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Interpretation of Buddhist Scriptures from the Perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism

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Abstract: The interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism has undergone a long and fruitful development process. From the initial period of Buddhist transmission with grid-meaning translation, to the elaboration of Buddhist doctrines during the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, to the doctrinal taxonomy in the Sui and Tang dynasties, and then to the interpretation of mind and nature during the Song and Ming dynasties, up to the modern trend of humanistic Buddhism, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures has always interacted with the spirit of Chinese native culture, presenting a unique landscape of integration and innovation. The Sinicized interpretation of Buddhist scriptures not only demonstrates cultural confidence but also provides wisdom and inspiration for modern society. In the future, cross-cultural dialogue with the world, interdisciplinary integration and development, digital humanities research, and innovative communication methods will become new directions and challenges for the Sinicized interpretation of Buddhist scriptures.

Keywords: interpretation of Buddhist scriptures; Sinicization of Buddhism; integration and innovation

1. Introduction

Buddhism was introduced to China from India and underwent a long process of Sinicization. In this process, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures played a crucial role. The Sinicized interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, on the one hand, demonstrates the efforts of Buddhist scripture translators to interpret Buddhist doctrines in combination with traditional Chinese thought; on the other hand, it reflects the development and innovation of Buddhist doctrines in the Chinese context. Through the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, we can not only appreciate the historical picture of Buddhist Sinicization but also discover its deep modern value. This paper intends to sort out the development process of the Sinicized interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, explore its ideological characteristics, further elucidate its contemporary significance, and look forward to its future development.

2. Historical Evolution of the Sinicized Interpretation of Buddhist Scriptures

2.1. Translation and Interpretation of Buddhist Scriptures in the Initial Period of Transmission

When Buddhism was first introduced to China, it faced the dual dilemma of language barriers and cultural differences. In the late Eastern Han Dynasty, eminent monks such as An Shigao and Zhiyi Jichen initiated the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. During the translation process, they adopted the method of "grid-meaning" (a technique of using Chinese philosophical terms to explain Buddhist concepts), using Taoist terminology to interpret Buddhist doctrines, such as translating "nirvana" as "wu" (emptiness) and "bodhi" as "dao" (the path). Although this method facilitated Chinese people's understanding of Buddhism, it inevitably distorted the

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original meaning of Buddhist doctrines. Later translators learned from previous experiences and gradually optimized translation strategies to make the translations more accurate. For example, Kumarajiva emphasized both transliteration and free translation in his translations and minimized the use of grid-meaning, striving to be faithful to the original meaning. His translations were both elegant and informative, creating a new era for the Chinese translation of Buddhist scriptures [1]. The translation and interpretation of Buddhist scriptures during this period laid the linguistic foundation for the Sinicization of Buddhism and also reflected the process of cultural interpenetration.

2.2. Elucidation of Buddhist Doctrines in the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties

During the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, Buddhist doctrines were further elucidated in China. Eminent monks such as Seng Zhao, Huiyuan, and Huisi integrated the wisdom of Prajna with metaphysical theories to explore profound doctrines such as Buddha-nature, dependent origination, and Prajna. Seng Zhao, in his *On the Immutability of Things*, elaborated on the true nature of phenomena using the idea of "accordant with conditions, yet unaltered"; Huiyuan, in his commentary on the Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra, combined Prajna with the idea of "original non-being" to create the concept of "emptiness being only a name"; and Huisi, in his *Mahayana Practice Method of Cessation and Clear Observation*, proposed the theory of "three contemplations in one mind." These elucidations not only deepened the doctrinal content of Chinese Buddhism but also reflected the unique features of Buddhist philosophy in the Sinicized context. At the same time, metaphysicians such as Wang Bi also attempted to interpret Buddhist doctrines using Laozi and Zhuangzi's thoughts, further promoting the interaction between Buddhism and Taoism. The elucidation of Buddhist doctrines during this period marked the deepening of the Sinicization process of Buddhist doctrines.

