

# The Influence of Chan Buddhism Spirit on Chinese Music

## DE L'INFLUENCE DU ZEN SUR LA MUSIQUE CHINOISE

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**Abstract:** Chan Buddhism is an influential school of Buddhism in China; the philosophic thinking it advocates has influenced Chinese music and culture in many ways, which results in four orientations of the development of Chinese music: firstly, Chinese music put emphasis on its artistic conception; secondly, Chinese music emphasizes spiritual charm; thirdly, Chinese music values self-intuition; fourthly, Chinese music values natural beauty.

**Key words:** Chan Buddhism, Chinese music, Influence

**Résumé:** Le Zen est un secte bouddhiste influent en Chine. Sa pensée philosophique a exercé des influences diverses sur la culture musicale chinoise, qui s'expriment dans les quatre domaines ci-dessous. Sous l'influence de la pensée de Zen, la musique chinoise insiste sur la beauté d'imagination, la beauté de spiritualité, la beauté de perception et la beauté naturelle.

**Mots-Clés:** Zen, musique chinoise, influence

As one school of Indian Buddhism, Chan Buddhism was imported into China in Han Dynasty. Evolving from three Kingdoms, Western Jin dynasty, Eastern Jin Dynasty, South and North Dynasty, Chan Buddhism had been sinicized and became Chinese Buddhism, till Sui Dynasty and Tang Dynasty, with the Buddhist scriptures being translated in Chinese language and concept. It adopted the idea of Huang-Lao Daoism and Metaphysics of Wei and Jin Dynasty to preach its theory and had been transformed repeatedly under the influence of Confucianism. After a long period of relying-on, resisting and absorbing Confucianism and Daoism, Chinese Buddhism entered into its golden age as well as its sincized period in Sui and Tang period. Chan Buddhism and the other sinicized schools took the thoughts of Confucianism and Daoism, developing their own theories to distinguish themselves from the Indian Buddhism. Especially after the Mid-Tang Dynasty, for the sake of simplicity of doctrine of Chan Buddhism, the long, tedious parts were cut out, so that Chan Buddhism met the requirements of Chinese culture better in terms of both content and form. The ruler of Tang Dynasty implemented the policy of 'three parallel religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism', which objectively promoted the integration of three religions. In Tang Dynasty and Song Dynasty, the three religions further interacted with each other, creating the trend of combing three religions into one, which eventually resulted in promoting Buddhism to be merged with Chinese local culture and to become one of the most important pillars of Chinese culture. Furthermore, it affected the studies of Confucianism during Song-Ming Dynasty, inspiring the transform of Confucianism and eventually promoted the

development of Chinese culture.<sup>3(211)</sup>

The main characteristics of Chan Buddhism can be summed up in the following four aspects: Firstly, it simplifies the long and tedious doctrines, turning the speculative Buddhism, abstruse theories and fixed ways of ratiocination into situational cases, questions and answers in the form of puzzles, through which nature's mystery is revealed merely by one or two words and Buddhist theory is implied through some simple actions. In this way, all the complex argumentations and scholastic ways of studies of Buddhism have been abandoned; the Buddha-nature shines brightly; Paradise is in front of you and the Pure Land is yourself. Secondly, Chan Buddhism considers subjective intuition as the shortcut for self-cultivation, giving up the classics which emphasized on bitter meditation and long-time sitting without sleeping. HuiNeng (one of the Buddhists) has one pointed out that long time of sitting without sleeping is wrong, by which he expanded the functions of Chan meditation, extended the scope that was suitable for meditation and drew people's attention to the real meaning of Buddhism and valued the importance of understanding and knowledge. if you can see yourself clearly, you can see the world in the same way; everyone can be a Buddha if one is determined and start right now. Thirdly, it emphasizes emptiness as well

