

Buddhist thought in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "Tozichun"

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Abstract. Ryunosuke Akutagawa is one of the representative writers of the "New Trend of Thought" in the Taisho literary circle. He shows humanity from multiple angles and aspects with a rational attitude, which makes the "New Trend of Thought" become one of the important literary schools and makes the Japanese literary circle full of vitality again. In addition, Akutagawa Ryunosuke's works are deeply influenced by Buddhist thought. Most of his historical novels are based on Chinese and Japanese classical novels with rich Buddhist elements, which are reprocessed and re-created with originality, presenting a brand-new theme idea, reflecting the profound influence of Buddhist thought on the author's writing style. By studying the Buddhist thoughts in Ryunosuke's Du Zichun, this paper probes into the Buddhist thoughts embodied in his role shaping, story development and theme connotation. Through text analysis and literature reading, this paper discusses the Buddhist theory of "love false", impermanence and karma. Through the analysis of the works, the author's role shaping and writing style will be deepened. In addition, the cultural background of the Taisho period and the integration of eastern and Western thoughts and cultures will be discussed to deepen the understanding of Japanese literature and cultural changes during this period. At the same time, the application of Buddhist thoughts in literary works will provide a new perspective for the interdisciplinary study of literature and Buddhism.

Keywords: Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Du Zichun, Buddhist thought.

1. Introduction

The creation of Du Zichun coincided with the Taisho Era in Japan, where the old and new ideas were exchanged. The impact of foreign cultures pushed Japan to experience social and cultural changes, and the Buddhist and Taoist ideas even penetrated people's lives. Imbued with this atmosphere, Ryunosuke Akutagawa had a profound understanding of the complexity of human nature and the impermanence of life. His literary works also reflect his absorption and understanding of Buddhist thought [1]. Most academic studies on Du Zichun focus on comparing the similarities and differences between Ryunosuke Akutagawa's Du Zichun and Tang Dynasty's version of Du Zichun. In addition, the paper "Breaking the Desire to Become Immortal and Destroying the Tao Because of Love – On the Trial Journey of Du Zichun in the Tang Dynasty" explores the protagonist Du Zichun's internal struggle between humanity and emotion during the course of his practice, offering a comparative analysis of different scholars' viewpoints [2].

In addition, Zhang Huoqing points out that Du Zichun's spiritual practice is not about completely denying human emotions but rather about overcoming greed, which also opens a new way to interpret the influence of Buddhism and Taoism in the story [2]. The theses "A Study on Variation of the Legend of Tang Dynasty in Ryunosuke's Historical Novel Du Zichun" and "Ryunosuke's Creation of Chinese Classical Novels – Centered on Du Zichun" reference to Cao Shunqing's theory of variation in comparative literature, along with related classical literature research, to explore the significance and value of Ryunosuke's adaptation of Chinese classical themes [3, 4]. Moreover, "Research on Ryunosuke's Literary Themes" discusses the themes and ideological connotations of Ryunosuke's works by analyzing the historical background and social issues reflected in his works from multiple perspectives [5]. Based on the literature reading method and the research of other scholars, this paper studies the Buddhist thoughts in Du Zichun and analyzes the content of the story to reveal the profound thematic connotation and the life philosophy that the author seeks to convey.

2. The Theory of “Love False” in Buddhism and Taoism

“Love falsehood” is another term for “thinking perplexities” in Buddhist thought. Delusion is based on love; love starts from love, its body is false, so love is false” [6]. According to the “love false” theory of Buddhism, all forms of love are illusory, and love is the root cause of all troubles. Only by getting rid of emotions can one achieve purification and, ultimately, real liberation.