2.3. Doctrinal Taxonomy and Synthesis of Buddhist Teachings in the Sui and Tang Dynasties

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, various Buddhist sects flourished, and the idea of doctrinal taxonomy emerged. The purpose of doctrinal taxonomy is to differentiate and explain the various forms and characteristics of the teachings preached by the Buddha throughout his life, including the depth, sequence, and form of the teachings, thereby establishing a system of Buddhist teachings. The Master Zhi Yi of the Sui Dynasty proposed the theory of "five periods and eight teachings," dividing the Buddha's teachings into five periods and eight types, marking the maturity of the idea of doctrinal taxonomy. Kui Ji, a master in the Tang Dynasty, further refined the theory of doctrinal taxonomy in his *Commentary on the Saddharmapuṇḍarika-sūtra* [2]. At the same time, the idea of synthesis also developed. The idea of synthesis advocates integrating the insights of various sects, believing that each sect's view is a facet of Buddhist teaching. For example, Master Ji Zang, in his *Exposition of the Three Treatises*, synthesized the Three Treatises and the Nirvana Sutra, believing that they converge on the same path; Master Fa Zang, in his *Chapter on the Distinction in the Teaching of the Single Vehicle of the Hua-yen Sutra*, sought to synthesize Hua-yen thoughts with other sects. The doctrinal taxonomy and synthesis of Buddhist teachings during this period not only reflected the diversity of Chinese Buddhist sects but also embodied the unique characteristics of Buddhist doctrines mutually influencing each other in the Sinicized context.

2.4. Interpretation of the Theory of Mind-Nature in the Song and Ming Dynasties

During the Song and Ming dynasties, with the rise of Chan sect and the development of Neo-Confucianism, the interpretation of the Theory of Mind-Nature gradually became mainstream in Buddhist interpretation. Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch

of Chan sect, proposed "How surprising, the self-nature is inherently pure," initiating the interpretation of Buddha-nature in terms of self-nature. Subsequently, masters such as Mazu Daoyi and Shitou Xiqian further developed this idea, forming the Chan theory of "this mind is precisely Buddha". Yongming Yanshou, in the Song Dynasty, compiled the *Zong Jing Lu* (Records of the Mirror of the Buddha-Dharma), summarizing the theories of various schools and pushing the interpretation of mind-nature to its peak. At the same time, Neo-Confucian scholars such as Zhou Dunyi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi also attempted to interpret Buddhist doctrines of mind-nature using the idea of "mind being reason," promoting the synthesis of Confucianism and Buddhism. Hanshan Deqing, in the Ming Dynasty, directly integrated the Confucian concept of "benevolence" with Buddhist precepts in his *Annotated Commentary on the Brahmajala Sutra*. The interpretation of mind-nature during this period fully embodied the exploration of the inner spirit of Buddhism in the Sinicized context and also reflected the deepening interaction between Confucianism and Buddhism.

2.5. Modern Interpretation of Humanistic Buddhism

In modern times, facing changes in the times and the impact of Western learning, Chinese Buddhism initiated a wave of reform, leading to the emergence of humanistic Buddhism. Master Tai Xu advocated the concept of "Buddhism for human life," emphasizing that Buddhism should focus on real life and serve the general public. In his *Explanation of Buddhist Philosophy for Human Life*, he reinterpreted traditional Buddhist doctrines and integrated them with modern society. Ven. Yin Shun further developed the idea of humanistic Buddhism in his works such as *Buddha in the Human Realm*, believing that Buddhist teaching should be "in harmony with both truth and opportunity" and adapt to the needs of the times. Master Xing Yun emphasized that Buddhism should go into the world and benefit all sentient beings [3]. These ideas of humanistic Buddhism undoubtedly represent innovative interpretations of traditional Buddhist doctrines, reflecting the self-transformation of Chinese Buddhism in the modern context. At the same time, Master Tai Xu and others absorbed elements of Western philosophy and science to provide modern interpretations of Buddhist teachings, promoting the modernization of Buddhism.

