

Chapter III

Chan and Chinese Poetry

3.1. The Combination of Chan and poetry: Chan Poems

The combination of Buddhist ideas and Chinese literature produced a new kind of literature, generally known as "Chinese Buddhist Literature" in China. This literature in turn led to the foundation of Chan sect, which bloomed and flourished in China during Tang period. Chan sect propagated Chan thoughts more prominently in the form of poetry, than any other form of writing.

It is generally agreed that Chan and poetry are the two glories of Chinese literature which appear in the broadest sense among the Tang dynasty and continue almost without break to occupy a major position in Chinese poems up to our own day. It is wonderful that both of them met somewhere down in history and got along together to produce a fantastic combination called Chan poems. Before we go further into this, we have to analyse a little about Chan and poetry. What is Chan, what is poetry and how did they get together? In the last part, Chan poems and their origination is discussed. Some examples will

be given to let the reader have a clearer idea of Chan and its connection to poetry.

The word “Chan”, in fact, is an attempt at a phonetic rendering of the Sanskrit word “Dhyana” (*Channa* 禅那) which means meditation or contemplation. Seen from the historical point of view, Chan, in over 200 years of quiet and steady development since it was first introduced in the sixth century by Bodhidharma (*Puti Damo* 菩提达摩) from the West, that is, from Southern India, Chan Buddhism established itself firmly in the land of Confucianism and Taoism. It is one of the product of Chinese mind after its contact with Indian thoughts, which we may say “Indian was the man, China the woman, and Chan the wonderful child.” The aim and principal of Chan is the enlightenment of the mind and to behold Buddha’s nature within oneself (*jian xing cheng fo* 见性成佛). It holds that reality is to be got hold of, not externally, but inwardly. The truth is to be found in our own nature and no where else. Every living being has within himself the Buddha nature. The Buddha nature is the principal of enlightenment or attainment of Buddhahood. It is nothing less than the “Buddha nature” as the saying of six patriarch Hui Neng (*Liuzu Hui Neng* 六祖慧能) goes:

“Our very nature is Buddha, and apart from this nature
there is no Buddha.”¹
本性是佛,离性无别佛.

“We should work for Buddhahood within the essence of mind,
and we should not look for it apart from ourselves. He who is kept in
ignorance of his essence of mind is an ordinary being. He who is
enlightened in his essence of mind is a Buddha.”²
佛向性中作,莫向身外求.自性迷即是众生,自性觉即是佛.

The ultimate truth is mind (*xin* 心) itself, which is free from all forms, inner and outer. This mind is also known as nature (reality) that is beyond words or wordless (*bu li wen zi* 不立文字). It can't be experienced, and cannot be understood intellectually. Words are symbols of the truth. Such as a finger may be needed to point at the moon; when you get the moon (truth), the finger (words) is not needed anymore. Chan is directly pointing to one's own mind (*zhi zhi ren xin* 直指人心), without depending on anything else. It is in the first and last, a matter of experience, as “a water drinker knows how hot or cold the water is.” (*ru ren yin shui, leng nuan zi zhi* 如人饮水,冷暖自知).

¹ “Bore Dier” (般若第二), Liuzu Dashi Fabao Tanjing, op.cit., p.350.

² “Yiwen Disan” (疑问第三), Liuzu Dashi Fabao Tanjing, op.cit., p.352.

We can see this in one of Han Shan's famous poems:

* My mind is like the autumn moon
吾心似秋月
shining clean and clear in the green pool.
碧潭清皎洁
No, that's not a good comparison.
无物堪比伦
Tell me, how shall I explain ?
教我如何说

It contains a wonderful meaning. The enlightened mind or its Buddha nature (*foxing* 佛性) or true nature or essence of mind (*xinxing* 心性) can't be expressed by words. From here, we know that Chan is beyond thoughts, beyond words or is wordless. This is like saying that no impression can be followed by expression. The emphasis is upon intuition, its peculiarity being that it has no words in which to express itself, no method to reason itself out, no extended demonstration of its own truth in a logically convincing manner. If it expresses itself at all, it does so in symbols and images. One may be surprised to note, how the Chan which cannot be expressed by words can finally be expressed through poetry. This is an interesting matter which I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