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\* Received 29 November 2007; accepted 15 February 2008

as aliveness. The nature of Buddhism is like emptiness, which has no sense of existence or size or boundaries, but it has the trajectories of lives. Life is a struggle against bitterness, but the essentiality of life is vitality with freedom; people do not necessarily need to hate and abandon life in order to get liberated; reborn is a borderline between alive and dead. Fourthly, during the long time development and evolvement of Chan Buddhism, it has absorbed, combined, and melted several essentials of Chinese culture which was represented by Confucianism, Daoism and *yin-yang* theories. Therefore, compared with other religion schools, Chan Buddhism was easier to be accepted by the primitive Chinese culture and to become part of the culture. For instance, Chan Buddhism does not oppose against taking part in social activities or not; what it emphasizes is self-cultivation, which corresponds perfectly with the views that Confucianism promotes: "If you are rich, concern about the society; if you are poor, concern about yourself", "self-cultivation first, followed by building families, followed by ruling the country, followed by unifying the whole world". The idea of "emptiness", "calmness" and "wisdom" in Chan Buddhism is in exact accordance with what Daoism calls "nihilism", "quietness" and "getting rid of outside material influence". The essential Buddha-nature is closely related with the traditional Chinese thinking of "the combination of the sky and human beings". For all these reasons, Chan Buddhism had been influenced by Confucianism and Daoism, and had formed its own unique characteristics ever since it was introduced into China. It eventually became one of the most influential religion schools in China, together with Confucianism and Daoism after Tang and Song dynasties and Chan Buddhism became an indispensable part of the main stream along which Chinese culture developed.

As a unique religion school, Chan Buddhism is well deserved to be described as a pure diamond. Many writers and poets and famous artists, who were consciously or unconsciously attracted by it, tried very hard to transform their deep thoughts into various refined and internal artisans. Chan philosophy is not merely a way of thinking for Chan Buddhists, it is also an important resource and support for the conception of Chinese art. Furthermore, it had influenced the creation and appreciation of Chinese music in multiple aspects.

### 1. THE INFLUENCE OF CHAN BUDDHISM ON CHINESE MUSIC WHICH VALUES THE BEAUTY OF ARTISTIC CONCEPTION

Chan Buddhism puts emphasis on "heart" and "self", raising the position of "self nature" onto that of Buddha nature; for instance, "self-nature is the Buddha; there is no other Buddha without holding self-nature", "seeing self=nature, seeing the Buddha-nature" (*TanJing*). This

claim is consistent with what Confucianism advocates as self-cultivation. Moreover, this powerful self-nature which has the potential to be Buddha-nature should transcend self, which is expressed as "if you merely see the superficial world, your heart is distanced from Buddha; if you can transcend yourself and always keep quiet and calm when looking at the material world, you are seeing Buddha-nature" (*TanJing*). This is again related to what Daoism calls "absolute freedom". It is because this transcendental characteristic, "quick intuition" can be transformed into "mysterious intuition", which produces a space-and-time transcendental consciousness in the artistic conception, that is, the transcendence of subjects is the condition for the understanding of the eternalness of time and space. In other words, it's a process of unconsciously transforming the real time and space into the psychological time and space through the transcended self. This "self" is in fact the "nil-self" in the real world. To put it in HuiHai's words, "people who grasp the meaningfulness of life by intuition can be liberated in his life ... Forget one's self being, get rid of obsession.<sup>4</sup> After all these, to come back to understand the "emptiness" in Buddhism, we find that "emptiness" is in fact a pure nil-self emptiness, a kind of emptiness which contains nonfinite vitality. The emptiness in Chan Buddhism requires that the artistic conception should be emptied. There is the saying that "if your heart goes with the outside situation, you are bound by the outside material matters, you will be confused and unsettled, which situation is like a monkey mistaking the moon as a flower" This does not mean that art does not need artistic conception; it merely points out that art should not limit itself to the situations in the real world. If all of your heart is devoted to the real material situations, what your artistic work reveals may be merely a reflection of the real world, which lacks the artistic value that transcend beyond real life. Real fine art is often originated from the life but rises beyond life. So it is possible to gain the high spiritual imagery only by getting rid of the real material situations; only the absolute emptiness can result in the existence vitality in emptiness. In other words, without emptiness as background, there is no possibility for spiritual transformation and transcendence. The poet SuShi had the line "If you want to make a wonderful poem, calm down and empty your heart from any desire; be quiet so that you grasp the movement of everything, be empty so that you hold every situation".

