

From Chan Philosophy to the Acoustic Beauty in *the Enchanting Moonlit Night on Spring River*

DE LA PENSÉE DE ZEN À LA BEAUTÉ DE LA MUSIQUE VOCALE *FLEURS ET LUNE SUR LA RIVIÈRE PRINTANIÈRE*

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Abstract: Chanzong is a Chinese-characterized Buddhism, absorbing the essence of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. The combination of Chanzong and art brings unique content and philosophies into Chinese art. The article analyzes the esthetic characteristics of a piece of acoustic music *The enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* from the approach of the Chan philosophy. The esthetic characteristics include the beauty of quietness, of naturalness, of emptiness, and of roundness and harmoniousness.

Key words: Chan philosophy, acoustic music *The enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, esthetic characteristics

Résumé: Le Zen est un secte bouddhiste de Chine, qui a absorbé les essences culturelles du confucianisme, du taoïsme et du bouddhisme. La combinaison du Zen et de l'art permet à l'art chinois de porter un charme philosophique. Le présent article analyse, en utilisant la façon et la perspective de la pensée de Zen, les caractéristiques esthétiques de la musique vocale *Fleurs et lune sur la rivière printanière* : la beauté tranquille, la beauté naturelle, la beauté sereine, la beauté de tolérance.

Mots-Clés: pensée de Zen, musique vocale *Fleurs et lune sur la rivière printanière*, caractéristiques esthétiques

Chan was first born in India, which was a way of self-meditation invented by ancient Indians. The corresponding Chinese character of Chan is short for the Sanskrit word Dhyāna, which means quiet meditation, that is, trying to get the highest-level of wisdom to control the universe by being fully concentrated and excluding all the trivial thinking.^{3(11,6)} In a broad sense, the historical Chanzong belongs to a school of Indian Buddhism. However, Buddhism was brought into China in Han Dynasty and was explained by Chinese language and concepts in the period of Sanguo Dynasty, East and West Jin Dynasty, North and South Dynasty, Sui Dynasty and Tang Dynasty, during which it gradually carried Chinese characteristics and finally came into Chinese Buddhism. Since its introduction in China, Buddhism relied on the Daoism and metaphysics to promote its beliefs and changed its form several times in accordance to Confucianism. After a procession of relying, resisting and absorbing with Daoism and Confucianism, Buddhism came into a climax period in Tang Dynasty, which was also a period of Buddhism being Chinesenized. The Chinesenized Buddhism Chan

absorbed some Daoism thoughts and came up with a system of theories different from Indian Buddhism. Especially after the middle-Tang Dynasty, Chan simplified the cumbersome Buddhism teachings, making it carrying Chinese characteristics both in form and content. The government policy of the parallel development of Confucianism Daoism and Buddhism also promoted the fusion of the three religions. Between Tang and Song Dynasties, the influence among three religions further deepened, forming the wave of the combination of three religions. Buddhism finally became a Chinesenized religion, being an indispensable part of the Chinese culture. It in turn influenced the Jurisprudence in Song and Ming Dynasties, stimulating the transition of Confucianism, as a result of which promoted the development of Chinese culture.⁴⁽²¹¹⁾

Since the culture attribute of Chan is Chinesenized Buddhism and especially it could on the one hand be in competition with Confucianism and Daoism and on the other hand communicate with them, the beliefs in Chan must have had huge shaping influence on Chinese intellectuals. The philosophy of Chan had greatly permeated the overall life philosophy and thinking

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pattern of Chinese literati, which further gave birth to their unique esthetic psychology and interest. In the long-term of culture accumulation, this esthetic interest became an unconscious intent hidden in the intellectuals. And the combination of Chan and art injected into the Chinese art certain special content and philosophical interest. Under this big background, which was greatly influenced by Chan art, Chinese intellectuals differed greatly in pursuing the ideal highest level of art from intellectuals in before. Chinese literati studied Chan though the artistic creation, which represented the creator's spiritual interest and his unique esthetic interest. The pursuit of imagination and intuition in the Chan philosophy together with the pursuit of image gave rise to the esthetic categories of emptiness, quietness, leisure, loneliness and mysteriousness. This unique thinking pattern brought to the literati new inspiration and higher-level esthetic horizon.⁵⁽¹³⁻¹⁸⁾ At the same time, the creations of literati characterized with simplicity, naturalness and implicitness expressed the Chan interest, philosophy and atmosphere.