Obviously, poetry is impossible without words. It is a term usually employed in connection with words. It is a communication

of experience through the medium of language used in a certain way. A poet uses words to express the whole infinitely complicated business of a happening experienced by him: the emotions it arouses, the sensations which accompanies it, the atmosphere it creates and the memories it awakens. It is about writing which appeals to our emotions. For example, the legendary sage Emperor Shun (*Shun Di* 舜帝 2255-2205 B.C.) states that :

“Poetry expresses the heart’s wishes, in words;
songs set words to music”³

In The Great Preface to “The Book of Poetry” (*Shijing Daxu* 诗经大序), we find the following :

“ Poetry is where the heart’s wishes go. What lies in the heart is ‘wish’;
When expressed in words, it is ‘poetry’. When an emotion stirs within one, one
expresses it in words, finding this inadequate, one sighs over it, not content
with this, one sings it in poetry; still not satisfied, one unconsciously dances
with one’s hands and feet”⁴

³ “*Shi Pu Xu*” (诗谱序), *Maoshi Zhushu* (毛诗注疏), in *Guoxue Jiben Congshu* (国学基本丛书), Taipei: Shangwu Yinshuguan, Vol.201, p.2.

⁴ Legge, James, tr., “*The Great Preface*” (*Daxu* 大序), *The Book of Poetry* (*Shijing* 诗经), in *The Chinese Classics*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960, second edition, Vol.IV, p.34.

Hence, in the fifteenth century, one of the important critics in Chinese literary history Jin Shengtan (金圣叹) said :

“ Poetry is nothing extraordinary, it is only the words which rise from the heart and lie at the tip of the tongue, and which everyone cannot help longing to utter”⁵.

Therefore, Chan is Chan and poetry is words or the expression of emotions through words. Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书) in his “ Tan Yi Lu” (谈艺录) says that :

“After enlightenment, Chan can't be expressed by words. But, poetry must be expressed by words.”⁶

This is the difference between Chan and poetry. However, both of them need a sharp insight experience that attaches importance to the inspiration and image that aspires after implication (*yan wai zhi yi* 言外之意). To this, the greatest critic of the thirteenth century, Yan Yu (严羽) in his “Canglang Shihua” (沧浪诗话) said:

⁵ Jin Shengtan (金圣叹), Jin Shengtan Xuanpi Tangshi (金圣叹选批唐诗), Zhejiang Guji Chubanshe (浙江古籍出版社), 1985, p.501.

⁶ Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书), Tan Yi Lu (谈艺录), Hong Kong: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986, p.101.

“In general, the way of Chan lies in intuitive apprehension.
So does the way of poetry”⁷

These similarities enable Chan and poetry a chance to express each other. Chan, pertains to the world of poetry rather than other genres like prose or fiction because of the intuitive experience that needs no words to express. The function of poetry as Yan Yu asserts is that the resulting poetry would have limited words, but inexhaustible meaning is appropriate for Chan.

Chan masters always apply their sense to concrete surrounding things to express something that cannot be expressed, like the Buddha nature. In other words, wordless ideas in Chan does not mean it does not need words, but, it means that the limited must be used to express the unlimited, the concrete to express the abstract and the special to express the common thing. This kind of expression is indirect and conceals a meaning in between which is the best way to reveal the enlightened state (*wujing* 悟境), such like the enlightened poem of sixth patriarch:

⁷ Yan Yu (严羽), “*Shibian*” (诗辩), *Changlang Shihua* (沧浪诗话), in *Bao Yan Tang Miji* (宝颜堂秘笈), *Wenming Shuju* (文明书局), 1922, Vol 17, p.1.

"There is no Bodhi-tree.
 菩提本无树
 Nor stand of a mirror bright
 明镜亦非台
 Since all is void,
 本来无一物
 Where can the dust alight."⁸
 何处惹尘埃

The sixth patriarch could not say directly: "I am enlightened" He expresses his enlightened state in an indirect way, where poetry becomes the most suitable form to express it. On the other hand, a number of poets, especially during the Tang era, after associating with Chan masters, absorbed Chan thoughts in their poems. Therefore, Chan masters use the form of poetry to express Chan, and the poets absorbed Chan in their poetry. This special phenomena is what Yuan Haowun (元好问) in his "Da Jun Shu Ji Xue Shi" (答俊书记学诗) says:

"Poetry is used as a form by Chan. Chan on the other hand
 enriches the contents of poetry."⁹
 诗为禅客添花锦,禅是诗家切玉刀.