The road of self-cultivation of Buddhists starts with "being quiet" and "keeping calm" and enters into the phase of metaphysics. Chinese music puts a great emphasis on the creation of the quiet atmosphere. Both the musicians and audiences can understand the beauty conveyed by the music only by completely relaxing themselves so as to reach the higher-order phase of "quiet observation" following meditation after the lower-order phase of "quiet observation". If the

<sup>4</sup> Huihai, *Of the Essentialities of Instant Intuition*.

audience is in a rush mood, even the most beautiful piece of music will not inspire him. The famous musician XuShangying in Ming dynasty, listed quietness as an important entry in his work of *XiShanQinKuang*; he especially elaborated on the importance of quietness in motion in playing music. He said "It is not difficult to be quiet only to put your hands on the string, but it is difficult to keep quiet when moving your fingers over the string. The purpose of moving your fingers over the string is to create music; then how can we pursue quietness? The point is to pursue quietness in motion, in sound. If the music is harsh, we can tell the player is moving his fingers in a rush; if the music is coarse, we can tell the play is not moving his finger neatly; if the music is calm and clear, we can tell the play is moving his finger in a neat and quiet way. This is the way to distinguish the music. If your mind is begged by other bothering and your hand is like being interfered by other materials; then how can you produce a quiet and beautiful piece of music in this way? How to reach the phase of quietness? Only those people who are highly self-cultivated can see through the material world and hold a pure and calm heart to face the reality; so that their fingers are not bound by other interferes and thus can produce quiet and beautiful pieces of music, arriving at the phase of pursuing quietness in motion and sound. This is highest phase of quietness, a phase in which one can hear nothing annoying and a phase where one only hears the music production without noticing any producing sound. The music skills to reach that phase mainly lie in two aspects: one is to balance the process of breathing; the other is to train the movement of fingers. Balancing the process of breathing helps to control the spirit in quietness; training the movement of fingers helps to produce quiet and clear sound. This is like to burn sandalwood, it holds smoke but spits out fog; it is also similar to making a cup of good tea: what has been washed away is impurity, what has been left is the good taste of the tea. This applies to music as well. You can reach the highest phase only when you have removed the resentment and impetus in your heart, putting down the material competitiveness that drives you. Your fingers become free and flexible, leaving a pureness in your string. In this way, even the music is in quick rhythm, you will not be confused and in a mess."<sup>5</sup> (306) The process of playing music is a dynamic process. If you combine it with another dynamic process, the result will be in a mess. Only if you discover the quietness in the dynamic process can you create an atmosphere of gentleness with vitality. Only in this way can you manage the process of exchanging your internal spirit with the outside spirit. For all these reasons, Chinese music tends to be fond of quietness because quietness creates an atmosphere of deepness and gentleness with vitality, where people's spirit flow freely. Chinese classic music pieces such as

*The enchanting Moonlit Night on The Spring River* and *How High the Moon* are all good at describing quietness in the nature through which to display the broadness and deepness of the great nature.

## 2. THE INFLUENCE OF CHAN PHILOSOPHY ON CHINESE MUSIC WHICH VALUES THE BEAUTY OF SPIRIT CHARM

Chan Buddhism promotes "All the desires and confusions and struggles disappears in a momentary instant" and "the preaching of Chan philosophy do rely on words". The teaching of Chan Buddhism in latter phase always relies on the immediate situations and expands on the existing materials. There is a sense of pursuing "autonomy" as well as a sense of emphasizing "intuition", that is, "from heart to heart", "getting the point with merely one word". The process of inspiration requires that initiators go directly to the point in a concise way and receivers respond quickly and has unique interpretations. To apply this proposal into aesthetics results in the whole process of aesthetic psychology, that is, a process goes from superficial appearance to intuition to experience and to essentiality, eventually reaches the realm of conveying spirit beyond what the sound and words in the music reveals directly.<sup>6</sup> Spirit charm in the music is the outward expression of self-spirit. And as long as the spirit is expressed in the form of material of artistic work, this artistic work is given a unique characteristic filled with sentiment and charm.