At present, as the study of Chan esthetic develops further and the Chan philosophy and the intellectual creations move from the nations to the outer world, from the traditional to the contemporary, it is necessary to study the Chan philosophy and the art creation esthetic in depth. Although scholars have done many researches on the relation between Chan and literature, these researches mainly focused on the relation between Chan and literature types like poetry and calligraphy. Few academic studies have been devoted to the influence of Chan on acoustic music. Scholars feel it urgent to fill this blank. Therefore, the present author takes the Chinese national acoustic music *The Enchanting Moonlit Night On The Spring River* as an example, to analyze and dig the Chan philosophy in esthetic characteristics. This article is a tentative study, the purpose of which is to draw the attention of more scholars into this field.

As a musical piece, *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* was originally a piece of Pipa music, named *Sound of Xiao And Gu in The Setting Sun* (other names are *Sound of Xunyang Pipa*, *Night Moon of Xunyang*, *Music of Xunyang* etc.) Seen from the fact that all these names are with Xunyang, this piece of Pipa music must have been derived from the famous long poem *Sound of A Pipa Player* by Juyi Bai, which has the line "to see off the friend at the Xunyang river". And it is not directly related to *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* by Ruoxu Zhang. At around 1925, Xiaozhang Liu and Jinwen Zhen first transferred the Pipa piece *Sound of Xiao And Gu in The Setting Sun* into the folk orchestra *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, combining the mood in the poems of both Juyi Bai and Ruoxu Zhang, enhancing the artistic expressionistic strength. After the establishment of PRC,

it has been edited several times and won popularity among its audience.⁶⁽⁵¹⁹⁻⁵²¹⁾ The acoustic piece of *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* was adapted by Jingxin Xu according to the folk orchestra by the same name. He fully kept the quiet and peaceful style in the original piece, the melody organization way, and the original orchestra structure and deleted some part of the piece in order to leave room for the vocal performance. The vocal part took the second part of the music instrumental part "the moon moves onto the east of the mountain" as the core melody and made some adaptations on it together with some other content in other parts to make the piece more beautiful and clearer, suitable for singers to fit in. It was this piece that made the actress Qiong Fang from Shanghai Xiaoyan Zhou Opera Center won the first place in the folk singing in the national TV singing competition. This is a successful piece of work which communicates the eastern charm all the way from adaptation to performance. The piece fully expresses Chinese people's unique esthetic feelings and Chan philosophy and interest. Being absorbed in it makes people can't help wondering about the universe and life...

Chan believes "the universal laws are in the people's heart", "the laws come into life when the heart has belief, they go to extinct when the heart is in despair and has no belief"; it also believes that as long as you can "clear up the heart and see the essence", as long as you can understand the nothingness and loneliness and peacefulness of the self-heart, you are seeing the Buda. This had permeated the artistic creations of Ruoxu Zhang and Juyi Bai, who had been greatly influenced by the Chan philosophy in the prosperous Tang Dynasty. Under this background, the creation of the piece *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* formed the esthetic characteristics of quietness, naturalness, emptiness, and harmoniousness.

1. THE BEAUTY OF QUIETNESS

The essence of Chan in effect is the ability to see the heart and the nature, pursuing a realm of wonderful understanding, that is, getting relieved from the changing secular world and entering into the ontology world, which is characterized with quietness.⁵⁽⁸⁰⁾ Self-nature is the nature of heart. The theory about self-nature is the theoretical foundation of Chan. It claims that "everything comes from the self-nature", "the self-nature include the inverse law". As long as people get to understand self-nature, they can reach the realm of Buddhism. Chan advocates the self-meditation without being away from the real life; it resists the meditation way of from "nothingness" to "nothingness". It appreciates the overriding life attitude, an attitude

⁵ Qiu Zihua The Influence of Chinese Buddhism on Japanese Culture [J] *Journals of Xianyang Normal College* 1998,(4)

⁶ *Ancient Art With Three Hundred Exercises*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Press, 1989.

rooted in the real life while at the same time rising above it. It pursues the peacefulness of the heart, "be peaceful to accept other people; be quiet to empty your heart".