⁸ "Xingyue Diyi", op cit, p.349.

⁹ Yuan Haowen (元好问), Houshan Quanji (后山全集), Sibü Congkan Chubian (四部丛刊初编), Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1936, Vol.72, juan 14, p.156.

During Ming dynasty the monk Zhi Kong (知空和尚)

also states that :

“ The monk and laymen discussed the poems. Then the laymen
in turn discussed Chan with the monks. Why? Because
Chan has been a popular theme in poetry writing since ancient
time.....”¹⁰

Chan influenced poetry and poetry influenced Chan
and produced the flower of Chinese Buddhist literature called Chan
poems which widens the higher state of Chinese poetry.

1.2. The Origin and development of Chan Poems

Chan poems, generally seen as a flower of Chinese
literature are poems that consist of Chan thoughts as the content
and poetry as the form. It is always connected with Tang dynasty
because the Chan sect was only established during Tang dynasty.
However, its origin can be traced back to Han dynasty when the gāthā
or gātham (Pali word), a kind of Buddhist Sūtra literature form in

¹⁰ “The Preface” (*Qianyan* 前言), Ten thousand Chan poems (*Chanshi Yiwàn Shou*
单诗一万首), edited by Han Jinlian (韩进廉), Hebei: Hebei Kexue Jishu Chubanshe
河北科学技术出版社), 1994, p.9.

India was brought to China.

“Gāthā or gātham is the fourth of the nine Angas, or divisions of the Scriptures according to subject matter. It comprises Dhammapada [the way of truth -(法句经)], Theragāthā [Psalms of the Brethen - (长老偈)], Therīgāthā [Psalms of the sisters-(长老尼偈)] and those portions of Suttanipāta [collected discourses -(经集)] which are unmixed verse, and do not bear the title of Sutta.”¹¹

“Buddhist Records of The Western World” (*Datang Xiyu Ji* 大唐西域记) Juan 3 :

“.....gāthā, during Tang dynasty was merely known as a praise.”¹²

To put it briefly, gāthā or gātham generally means the psalms or the song of praise of Buddha’s teachings in ancient India. Indians used poems as a form to eulogise and praise. It devoted a particular care to metrical pattern of poetry (*gelü* 格律) and syllables (*yinjie* 音节), and also has its own structure (*tizhi* 体制). It is a beautiful verse in the Buddhist scripture.

¹¹ Childers, Robert Caesar, A Dictionary of The Pali Language, London : Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1909, p.144.

¹² Xuan Zhuang (玄奘), Buddhist Records of Western World (*Datang Xiyu Ji* 大唐西域记), Da Zang Jing , op.cit., 1994, Vol.51, juan3, pp.882-883.

Later on, the translation of Buddhist scriptures during Han dynasty included gāthā as well. Because of the influence of the traditional poetry form of Chinese literature, which normally has four or five words in a line, the gāthā after its translation to Chinese language, was also written accordingly. But, the translation work was difficult to do giving consideration to both the content and form of the original work. Therefore, after gāthā was translated into Chinese language, it lost its poetic characteristics such as the correct syllabic numbers, rules of rhyme (*yayun* 押韵) and metrical pattern of poetry. So much so that, it could not be called a poem anymore. For example, the verses which appeared in “ The Five Discourses Of The Buddha”¹³, “ The Dhammapada” , “ The Diamond Sutra” as well as the others used were very simple, although rich with Buddha’s teachings, but the flowery language, rules of rhyme and so on found in the original text (gāthā) were completely lost. That is why the famous monk of East Jin, Kumārajīva felt that translations could never capture the flavour of the original works; it is like a person being fed with food already

¹³ The “Five Discourses Of The Buddha” mentioned are : Collection of Long Discourses (*Chang a han jing* 长阿含经), Collection of Middle-length Discourses (*Zhong a han jing* 中阿含经), Collection of Kindred Sayings (*Za a han jing* 杂阿含经), Collection of gradual Sayings (*Zeng yi a han jing* 增一阿含经) and Small Collections (*Xiao Bu* 小部).

masticated by another; not only is the taste lost, but it might even cause nausea.¹⁴

During the Six dynasties, Chinese scholars associated with Buddhism for some time, and the monk-poets of that era sang praises about Buddha's teachings, like Hui Yuan's "Nianfo Sanmei Shi" (念佛三昧诗), Zi Dun's (支遁) "Siyue Bari Zanfo Shi", (四月八日赞佛诗), Wang Rong's (王融) "Fayue Chi" (法乐辞), Liang Wu Di's (梁武帝) "Shiyü" (十喻), "You Zhongshan Da Aijingsi Shi" (游钟山大爱敬寺诗) and etc.