Chinese music adopts the inspiration way of Chan Buddhism, that is, making sense of what is not being said in stead of what is being said. Thus the corresponding aesthetic emphasis is put on the unexpressed meanings. ChengKuo in Song dynasty has written down the famous musician Hai's music proficiency in his work *MengXiBiTan*. He pointed out that the essentiality of Hai's music proficiency lies in the unexpressed part in his music creation. He recorded that "there are a large number of people who learned from Hai, but none of them have mastered the essentiality of Hai's skill. Hai is getting old now and his skills are going to be extinct. Hai read a lot of books and can wrote good essays so that intellectuals liked to be with him; but he was only famous for his music skills. Hai's reputation did not come from the music sound but from the spirit outside music sound, which is why all the other people could not be compared with him."<sup>7</sup> This spirit coming from outside the music is the unspoken meaning of the music. It lies in our life and is the product of feeling, experiencing, understanding and

<sup>5</sup> Xu, Shangying, *XiShanQinKuang, Selections of Essays on Chinese Ancient Music*[M] Beijing: People's music Press. 1983

<sup>6</sup> SiKong, Tu. Discussion with LiSheng on Poetry and Books

<sup>7</sup> Sheng, kuo. *Beijing: Notes of Scientific Study*[M].Union Press, 1996.

representing the vitality of our life, which is the highest pursuit that Chinese music aims at. The book *Liezi* has recorded that after Han'e (a certain lady) sang the song, people felt that her beautiful sound lingered along the pillars for three days.<sup>8(127)</sup> But we noticed that what lingered for three days were not actually the physical sound but the influence that the singer had imposed on the listeners. Therefore, we can from this story that Chinese people value the unspoken spirit charm in music. Chinese music, whether it be vocal music or instrumental music, puts emphasis on the unexpressed spirit charm outside the sound and lyrics of the music piece. Only those music pieces that have created the spirit charm can be called successful and vital music piece, which can be appreciated by audiences.

### 3. THE INFLUENCE OF CHAN PHILOSOPHY ON CHINESE MUSIC WHICH VALUES SELF-INTUITION

What Chan Buddhism has emphasized as “essentiality of the heart” or “essential nature” or “no desire as essentiality” all refers to the importance of “meta essentiality”. Everything can be abandoned as long as you get the “meta essentiality”. So there is the saying “*Jing* is the language of Buddha and *Chan* is the meaning expressed by Buddha” and “Getting the meaning is superior to getting the language; understanding the inner meanings is superior to knowing the words and expressions.”<sup>9</sup> This is similar to what Zhuangzi called “the essentiality of everything” as well as what Metaphysics in WeiJing Dynasties had put as “don't throw away the fishing tool after you get fishes with it”. Chan Buddhism advocates that “getting rid of the boundary of language” needs “intuition”, that is, “confusion makes one feel being troubled and depressed; but intuition can pull you out of that miserable situation merely in a momentary second” (*Tangjing*). On the other hand, one can not arrive at the Western Paradise all along his life if he hasn't experienced the process of intuition, even if he is singing the Buddhism scripts in his lifetime. Therefore, intuition is fairly important. There is the saying “You must have certain intuition if you want to get the essentiality of Buddhism”. Intuition is the critical point to approach to Buddha. Yanyuan, Zhang has once said “When concentrating on meditation and intuition about the nature, you will forget the matter around you and yourself and feel free from the chains of matters”. High-level artistic experience indeed has not much to do with “rationality” directly; but it has much to do with intuition. Of course intuition should be based on rationality; without knowledge intuition can not be

realized. This is what is said as “You are brought into the field by the Master; but your development relies on your own intuition and effort”.