The acoustic piece *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* fully denotes Chan philosophy's esthetic requirement of quietness. The piece begins with a melody sung with the "Wu" note, slowly telling audience the moonlit night on the river side. The audience may feel that they have been away from the noisy secular world and come to the quiet and peaceful paradise all of a sudden. The sound effect of "wu" note, very similar to the Chinese music instrument *Xun*, gives people a sense of far away and empty, creating an atmosphere of silence and emptiness. In term of the rhythm, this beginning part is slow and calm. The voice pattern in the vocal part is sparse with breaks, non-continuous but repeated, getting louder but gradually going weaker, creating an atmosphere of peace and beauty of a moonlit night on the spring river.

2. THE BEAUTY OF NATURALNESS

The standing point of Chan is always very high, being in a place where it can overlook the life of people and know everything; it is like an old fisherman who is completely sure about himself and the world. "Chan doesn't have the pathetic experience towards life; it doesn't involve meditation about death on the other side. On the contrary, it appreciates the secular life on this side. The true understanding of Chan is obtained only in the common life."⁷⁽²²⁾ The point in Chan is how to face life and the world after understanding it. The essential task of Chan is to dynamically grasp the ultimate combination of Buddhism philosophy and Buddhism nature and self-heart and self-nature beyond the real world. "The calm and peaceful heart is the Dao" does not mean to make Dao vulgar or limit it in daily life; on the contrary, it means to show the high realm beyond the common daily life, forgetting the effort once you made. Therefore, the ultimate end of Chan comes back to the meditation about our life, about the significance of life, the value of it, and the meaning of the existence of itself. It expresses its keen concern toward the significance of life in an intuitive way and discloses its urgent eager towards the society in a transcendentalist way.⁸⁽²⁾ Zhaoguang Ge said "Chanzong takes the world of daily life as the ultimate realm of a religion; it pursues the nature of people as the nature of Buddhism; it considers the peaceful and calm mentality as the sacred mental phase; by these the transformation from Indian

Buddhism to Chinese Chan is finished, making the Buddhism which was originally full of religion characteristics take off its responsibilities of disciplining and supervising the spiritual life of human being and become an advocator of esthetic interest, linguistic wisdom and elegant attitude.⁹⁽⁸⁹⁻⁹⁰⁾

The pursuit of natural artistic beauty has become the creation principle of many generations of artists. The book *The Realm of Drawing* clearly points out that "the outside nature gives the heart origin",¹⁰ that is, the natural mountains and rivers are the origins of beauty in our heart, humans should go deep inside their heart to understand the philosophy of natural beauty. The acoustic piece *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* uses the natural sound notes in according with the traditional Chinese artistic esthetic habit. When the artists adapted it into a vocal performance, they avoided being artificial and never mechanically applied the unified skills of Italian way while ignoring Chinese people's esthetic habit. The Italian performance is a way of singing which fits into the Italian national culture; it has its own pronouncing norms; it is systematic and scientific; but if we apply it mechanically to the creations which have a strong Chinese characteristic, the result will not be satisfying. Therefore, when creating and performing *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, natural sound should be adopted. "The moon uprises with the rise of the river, becoming a flower in the beautiful surroundings of the river; the spring river follows the rolling waves for ten thousand li and the beautiful moonlit night permeated our heart ..." The natural sound notes together with perfect singing skill makes the spirit of the piece melting and spreading inside the hearts of the audiences; the beautiful sound is like a boat floating with the waves as the singer sings, floating deep into the heart of the audiences.

3. THE BEAUTY OF EMPTINESS AND SPIRIT

The most important word for Chanzong is the word *kong* (empty). Phrases such as "empty all the sights", "seeing nobody in the eye", "forget one's being, free of any obsessions". etc. all emphasize the importance of the empty of the existence of self. When concepts such as "no self", "realm" are introduced into the art theories, it follows that they have a tremendous impact on the change of Chinese art. Danyuan Jin said that "*Kong* is a pure atmosphere for silently esthetic observation, through which the unstableness of everything is expressed; thus the background of *kong* is a background

⁷ He Xianming. *The Attitude of Chinese Towards Death* [M]. Shanghai:Shanghai culture press,1993.

⁸ Pi Chaogang. *The Changing Trace of Chanzong Esthetic Thoughts*[M] Chengdu: electronic and science technology press, 2003.

