

## Chapter II

### Buddhism and Chinese literature

Through Chapter One, we know that Han Shan is essentially a Buddhist recluse and he wrote many poems according to stout Buddhist believes and values. Buddhism itself originated from India and it had no connection whatsoever with Chinese literature at the beginning, but later on after Buddhism spread over China, the Chinese absorbed new ideas and techniques that sustained and revitalized them throughout their long history. All these fluctuating influences can be found in Chinese literature.

In this Chapter, a brief background of Buddhism and Chinese literature will be given in order to have a better understanding about the difference between the two. Buddhism covers religious aspects and Chinese literature covers literary aspects. Both these aspects were combined to produce a new literature in China called the "Chinese Buddhist Literature" ( *Zhongguo Fojiao Wenxue* 中国佛教文学 )

One of the great themes in the history of China is the transformation of Chinese literature by Buddhism. We can trace this process across to Han ( 汉 ) dynasty. Buddhism was brought to China from India during the reign of Emperor Ming ( *Ming Di* 明帝 ) of Eastern Han ( *Dong Han* 东汉 ) dynasty. Back then it was not easy for foreign elements to gain immediate foothold in another country. The existing tradition and cultural background of that respective country is much too strongly rooted, to be disregarded. A strong and meaningful foothold can be gained only through the use of the existing culture as a channel to introduce different cultures, beliefs and traditions belonging to another country. This is a long process that takes time. A foreign culture when finally transformed and assimilated with the local one, will produce a new culture. In this respect, it took about 2000 years for Buddhism to be spread all over China. After this process took place, Buddhist beliefs had an undoubted influence in Chinese traditional aspects.

Seen from the literary point of view, Chinese language expanded to new areas and was in a way further enriched by the influence of Buddhism. Buddhist scriptures with beautiful languages were widely translated into Chinese by excellent translators such as

Kumārajīva ( *Jiūmó Luóshēn* 鸠摩罗什 344-413 ), Buddhābhadrā ( *Fótuó Bātóluó* 佛陀跋陀罗 359-429 ), Guṇābhadrā ( *Qíuna Bātóluó* 求那跋陀罗 394-468 ), Guṇavarman ( *Qíuna Bāmó* 求那跋摩 367-431 ), Zhen Di ( 真谛 499-569 ), Xuan Zhuang ( 玄奘 596-664 ), Yi Jing ( 义净 635-713 ) and Bu Kong ( 不空 705-774 ) during the Wei Jin ( 魏晋 ) dynasty. This process continued till Shui Tang ( 隋唐 ) dynasty where five Buddhist sects were founded namely Pure Land sect ( *Jìngtǔ Zōng* 净土宗 ), Huayan sect ( *Huāyán Zōng* 华严宗 ), Chan sect ( *Chánzōng* 禅宗 ), Tiantai sect ( *Tiāntāi Zōng* 天台宗 ) and Weishi sect ( *Weishī Zōng* 唯识宗 ). Out of these sects, the Chan sect especially, grew in the land of China and flourished during Tang period. The content and form of Buddhist scriptures coupled with some of Chan's own ideas, have enriched the genre of Chinese literature, such as poems, fictions, lyrics, dramas, changing texts and etc.

Before considering the long process which in so many ways transformed Chinese literature, we should at this point consider briefly the background of Chinese literature. Chinese literature has a very old history and had been established more than 2500 years ago. The works of literature in Chinese language is vast and the study of this is done by dividing it into different sections and periods.

Each historical period has its own special form of literary expression. Its different categories can be listed out as Han writings ( *Hanwen* 汉文 ), Tang poems ( *Tangshi* 唐诗 ), Song lyrics ( *Songci* 宋词 ), Yuan plays ( *Yuanqu* 元曲 ) and Ming and Qing novels or fiction ( *Mingqing Xiaoshuo* 明清小说 ). Literature during pre-Qin and two Han Dynasties ( *Xianqin Lianghan* 先秦两汉 ), such as “The Song of Chu” ( *Chuci* 楚词 ), “Rhyme prose of Han” ( *Hanfu* 汉赋 ) and “Music Department Song” ( *Yuefu* 乐府 ) basically hold the concept that “literature is meant to be a vehicle for the Tao (Confucian)” ( *wen yi zai dao* 文以载道 ). The contents of these writings were written based on and never go beyond the scope of the Five Classics ( *Wujing* 五经 )<sup>1</sup>. It is Confucianism that most strongly influenced the morality and customs of China. It is Confucianism in a broad sense, that dominated much of Chinese literature during this epoch. Most writers conformed to Confucian principles and found their inspiration in the Confucian concept of morality and proper social behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> The Five Classics mentioned are :  
( i ) The Book Of Songs ( *Shijing* 诗经 )  
( ii ) The Book Of History ( *Shujing* 书经 )  
( iii ) The Book Of Changes ( *Yijing* 易经 )  
( iv ) The Book of Rites ( *Liji* 礼记 )  
( v ) The Spring And Autumn Annals ( *Chunqiu* 春秋 )