Influenced by the philosophy of Chan, the learning of Chinese music puts great emphasis on self intuition. Whether it is vocal music or instrumental music, the teacher only serves as a guide of introducing the principles of playing or singing and the skills employed; the specific learning process is complex and subtle, which can not be described and explained by conceptions and definitions. It is like the story told by Zhuangzi about a skilful butcher. What the story told us is that you can be an expert in a certain field if you stick to a thing and keep practicing the same thing constantly, through which you have the intuition of the particular engagement. Many categories in Chinese music, such as the degree of stress and strength, music sound quality, sound pronouncing style, music spirit charm can not be analyzed and classified into different connotations and ...in a strict scientific way. So players have to select their own way to learn and apply the skills, ways of breathing, making rhythms, pronouncing and creating music spirit. Players should take the way of self-intuition. After absorbing the lectures, obtaining music materials and music knowledge, works, music players and singers should further go back to their real inner of heart so as to inject what their inner hearts have intuited about life into the represent of their music works. Only in this way can they create wonderful music pieces with their unique characteristics.

There is another level of meaning that is embedded in the self-intuition of Chan, that is, the process of intuition should be conducted and completed in a momentary instant, which is called “instant intuition”. “instant intuition” is the realization of eternalness in a momentary time. Huineng has once said “intuition occurs in a momentary instant, people who experiences intuition feel that all the interfering confusions extinct in a momentary second and Buddha is in front of him”.<sup>10(37)</sup> 悟中各自離五欲,見性剎那即是真. All these sayings point to the momentary characteristic of intuition. Intuition in a momentary instant means that the heart, which is bothered by various temptations and confusions finds its essential nature in a momentary instant. In addition, “instant intuition” refers to its simply way, without complex and cumbersome meditation. You come to Buddha in a momentary instant. The reason what instant intuition can be completed once and for all is because the Buddha nature instant intuition pursue is a complete entity which can not be divided. You can only intuit once and for all; you can not divide the process into several steps. So you get it in a momentary instant or you get nothing. HuiNeng expressed this process as “you focus on your real self-nature constantly and will suddenly see the meaningless of all the confusions and temptations, that

<sup>8</sup> LieZi, Questions Asked By Tang, *Selections of Essays on Chinese Ancient Music*[M] Beijing: People's music Press. 1983

<sup>9</sup> Words by the Great Chan Buddhist DaZhu (volume 2)

<sup>10</sup> Yang, Zengwen, edited, *New Edition of DunHuang LiuZu Tanjing*[M] Beijing: religion and culture press, 2001.

is, you get the intuition in a momentary instant".<sup>11(34)</sup>

In the same way, Chinese music puts great emphasis on "instant" in the process of instant intuition. *Qinlun* has the saying that "The practice of Qin is like the process of pursuing Chan philosophy. After years of practice, you get inspired and suddenly see the essentiality one day; then you know everything and easily produce wonderful music creations."<sup>12(638)</sup> This is exactly the same as the process of intuition, which occurs in a momentary instant. In fact, such kind of intuition in a momentary instant can never occur to people who have practiced a short time; it occurs to people who have had a long time of practice and accumulated much experience. This long-time practice and accumulation makes instant intuition possible; instant intuition opens a new phase for the long-time practice and accumulation. Music artists can reach the phase of instant intuition only after long-time practice of skills and accumulation of life experience. Artists will defiantly lose the chance of instant intuition if they desire to reach it all by accident without making effort constantly. As the common saying puts it, "the reward of your efforts comes in an instant but is a result of long-time accumulation".

