

# A Study on the “Social Behavior” of Zen Poetry Culture: A Case Study of the Sui and Tang Dynasties<sup>\*</sup>

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During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism and Zen poetry underwent great development. Zen poetry is diverse in form, strong in personality, and high in achievement. Among the types of Zen poetry are poems, lyrics, and prose, some of which have social attributes closely related to the development of Chinese Buddhism. An analysis reveals that the viewpoints and information conveyed in these poems, lyrics, and prose are positively correlated with the attitudes of the emperors towards Buddhism. When the attitude of the emperor towards Buddhism reached its peak of positivity during the Tang dynasty, there was a change towards a negative correlation with the viewpoints expressed in poetry.

*Keywords:* Zen poetry, social behavior, the Sui and Tang Dynasties

## Preface

The period when Buddhism flourished in China includes the Sui and Tang dynasties. The mainstream academic community on the mainland generally agrees that Chinese Buddhism had formed its own independent sects since the Sui Dynasty, which led to the development of “sects” within Chinese Buddhism as a major characteristic of later Buddhism. During this period, Buddhism had a systematic theoretical framework and strict institutional norms, gradually maturing and developing their own fixed spheres of influence. Thanks to the support of most monarchs, the strong national power, and cultural confidence, the Tang Dynasty saw the flourishing development of various sects, and a Buddhist golden age with active theoretical collisions among them. The social attributes of Buddhism were reflected in the increasing variety of poetry and prose styles, and this article aims to analyze and study texts of this nature.

## Oral Transmission and Dissemination

### Types of Rational Preaching and Evangelism

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the reasoning missionary poetry had a more obvious missionary color.

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In particular, during the Tang Dynasty, several emperors used Buddhism to educate and manage the people, and Buddhism received official support. With a strong national power and confidence in it, cultural inclusiveness continued to increase. In such a social environment, Buddhism reached its peak during the Sui and Tang dynasties. The behavior of monks openly preaching increased and became widespread.

The poem “Advice for Chanting the Buddha’s Name” (《劝念佛偈》) (Shan Dao, 613-681 AD, p. 22) has a title that explicitly states the main theme of the entire poem, and it has a clear social intent and attribute, indicating that the author hopes that people will chant the Buddha’s name to attain the state of perfect merit. In this poem, “Amitabha Buddha” is the unique way of chanting the Buddha’s name in the Pure Land school, which is also known as reciting the name of the Buddha. The actual founder of the Pure Land school, Shandao, is also the author of this poem. Taking into account Shandao’s religious background, it can be inferred that the social intent and purpose of the author in creating this poem also includes introducing and promoting the Pure Land school, making its social attribute evident.

### **Types of Communicating With Friends Through Poetry**

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the discussions between literati and nobles and monks regarding Buddhism further were developed on the basis of the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties. With the support of society and an open-minded environment, the scope of their communication further expanded. Zen poetry gradually shifted from academic instruction to daily communication, resulting in a phenomenon where literati and monks used poetry to exchange their understanding of Buddhism in their daily lives. During the Sui and Tang periods, a large number of wall poems and landscape poems inspired by visits to ancient temples and scenic spots appeared, such as “Night Mooring at Lujiang and Hearing an Old Friend Is in the Eastern Temple and Sends Him a Poem” (《夜泊庐江闻故人在东寺以诗寄之》) (Meng Haoran, 689-740 AD, p. 364) by Meng Haoran.

The title of this poem explicitly mentions the social behavior and purpose behind it. The behavior refers to the fact that the author wrote and sent it out after being inspired while enjoying the scenery. The purpose was to send it to a friend. The poet describes a quiet and serene night, where he takes a stroll along the Lujiang River. Everything he sees and hears is simple yet imbued with a sense of Zen, providing some psychological comfort to the author who had experienced setbacks such as failing in the imperial examination and being unable to find a government position. During this period, Meng Haoran experienced the pain of being unrecognized for his talents. However, these feelings dissipated gradually while he was hiking with friends and discussing Buddhist philosophy, hence the line “The Zen branch terrifies a resting dove” in the poem.

