage of the development of Buddhism in his *Brief History* and *Six Books of Zhenyuan*. He thought that the development of Zen was following the “Ge Yi” interpretation of Buddhist thought and combined with Chinese traditional Taoist thought. This was because of the similarity between Mahayana Kongzong thought and Chinese traditional Taoist thought. Since the introduction of a large number of Buddhist classics after the Northern and Southern Dynasties, with the deepening of the research, “Lian Lei” and “Ge Yi” were no longer enough to meet the needs of translation. At this time, there were different branches of Buddhism. Different sects screened Buddhist classics and selected different classics as their own sectarian doctrines. Fung Yulan believed that this phenomenon indicated that Chinese Buddhism had entered a stage of independence. Different sects focused on different Buddhist doctrines, which was the “Zong Men” stage. For the third stage, “Zong” referred to Zen. At this time, Zen had become the core of Chinese Buddhism. It was formed in a Buddhist reform movement in the middle of the Tang Dynasty, which was produced in opposition to the sect. It called itself “Zong Men”. In *New Edition*, for the history of Zen, Mr Fung abandoned the interpretation of the history of Zen in *History of Chinese Philosophy* and *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*. He thought that the history handed down in Zen was questionable, with no research value. Therefore, he focused more on the analysis of the social environment and the historical significance of the existence of Zen. As for the inevitability of the existence of Zen in history, Mr Fung believed that the theoretical basis of Zen thought was derived from the thoughts of Dao Sheng and Seng Zhao. It was this background that made the rise of Zen an inevitable phenomenon. In *New Edition*, he added an analysis of the social level. He held that the social influence brought by Zen was huge, which was expanded by Hui Neng. It was this social influence that became the recognition of Zen on its self-evaluation. With the continuous expansion of this social influence, after Hui Neng, Zen replaced other sects, making Zen become the exclusive name of Buddhism. The content taught by Zen had the opposite side with other sects. From the social basis of the era in which Zen existed, the opposition between Zen and other sects essentially reflected “the fight against the aristocratic families at that time”.^{[3]552} With the collapse of the patriarchal clan rule in the society, Zen followed the trend of history and replaced it. Fung Yulan believed that this was the key to the rise of Zen.

In *New Edition*, Mr Fung held that the development of Zen was in line with Hegel’s “sublation”, which was the real development and a major law in the development process.^{[3]553} Zen reformed the sect and inherited it. It made a total “sweep” and “dispatch” of what each sect said, and inherited the doctrines of each sect. However, for Zen, the highest doctrine couldn’t be expressed by “explanation”. Because once it was explained, it became rubbish and needed to be cleaned up. Meanwhile, Zen believed that when Sakyamuni founded Buddhism, there was a kind of speaking method of heart to heart without words. He also considered that many tedious comments and debates on Buddhist classics were meaningless, and their basis was people’s own “original mind”. Fung Yulan thought that “from the development of Buddhism, the rise of Zen is also a denial of the trivial philosophy of Buddhism.”^{[3]554}

Mr Fung’s introduction of Hui Neng and Shen Xiu in *New Edition* is different from that in *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy* and *Six Books of Zhenyuan*. Here, he used the objective idealism and subjective idealism of Zen to interpret the thoughts of Hui Neng and Shen Xiu. Although the concept of subjective idealism and objective idealism has been used less frequently, this is the reflection of Mr Fung’s evaluation of Chinese philosophy with Marxist philosophy as the reference. In the introduction, Mr Fung Yulan first told the story of Hui Neng and Shen Xiu, in which Hui Neng was better received, so he passed on the dharma and clothes to Hui Neng and let him escape. The purpose of this story was actually to reflect the social background at that time and the struggle in the society. This struggle was between the lower level monks and upper class monks, between those who were rejected by Buddhist monks and monks, and between learned monks and unschooled monks. Mr Fung Yulan considered that “the social background of the rise of Zen Buddhism has the side of resistance. This kind of revolt is also the reflection of the peasant uprising in the Sui and Tang Dynasties”^{[3]555}. The analysis of social contradictions has not been found in the description of Zen in the *History of Chinese Philosophy* and the *Brief History of Chinese*

Philosophy. At the same time, it reflects the historical position of Fung Yulan as a Marxist philosopher to a certain extent. It is the resistance in this social contradiction that promotes the reform within Buddhism, but this reform is only within Buddhism. It challenges the authority of Buddhist classics. Fung Yulan believed that Zen had destroyed the original hierarchical order of monks in temples and established its own order. The translation of Buddhist classics takes easy-to-understand vernacular and concisely expounds the central idea of Buddhism. Fung Yulan held that this was the characteristic of Chinese Buddhism in the third development stage and part of the reason why Zen had been widely spread.

For the interpretation of Shen Xiu and Hui Neng, Mr Fung Yulan held that Shen Xiu was talking about subjective idealism and Hui Neng was talking about objective idealism. What Shen Xiu said was the original Buddhism and “individual heart” while Hui Neng expressed “the heart of the universe”. This was different from the view that Shen Xiu emphasized “the heart of the universe” and Hui Neng agreed with Seng Zhao’ “Wu” in the *Brief History of Chinese Philosophy*. The heart of the individual is relative, while the heart of the universe is absolute. This is the fundamental difference between Hui Neng and Shen Xiu.

Mr Fung Yulan paid more attention to the framework of Marxist philosophy when making interpretations in *New Edition*. He believed that the difference between the North and South was not only the difference of the method of practice, which referred to the “epiphany” advocated by the South and the “gradual understanding” advocated by the North. The fundamental difference was in their philosophy. Mr Fung Yulan attributed this difference to the distinction between subjective idealism and objective idealism.

4. Conclusion

From the *History of Chinese Philosophy* and *New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy*, Mr Fung Yulan reflected the change of his research methodology on Chinese philosophy. In *New Edition*, more attention has been attached to the exploration of the spirit of Chinese philosophy, the internal logical structure of Chinese philosophy, and the study with logic and deep social background. This is his method of studying the history of early Chinese philosophy, which is a kind of transcendence.

References

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