However, since Wei Jin dynasty, Chinese literature showed its new visage after ideas of Buddhism were instilled in China. There is evidence to show that Buddhism had, by this time, made its way slowly into China. Yet, in these early years, few signs of its influence on Chinese life and thoughts could be seen. Throughout this period of Wei Jin, Buddhism was slowly spreading and taking root in scattered centres throughout the empire. The introduction of 'formless' ( *kong* 空 ) idea of Buddhism and the Lao Zhuang's ( 老庄 ) metaphysical thoughts ( *Xuanxue Sixiang* 玄学思想 ), which prevailed during Wei Jin period, became popular among Chinese scholars. They absorbed new ideas (Buddhism) into their work and therefore enriched the contents of their works, which brought about a different meaning to Chinese literature. It is said that Buddhist literature began to grow during this era. For example, the poet Xie Lingyun ( 谢灵运 ), one of the most outstanding figures in the intellectual and cultural history of the Six dynasties ( *Liu Chao* 六朝 ), occupied a prominent position through his poetry of nature ( *Sanshui Shi* 山水诗 ), which was rich with Buddhist ideas. And yet, the poets from East Jin ( *Dong Jin* 东晋 ), Zhi Daolin ( 支道林 ), Hui Yuan ( 慧远 ), Cao Zhi ( 曹植 ), Sun Zhuo

( 孙绰 ) also use Buddhism as the theme and content in their works. Hence, supernatural tales of Six dynasties ( *Liuchao Zhiguai Xiaoshuo* 六朝志怪小说 ), like Liu Yiqing's ( 刘义庆 ) "Xuanyan Ji" ( 宣验记 ), Yan Zhitui's ( 颜之推 ) "Yuanhun Zhi" ( 冤魂志 ), Xiefu's ( 谢敷 ) "Guanshiyin Yingyan Ji" ( 观世音应验记 ) invariably also used materials and contents of Buddhism which was incorporated with Taoist beliefs, to propagate the concept of cause and effect of Buddhism and Taoism's fairy-land thoughts ( *Shenxian Sixiang* 神仙思想 ). But it would seem almost certain that this early Buddhist literature was generally regarded as a sect of Taoist religion. They produced various works under the combined influence of Taoism, to extend and develop further. But, by creating and spreading this theme, Buddhism had exercised a very profound influence on Chinese literature, on the whole.

Till Tang ( 唐 ) dynasty, the beautiful language of fable stories ( *Chuanqi Xiaoshuo* 传奇小说 ) with a combination of verse and prose, in the translation of Buddhist scripture, had given an obvious influence to Chinese literature in both contents and forms. For example, from Tang and Song's poems ( *Tangsong Shi* 唐宋诗 ), short stories of the Tang and Song dynasties ( *Tangsong Zhuanqi Xiaoshuo* 唐宋传奇小说 ) and folk changing text ( *Minjian Bianwen* 民间变文 ),

we can see the outstanding evidence. “Qiuhu Changing Text” ( *Qiuhu Bianwen* 秋胡变文 ), “Wang Zhaojun Changing Text” ( *Wang Zhaojun Bianwen* 王昭君变文 ), “Wu Zixi Changing Text” ( *Wu Zixi Bianwen* 伍子胥变文 ), were basically modelled after the Buddhist changing text in its forms. They are largely developments and re-elaborations of favourite sutrās in a semi-colloquial version. Tang short stories like “The Governor of Nanke” ( *Nanke Taishou Zhuan* 南柯太守传 ), “Little Jade Huo” ( *Huo Xiaoyu Zhuan* 霍小玉传 ), “The World Inside A Pillow” ( *Zhenzhong Ji* 枕中记 ) partly contain Buddhist elements. As everyone knows, it was during Tang dynasty that Buddhism flourished and spread widely. It is also called ‘an age of monks’. After a long period of time, Buddhism developed a link with Chinese literature and finally attained its full florescence during this epoch. The literary works of many Chinese scholars had an obvious influence of the ideas of Buddhism. Especially after High Tang period ( *Sheng Tang* 盛唐 710-780 ), it gradually began to take hold of the Chinese mind. Its simple ways of teaching and practising were received favourably by the Chinese scholars. After that, the learning of Chan among scholars had become a common practise and Chan thoughts began to be used widely in poems produced from then on. So much so, it is said that the power and

strength of Buddhism was at its greatest in China, during this time. Especially as it was combined with the Chinese native genius to produce some of the greatest poems. Only afterwards, the term “Buddhist literature” got its full meaning.