Such songs of praises, written in the form of poetry, are about prayers, the travel to temples and also the theory and philosophy of Buddhism. In the verses of that era, there were more philosophy than poetry. They sound dull, flat and insipid because they were written more in an argumentative way, without much poetic flavour. This is because the monk-poets and Chinese scholars during Six dynasties gave importance to argumentation in their poems rather than

¹⁴ Shi Hui Jiao (释慧皎), "The Biography of Jiumo Luoshen" (Jiumo Luoshen Zhuan 鸠摩罗什传), Gaoseng Zhuan (高僧传), in Da Zang Jing, op.cit., 1993, Vol.50, juan2, p332.

conveying their experience in Buddhism directly. One poet, who needs to be particularly mentioned is the famous painting poet, Xie Lingyun. During that time, it was his poems that first contained elements that remedy the dull and boring style of poetry. Xie Lingyun's poems, known as nature poetry, had the influence of metaphysics that was famous at that time. His poems were the product of the empty thoughts of Buddhism. He absorbed both in his poetry of nature and created a new style of his own. Even then, it was still very much a part of the transition period towards Chan poems and cannot be called as Chan poems. This is because the feeling and the true experience of Chan are not apparent in them. Until early Tang dynasty, when the Chan sect was starting to be established in the land of China, the Chan masters used gātham to transmit dharma (the teachings of Buddha) and also show their enlightened state. The gātham of fifth patriarch and sixth patriarch is generally said to be the first sign of Chan poems. The famous gātham written by the fifth patriarch Shen Xiu (神秀) and sixth patriarch Hui Neng are :

(i) Fifth patriarch's gātham:

“Our body is the Bodhi tree,
身是菩提树
And our mind a mirror bright.
心如明镜台

Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,
时时勤拂拭
And let no dust alight."¹⁵
勿使惹尘埃

(ii) Sixth patriarch's gātham:

There is no Bodhi tree,
菩提本无树
Nor stand of a mirror bright.
明镜亦非台
Since all is void,
本来无一物
Where can the dust alight ?
何处惹尘埃

They express their true experiences towards Chan. But, one can see that they still lack the poetic flavour. They give importance to the state of enlightenment, but not to the state of poetry. They can also be called "philosophic poems" (*Zheli Shi* 哲理诗). However, we can say that these enlightenment poems gave an inspiration to poets who wrote Chan poems.

During middle Tang (*Zhong Tang* 中唐 780-830) and late Tang (*Wan Tang* 晚唐 830-906), the process of gātham in Chan poems be seen more clearly. Most of the Chan masters or monks were well versed in literature. They combined their Buddhism experience

¹⁵ "Xingyou Diyi", op.cit., p.348.

with literary work to produce a work of higher quality and develop their product. For example, the Chan master Zhi Qin (志勤禅师) who got enlightened after seeing the peach blossom, wrote :

“It took thirty years for me to find the swordsman,
三十年来寻剑客
When many a time I saw the leaves drop from the trees
and new branches grew,
几逢落叶又抽枝
But, since I saw the peach blossom,
自从一见桃花后
There has been no doubts in my mind.”¹⁶
直至如今更不疑

And, a nun's enlightenment poem :

“I roamed the mountains in search of a spring
that could not be found,
尽日寻春不见春
My shoes travelled all over the hills and valleys.
芒鞋踏遍陇头云
But, after returning home, I smelled a plum, with a smile,
归来笑拈梅花嗅
I found spring right here, at it's very brim.”¹⁷
春在枝头已十分

(Swordsman and spring here refers to the mind. Saying that it could not be found on the outside, but within a person.)