⁹ Ge Zhaoguang. *The History of Chinese Thinking (second edition)* [M] Shanghai:Fudan University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ Zhang Yanyuan. *A Collection of Famous Paintings*, Volume 10.

including the whole universe. *Ling* is the spirit of lives. The combination of *kong* and *ling* refers to the artistic realm in which life spirits are felt through the pure quiet and empty atmosphere.^{11 (95)} The artistic atmosphere in Chinese arts does not rely on the three-dimensional world; neither does it rely on rich paintings to show the variety and reality of the picture. Chinese arts create images and atmosphere under a chaotic and obscure background and produce the implicit meaning through the spirit.

In the acoustic piece *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, the beauty of *kong*(empty) and *ling* (spirit) is realized by the use of an exclamation word “a”, which doesn't refer to any specific meaning. Its utterance takes two thirds of the whole piece. Superficially a simple and insignificant word, it reaches the effect of enabling the audiences to view those real beautiful surroundings at a moonlit night on the spring river. Such kind of creation method, which combines the reality with imagination, the form with spirit, leads the audience to the realm, where everything is universalized and further let them understand the philosophy of life when enjoying the beautiful sights.

4. THE BEAUTY OF ROUNDNESS AND HARMONIOUSNESS

In the Chan philosophy, *yuanjue* is the most basic belief. One of the characteristics in Chan philosophy is roundness and harmoniousness, which is discussed in *Huayan Sutra*, with the magic net of Dishitian. The original material was obtained from Indian legend. It was said that on the pearl-net in the palace of God Dishitian, there were numerous pearls, each of which carried the reflections of other pearls and numerous other reflections contained in the reflections. Pearls are contained inside pearls; reflections reflect reflections, reflecting a realm without ends and displaying a gorgeous picture of roundness and harmoniousness. In Chan philosophy, time is explained as Bidirectional rather than a one-way flow. For instance, “the sun shines brightly in midnight, the bell for midnight rings in the noon” (*Wu Deng Hui Yuan*,11) is a classical expression of time. In terms of the understanding of special concepts, there is a saying “The sea water from the Four Seas remain what they were even after they are put in a small pore”.^{12 (63-64)} The Chan philosophy realizes the harmoniousness between long and short time as well as the harmoniousness between larger and small space. It universalizes the individual life with the universal life. Trivial and tremendous, dark and bright, momentary and permanent, individual and groups, nature and life,

all melt into each other and make the Emperor Huayan net.

Roundness and harmoniousness represent Chinese people's views towards life and the universe, which is the reason why Chinese artists consider roundness as a symbol of beauty and harmony. In the acoustic piece *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, each note, each sentence, each paragraph is naturally connected with each other, making the melody line smooth and gentle and the whole piece forming a closed circle or several circles, each of which pushes forward the content of the music piece. This fully represents the pursuit of roundness and harmoniousness. The theme of the piece is revealed gradually step by step, using the coherence method of locking together, making the piece smooth, round, continuous and flexible. This skill is also called “fishes biting each other's end” by musicians. In effect, it is not only Chinese literature and music make use of this, other arts, such as painting, gardening and engineering also make use of “divide” and “hide” to bend the space into a circle. For example, Chinese paintings are often observed to have the mountains overlapped or hidden by other mountains, or cut by the mist; Chinese gardens often have winding paths, fake hills and towers etc while inside, people have big screens and curtains; all of these are efforts to bend the space we are living so as to make it alive, leading us to look forward to the farthest of the time and space, satisfying our innate strength for free movement and forever creation.

Buddhism has the saying “Confucianism is for the society; Daoism is for the physical body; Buddhism is for the mentality.” Chan is also called “Chan Na”, meaning silently meditation.¹³⁽¹⁴¹⁾ The purpose of Chan is to obtain the fun of being reborn, where the distinction between self and other, between things and myself is blurred. The artistic inspiration of Chan brings new horizon to the artists. *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, which is characterized with Chinese philosophy is loaded with the Chan philosophy towards the universe and life, whether in its poem, music and song forms. In addition, the esthetic characteristics of *The Enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River*, that is, the beauty of quietness, of naturalness, of emptiness and of roundness harmoniousness reveal the Chan philosophy embedded in the piece.

¹¹ Jin Danyuan. *The Philosophy of Chan and Transforming Phase*[M] Shanghai: Shanghai arts press.

¹² Wu Yansheng. *Of The Esthetics in the Chan Poems*[J] *Journal of Shanxi Normal University* (philosophy)2003(1)

¹³ Li Zhenliang. *The beauty of Speaking Chan Language*[M] SiChuanRenmin Press, 1998

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