Chan has its widespread and profound influence in the Chinese literature. It had made a significant contribution to the development of Chinese literature. It brought Chinese literature of a higher nature to China of those days. The Tang poems, Song lyrics and Ming and Qing fictions have deep Chan influence, but, Tang poems are the most influenced ones. Since my dissertation focuses on Chan poems ( *Chanshi* 禅诗 ), I will occupy a chapter (Chapter III) to describe the connection between both Chan and Chinese poetry. As for the following study, I will attempt to elaborate other forms of Chinese literature, besides poems that are related to Buddhist influence.

As I have mentioned above, Chan had not only influenced Tang poems, but also other forms of Chinese literature. The historical novel, “Three Kingdoms” ( *Shanguo Yanyi* 三国演义 ), which enjoyed the greatest measure of popularity among audiences, contains



the largest number of Chan elements. Its preface shows that the author has embodied personal feelings and experience in Chan. It sounds:

“The Long River passes east away,  
Surge over surge.  
滚滚长江东逝水  
White blooming waves sweep all heroes on.  
浪花淘尽英雄  
As right and wrong, triumph and defeat all turn unreal.  
是非成败转头空  
But ever the green hills stay,  
青山依旧在  
To blush in the west-waning day,  
几度夕阳红  
The woodcutters and the fishermen, whiteheaded,  
白发渔樵江渚上  
They’ve seen enough, spring air and autumn moon  
惯看秋月春风  
To make good company over the winejars,  
一壶浊酒喜相逢  
Where many a famed event,  
古今多少事  
Provides their merriment.”<sup>2</sup>  
都付笑谈中

This preface undoubtedly expresses the impermanence of the affairs of human life and the unreality of the universe. “Pilgrimage To The Western Regions” ( *Xiyou Ji* 西游记 ) however, was based on a Buddhist work entitled, “The Biography Of The Monk Xuan Zhuang”

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<sup>2</sup> See Roberts, Moss, tr., *Three Kingdoms: China's Epic Drama*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1976, p.3.

( *Xuan Zhuang Fashi Zhuan* 玄奘法师传 ) for his famous pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Magadha in India. The author in fact embellished the account of the pilgrimage, adding a strong religious flavour and transforming it into a great mythical romance full of Buddhist affairs. Although it is concerned with the Taoist legends as well as ordinary folk tales, the power of Buddha and the vestiges of Buddhism is also fully propagated in this novel. “The Water Margin” ( *Shuihu Zhuan* 水浒传 ), also expresses the causation idea of Buddhism, which contains the concept of “good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil”( *shan you shan bao, e you e bao* 善有善报,恶有恶报 ). Yet, “The Dream Of The Red Chamber”( *Hongloumeng* 红楼梦 ), the full-length novel of Qing ( 清 ) dynasty on the other hand, implicated the concept of ‘formlessness’ of Chan sect, like what was stated in “Diamond Sūtra” ( *Jingang Jing* 金刚经 ):

“Thus shall we think of all this fleeting world:  
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;  
A flash of lighting in a summer cloud,  
A flicking lamp, a phantom, and a dream.”<sup>3</sup>  
一切有为法,如梦幻泡影,如露亦如电.....

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<sup>3</sup> Jiumo Luoshen ( 鸠摩罗什 ), tr., *Jingang Bore Boluomijing* ( 金刚波若波罗蜜经 ), *Da Zang Jing*, op.cit., 1992, Vol.8, p.752.

The influence of Buddhism in Chinese literature is great and at the same time complicated. We can say that Buddhism with its rich ideology, had enriched the contents of Chinese literature. It in fact influenced the new and high state of Chinese literature, giving it a broader mental outlook. One can say that Chinese literature was considered different and outstanding among other literatures because of its largeness of mind in accepting and absorbing foreign elements (Buddhism) and giving full scope to it. Especially during Tang dynasty, scholars like Wang Wei ( 王维 ), Bai Jūyi ( 白居易 ), Han Shan ( 寒山 ) etc., produced the works of literature which were full of the spirit of Buddhism, according to their own experiences. Chan poems ( among the works of Buddhism ) occupied an important place in later Chinese literature and stood out to be the most outstanding in its achievement in this field.