These songs possess an obvious flavour very different from the earlier gātham. They have by now reached a stage where they

¹⁶ Pu Ji (普济) “*Lingyun Zhiqin Chanshi*” (灵云志勤禅师), op.cit., juan4, p.239.

¹⁷ Yao Debin (姚德彬), “*Wudao Shi*” (悟道诗), in *Zhongguo Chanshi Jianshang Cidian* (中国禅诗鉴赏辞典), Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1992, p.1016.

can be called poems and not just gātham. Generally speaking, Buddhist literature does not only convey Buddhist ideas. It is not really a form of literature set for the religion itself, but, it is the experience of life and thoughts of Buddhist practice which is expressed through literary channel. If the poet has no experience whatsoever in Buddhist approach, practice or thoughts, it would be very hard for him/her to produce a good Buddhist literary work. It is to say that, the Chan which first arrived in China was indigestible to the Chinese mind, and it was only after centuries of adaptation that it became an expression of their highest thought. Therefore, since Tang dynasty, after Chan sect had been uprooted in China, the practise of Chan was of a general mood. In this point of view, Yan Yu once again showed his excellent opinion. In his view, the poet, like the follower of Chan, should seek to attain to a calm contemplative state of mind. When one has achieved this, one can then hope to capture the spirit of life, of nature, in one's poetry. He writes:

“The ultimate excellence of poetry lies in one thing:
entering the spirit. If poetry can succeed in doing this,
it will have reached the limit and cannot be surpassed.”¹⁸

This was done during Tang dynasty. One can see that the impact of

¹⁸ Yan Yu , op.cit.

Chan upon the Chinese poetry was tremendous. Chan masters who had Chan experience and poets who were experts in poetical aspects joined together to bring about a result which was altogether very different. Both were inter-related to absorb the quintessence of each other. This happened especially during Tang dynasty when it was poetry's golden time and also Chan's flourish period. The greatest achievement of the poets and Chan masters of Tang era appear to be their ability to assimilate not only the Buddhist thoughts and poems, but also their experience of Chan. This ferment, however was sustained by them and reached the highest level of intensity in the works of Wang Wei, Jiao Ran (皎然), Guan Xiu (贯休) and so on. They wrote a lot of poems rich in Chan and also poetic flavour. For example, Wang Wei produced many good poems from Chan experiences, that he applied into his painting poetry, especially his "Wang Stream Collection" (*Wangchuan Ji* 辋川集), a small series of quatrains written together with his friend Pei Di (裴迪), which is full of Chan flavour. Indeed, Liu Zhongyuan's "River Snow" (*Jiangxue* 江雪), Bai Juyi's "Flowering Trees In The Buddhist Temple" (*Sengyuan Hua* 僧院花), Guan Xiu's "Poems Written On The Mountain" (*Shanju Shi* 山居诗), Jiao Ran's "Hearing The Bell" (*Wenzhong* 闻钟), Chang Jian's (常建) "Written On The

“Meditation Garden Behind Broken Mountain Temple” (*Ti Poshansi Hou hanyuan* 题破山寺后禅院), Li Bai’s “Sitting Alone By Jin Ting Mountain”(*Duzuo Jingting Shan* 独坐敬亭山) and etc, perfectly exemplify all the qualities of good Chan poetry in Tang dynasty.

These poems are an evidence to the fact that poetry was at its highest flourishing period during the Tang dynasty (618 - 907). It has always been the saying in Chinese that once a certain limit is reached, a change in the opposite direction is inevitable. Which means, things always reverse themselves after reaching an extreme. This obviously happened during Song dynasty when Chan poems started to decline. Although during Song era many talented poets emerged, their Chan poems were not so outstanding compared to those of Tang era. During this era, the scholars mostly wrote Chan poems as a means of releasing tension. Scholars who failed to live up to the demands of the time, wrote Chan poems as a matter of balancing their life. It was written more out of frustration than for the love of it. The writing of poetry was considered among the literati as an avocation, a personal accomplishment, or a means of self-expression. Hence the quality of the poems started to drop, compared to the Tang period before them. This

phenomena was unfortunately carried on to the Ming and Qing dynasty, when Chan lost its independent existence and also its Chan flavour. Although there were some monk poets who wrote very good Chan poems, they were few and far apart. Whereby, the poems written were but their enlightenment poems.