The concept of “love false” is closely related to the confusion and perplexities that arise from emotional attachments. Delusion, in this context, refers to the mental confusion caused by emotions such as love and attachment. Its “perplexity” is love, while “love” comes from infatuation. Given its illusory nature, it is called “love false”. This idea contrasts with “seeing bewilderment”, which is the confusion caused by wrong opinion or misunderstandings. The elimination of perplexity by thinking is a gradual process, while the elimination of perplexity by seeing is a halting process. As for the interpretation of religious thoughts in his works, Gong Pengcheng pointed out:

In *Du Zichun*, “Love is born in the heart, forgetting the previous covenant” leads to a sharp rupture of the *Dan ding* and the illusion of each other is empty. It is using the theory of “love false” of Buddhism and Taoism to expose love as the root of trouble. The focus of the whole text is that “only through the purification of love can we enter the road” [2].

This explains the source of Du Zichun’s troubles and the reason why Du Zichun’s spiritual practice failed. From the beginning of his pursuit of material and enjoyment, Du Zichun turned from a poor scholar to the richest man, and then indulged in extravagance all day long, showing his pursuit and nostalgia for worldly desires. This lust for material wealth led to Du Zichun’s emptiness and pain. Later, in the process of practice, when Du Zichun’s mother, who had become an old horse, still showed her love for Du even after being punished, Du broke the rules of practice and made a voice, which led to the failure of practice in the end, showing that he was still not free from the bondage of family affection.

After experiencing the test of fantasy cultivation, Du Zichun realized that all emotions are illusory, finally put down his obsession and desire, no longer ask for external things, no longer cling to empty emotions, and showed his true understanding of the concept of “love false”. The difference is that Du Zichun is poor and destitute in the original novel, but there is no in-depth discussion of his inner changes. Through reflecting on Du Zichun’s need for wealth and inner struggle, Akutagawa emphasizes that Du Zichun finally understands the nihilism of material things. The innovation of turning into an old horse’s mother to be tortured further reflects the contrast with the human weakness in the test emphasized in the original work.

3. The Buddhist View of Impermanence

Anicca, or impermanence, means that everything is in constant flux, without constancy, change, or disappearance. The Buddhist principles of the “three Dharma seals” are “impermanence of all actions,” “no self of the Dharma,” and “silence of Nirvana,” from which comes the Buddhist view of impermanence. The explanation for the impermanence of the acts is that everything that exists in the world changes in an instant [7]. In the Diamond Sutra, “Everything that has Dharma, like a dream bubble, like dew and like electricity, should be viewed as such” [8]. The Mahabhinbana Sutra also states: “All actions are impermanent, and love must depart” [9]. In his work, Akutagawa Ryunosuke explains his understanding of “impermanence” with delicate brushstrokes. Buddha and Tao thoughts are “remedies for the suffering (suffering) of lust, not to deny its needs and satisfaction, but to resolve its greed and attachment” [2]. In the original text, when Du Zichun faces the scene of empty houses and people after two bankruptcies, he cannot help feeling:

People are all uncaring. When I was a rich man, they tried their best to flatter and flatter me. Once they became poor, they would not even give me a smile. When I think of this, what is the use of becoming a rich man again? [1].

In the above description, Du Zichun received enough gold to become the richest man and held a big banquet for his guests. However, when Du’s wealth was gone, his former guests and dancers

stopped coming. But when he got the gold again, the people came again. The second time he ran out of money, the people went away, leaving the house empty. The two gains and losses of wealth, the closeness and alienation of personal relationships, the ups and downs of his life circumstances, further demonstrate the impermanence of the world.

At the end of the story, although Du Zichun fails to pass the test, he understands that all things are maintained in a permanent transformation, and all emotions are external things. He no longer attaches himself to the pursuit of material wealth and returns to the most ordinary and simple life. His detachment from indifference once again confirms his understanding of the impermanence of all things in the world and the illusory of lust. This is precisely the truth that the Tie daozi guided him to realize by twice giving him wealth and money.