#### 4. THE INFLUENCE OF CHAN PHILOSOPHY ON CHINESE MUSIC WHICH VALUES THE NATURAL BEAUTY

In terms of the question of whether to be transcended by Buddha or by oneself, Chan Buddhism recommends the latter. Both *Liu Zu Dashi Fabao Tan Jing* and *Liu Zu Tan Jing* recorded the story of HuiNeng getting transcended by himself. Here is the main development of the story. WuZu HongReng passed *Yibo* which is the symbol of Chan Buddha to HuiNeng. WuZu HongReng was worried that other followers might be jealous and do some bad things to HuiNeng; so he send HuiNeng to the River JiuJiang and intended to ferry him to the other side of the river. But HuiNeng said to him "Please let me ferry myself." WuZu said "It is my responsibility to ferry you; how can it be the other way around?". HuiNeng responded "When I was in confusion and can't the direction, it is necessary for you saint to help me; since I have now get rid of confusions and can see the directions clearly, it is time I relied on myself." This story of HuiNeng ferrying himself implies that people who are pursuing Chan Philosophy should self-reliant and resist relying on outside force. HuiNeng has once pointed out that "What is meant by getting transcended all by oneself? That is, we clear the confusions, troubles,

jealousies etc. in our heat all by ourselves." Then, how can we realize this process? HuiNeng continued to say that "Justice is to overcome evilness; intuition is to overcome confusion; wisdom is to overcome foolishness; kindness is to overcome badness. If you apply this way to realize yourself, it is the right thing." (Tnagjing). Latter Buddhists such as JinJue and HuiHai promoted this idea. jinJue has once said "It is people themselves who help them complete the process of approaching Buddha, not Buddha."<sup>13</sup> HuiHai also said "People accomplish the process of approaching Buddha all by themselves; Buddha can't finish the process for them; so people should rely on themselves and nothing else." This self-reliant spirit of Chan Buddhism influenced the development of Chinese Music, as a result of which artists create their works to express their spiritual world. The artistic work is the outward representation of the inner spiritual world of the artist. This kind of spiritual creation based on self-transcendent is of nature and without artificial refinement, which is put as "to create the natural artistic work by following the nature itself".

Influenced by Chan philosophy, the musician LiZhi in Ming dynasty regarded "natural beauty" as the principle for music aesthetics. His *FenShu.Du Lü Fu Shuo* has recorded the following lines: "Some people believe that if you an artistic work is plain, it loses its attraction; if it is straightforward, it loses its sentiment. If it is obscure it loses decency; if it is loaded with heavy thoughts, it hurts its spirit. If the artist is bounded by such rules and regularities, he is merely a salve of art and can not achieve the perfect realm of art; if he doesn't rely on those rules of art creation at all, he is an evil of art and can't reach perfection either. Since the beauty of an artistic work comes from its nature, how can it be artificially pursued? The essential point of creating artistic works is following your own naturalness. It follows that people who is optimistic and pure play out pure and fluency music; people who is quiet and calm play out quiet and slow rhythms; people who is wild play out grand music; people who is depressed play out sad tunes; and people who is weird play out weird music. All in all, what you have in your nature determines what music you will produce. That's the phase of music creation which is promoted. There are no exactly same characteristics among different people, so how can we require people to follow a universal set of rules? In addition, the pursuit of naturalness does not refer to intentionally ask for it, which is no different from artificiality. Thus the way of naturalness is not easy to approach"<sup>14 (707)</sup>. Therefore, we can see from the above that natural beauty requires that the artistic work should express its natural features without being bound by rules or principles in its content; and develop freely without being restricted by formed regulations in it form. LiZhi put emphasis on the

<sup>11</sup> Yang, Zengwen, edited, *New Edition of DunHuang LiuZu Tanjing*[M] Beijing: religion and culture press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> *Notes of Chinese Music Aesthetic History*[M]Beijing: People's Music Press, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Leng Jia Shi Zi Ji JuanYi

<sup>14</sup> Cai, Zhongde, *History of Chinese Music Aesthetics*[M] People's Music Press, 2003.

naturalness in both content and form; he resisted against any form of artificial processing, advocating “what you have in your nature determines what music you will produce” and opposing against “a universal set of rules”

In conclusion, as an influential religion school, Chan philosophy advocated by Chan Buddhism has had great impact on the creation and appreciation of Chinese

music. The unique way of thinking and aesthetic consciousness that Chan Buddhism promoted brought Chinese music into a new phase where the quietness, deepness, spirit charm, intuition, naturalness were all valued. Chinese music is growing with fresh vitality and with the youth of art.

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