This sentence refers to a Buddhist story, “Zen twig, dreadful pigeon roost” (禅枝怖鸽栖), which can be found in the Nirvana Sutra, Volume 28, and the Discourse on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, Volume 11. The story later evolved to represent those who seek refuge in a state of panic and finally find a place to rest. Combining the last sentence of the poem, it can be understood that Meng Haoran believed that places like Donglin Temple and Buddhist teachings were his own spiritual refuge. Discussions about Buddhism between the author and his friends also demonstrate that social interactions related to Tang Dynasty and Zen poetry had become popular, and the social aspect of Zen poetry gradually became one of its defining characteristics.

### **Types of Using History to Criticize the Present**

There is a vast number of ancient poems that employ the technique of “using history to criticize the present” (借古讽今) in history. Their intention is to advise, warn, or criticize, and their purpose is often to call for reform or to gain favor with the ruling class. As such, these poems inherently have social behavior and objectives.

Like Du Mu's poem “Spring in the South” (《江南春》), it describes the picturesque scenery of spring throughout the thousand miles of Jiangnan, with singing birds, dancing swallows, wine banners fluttering in the wind, and the people living and working in peace and contentment. Imagine the countless temples in the Southern Dynasties, many of which were shrouded in misty rain. The poet's focus is on depicting the beautiful spring scenery of Jiangnan, but the second sentence still carries a hint of melancholy—if we continue to engage in extensive construction and reckless expansion of Buddhist temples like during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, then the situation may become as difficult as the end of the Northern Qi and Northern Wei, with the people's livelihoods being harsh and society being chaotic. Therefore, in addition to praising the beautiful scenery of Jiangnan, Du Mu's poem may also contain a sense of concern for the country and the people, and a social critique of the present by drawing on the past.

### Quotations of Praise and Eulogize

Quotations of praise and eulogize are commonly found in ancient Chinese poetry, including those that are inspired by the author's social status, influence, or the impact of classic lines in their works. These quotations have been continuously praised and cited in social contexts during and after the author's lifetime. As quotations and praise inherently involve the responder's response and agreement towards the subject, such behavior has become a form of information feedback and social interaction.

As previously mentioned in “Night Mooring at Lujiang and Hearing an Old Friend Is in the Eastern Temple and Sends Him a Poem” (《夜泊庐江闻故人在东寺以诗寄之》) the use of the imagery of Shijing Mountain and Songmen Mountain in the poem is believed to be inspired by Xie Lingyun's “Entering Pengli Lake Mouth” (《入彭蠡湖口》) (Xie Lingyun, 431 AD, p. 216): “Climbing the cliff to shine upon the Stone Mirror, pulling the leaves to enter the Pine Gate.” (攀崖照石镜, 牵叶入松门。). Xie Lingyun's use of these names is speculated to have been influenced by Li Daoyuan's “Commentary on the Water Classic—Lujiang River” (《水经注·庐江水》) from the Northern Wei dynasty (p. 966) “There is a Stone Mirror in Shandong, shining where the water comes out. There is a round stone hanging from a cliff, bright and clear, reflecting human figures. When the morning light disperses, it lingers in the stone, and one can observe it carefully. Hence it is named Stone Mirror.” (山东有石镜, 照水之所出。有一圆石, 悬崖明净, 照见人形, 晨光初散, 则延曜入石, 豪细必察, 故名石镜焉。).

In addition, Meng Shizhong's “Zen twig, dreadful pigeon roost” and Ouyang Gun's “Shenguang Temple” (《神光寺》) (p. 1357) from the middle to late Tang Dynasty period both use the Buddhist allusion of “Zen Twig, Dreadful Pigeon Roost” to describe the roosting habits of birds, forming a social behavior of citation.

### Conclusion

The open social thought and inclusive social environment during the Sui and Tang dynasties laid the foundation for the development and prosperity of Buddhism, becoming the fundamental reason for the flourishing and diversity of Zen poetry in the Sui and Tang dynasties. The social behaviors portrayed in Zen poetry have undergone constant changes throughout history, and their analysis and summary are important foundations for studying the cultural psychology and artistic expression of literati and monks in the Sui and Tang dynasties. Sui and Tang Zen poetry not only stimulated the development of “Zen” poetry in the Song Dynasty and beyond, but also laid the foundation for the preference for the study of philosophical theories in the Song and Ming dynasties,

profoundly influencing the ways in which literati in later generations exchanged ideas and recorded social behaviors, becoming a brilliant page in the long scroll of traditional Chinese poetry.

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