In contrast to the original work, Du Zichun feels guilty because of his gratitude to the immortals and his extravagant habits. In Akutagawa's work, Du Zichun is disappointed by people's unkindness and unrighteousness. He is tired of the world, so he refuses the railroad's gift again and wants to cultivate the immortals. Akutagawa's re-creation, through detailed scene description and psychological depiction, not only retains the essence of the original book, but also enhances the drama of the plot and the appeal of the story, creating a more accessible version of the story that is closer to the reader.

4. Karma in Buddhism

In the concept of karma, "cause" and "effect" are intrinsically linked to "good" and "evil". That means that everything in the world is governed by the causal relationship, and the corresponding good and evil are generated by the actions, so as to promote the reincarnation of people in the past life, the present life, and the next life. In Du Zichun, the protagonist Du Zichun got gold twice but squandered it because of his pursuit of material money, resulting in the loss, confusion and helplessness felt by the final talent empty, which is the result of his greed. However, when he enters the fantasy cultivation, avoids the attack of trapped animals, the environment of heaven and earth falling apart, and passes through the fire of hell, he finally fails in cultivation because of the emotion of his mother and makes an uncontrollably loud response.

However, he soon realizes that all things are empty. Only by letting go of all attachments can he find the true peace and tranquility of his heart, and giving the Tie Daozi's gifts away from the world is his good result. Besides, when Du Zichun was living in the street after squandering his wealth twice, when he saw Tie Daozi again, he still attributes the result to the indifference and coolness of human feelings. His entry into the fantasy cultivation can be attributed to the fact that he could not reflect correctly despite repeated failures but was only pushed to enter by shirking his responsibility. At the end of the story, Tie Daozi gave Du a peach house to help him stay away from the world:

Oh, by the way, I just remembered that I have a house at the southern foot of Mount Tai. The house and the land are given to you. You can go and live there at once. At this time of year, there must be peach blossoms all around the house [1].

By the end of the story, Du Zichun has experienced the gain and loss of wealth, the rise and fall of status, and the intimacy and relaxation of interpersonal relationships. After all kinds of trials and tribulations in the situation of cultivating immortals, Du finally deals with life with a relaxed and cheerful mind. Tie Daozi's gift house is at this moment for Du's as a happy ending.

In the work, Du Zichun's corresponding actions have consequences, and the "effects" generated by the "causes" of the actions repeatedly promote the development of the story, which is the karma reflected in the work. In the original, Taoist alchemy and cultivation of immortals is the main line of the story, but by adding Buddhist elements such as karma, Akutagawa makes the work not only stay on the path of cultivation and immortals, but also focuses on the purification of humanity and the heart. The plot of the gift house that Akutagawa creates at the end is the finishing touch of the whole story. It turns the theme of "cultivating immortals is not easy" to people's longing for a secluded life, thus realizing the change of theme. It is also the most different part of the novel.

5. Conclusion

By recreating Chinese classical literature, Ryunosuke Akutagawa's *Du Zichun* deals with the conflict between spiritual practice and human nature with clever plot arrangement and psychological depiction of characters, which contains Buddhist thoughts. After realizing "love false", *Du Zichun* finally puts down his attachment, sees through the impermanence of the world, and then secludes himself in a peach house, stepping into the realm of transcendence. It also explains the complexity and depth of life. Through clever ideas, the author reduces the mystery of immortals and transforms them into a role that guides *Du's* inner and personal growth step by step. In this way, he emphasizes the inner cultivation of human beings rather than the external cultivation of immortals. The work is not only the author's understanding and enlightenment of Buddhist thought, but also reflects his reflection and expectation on the pursuit and meaning of life.

This classic work, which contains both Eastern and Western thought and culture, not only promotes our understanding of Ryunosuke's writing style and literary themes, but also reveals the enlightenment and significance brought by the rich life philosophy contained in the theme of the work. Ryunosuke's realistic writing style incorporates romantic elements, giving flesh and blood to the story. Readers get moved and comforted when reading. When the book draws down the curtain in the protagonist's courtyard house full of peach blossoms and reaches the other side of everyone's own thoughts throughout their life, the author sends the sincerest wishes and expectations to each reader.

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