3. Ideological Characteristics of Buddhist Scripture Interpretation from the Perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism

3.1. Matching the Meaning (Analogical Explanation) and Integration

When interpreting Buddhist scriptures, Chinese Buddhism is deeply influenced by Confucian and Taoist thought, exhibiting characteristics of analogical explanation and integration. During the early stages of its transmission, Buddhist scripture translators often employed Confucian and Taoist terminology to explain Buddhist concepts in order to facilitate a better understanding among Chinese believers. For instance, they translated "nirvana" as "non-action" and "bodhi" as "the path". Although such analogical explanations facilitated the localization of Buddhism, they inevitably led to some misinterpretations of the original meanings. As Buddhism developed, eminent monks began to attempt to integrate Confucian and Taoist ideas to deepen their interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. For example, in his *Treatise on the Namelessness of Nirvana*, Ven. Seng Zhao combined Laozi's idea that "what can be named is not the eternal name" with the Buddhist concept of ineffability, thereby pioneering the idea of "emptiness as form and form as emptiness." Another example is the work of Master Ji Zang, who, in his *Essentials of the Three Treatises*, used the Confucian concept of "essence and function" to elucidate the relationship between Buddha-nature and the phenomenal world, viewing them as inseparable. Furthermore, during the Song and Ming dynasties, many Neo-Confucian scholars attempted to interpret Buddha-nature using Confucian concepts such as "benevolence" and "reason", believing them to be interconnected. These

integration efforts not only enriched Buddhist principles of the teaching but also promoted interaction between Buddhism and Confucianism. It can be said that it is through the analogical explanation and integration with Confucian and Taoist thought that the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures in China has demonstrated its unique local characteristics.

3.2. Doctrinal Taxonomy and Harmonious Integration

In the face of the vast array of Buddhist scriptures, Chinese Buddhism developed unique ideas of doctrinal taxonomy and harmonious integration during the process of interpretation. Doctrinal taxonomy aims to differentiate the sequence and depth of various scriptures and establish a systematic framework of Buddha's teachings to facilitate the study and practice of Buddhist learners. Representative theories of doctrinal taxonomy include the "Five Periods and Eight Teachings" proposed by the Master Zhizhe of Tiantai sect and the "Three Periods Teaching" put forward by the Master Kui Ji of the Dharma-Characteristics Sect. These theories help clarify the sequence of Buddha's teachings and grasp the depth of Buddhist doctrines, embodying the systematic efforts of Chinese Buddhism in scriptural interpretation.

At the same time, the idea of harmonious integration also developed. It advocates the fusion of the viewpoints of various scriptures and schools, believing that although they may differ, they ultimately converge and complement each other. For instance, Master Ji Zang, in his Commentary on the Madhyamika Treatise, integrated the Three Treatises with the Chengshi School; Master Fa Zang, in his Division of Teachings of the Single Vehicle of the Hua-yen Sutra, harmonized Hua-yen sect with other schools; and Master Zong Mi, in his Great Commentary and Commentary Collection on the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, integrated various Chan and other Buddhist teachings. These works of harmonious integration reflect the inclusiveness and fusion of Chinese Buddhism in terms of doctrines, contributing to the reconciliation of sectarian differences and promoting the development of Buddhism. The ideas of doctrinal taxonomy and harmonious integration are not only important methods in the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures but also reflect the innovative efforts of Buddhism itself in the context of Sinicization.

4. Modern Value of Buddhist Scripture Interpretation from the Perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism

4.1. Cultural Confidence: Highlighting the Local Characteristics of Chinese Buddhism

The interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization fully demonstrates the unique local characteristics of Chinese Buddhism. Through in-depth elaboration of Buddhist principles and the integration of the essence of traditional Chinese culture, a Buddhist theoretical system with distinctive Chinese characteristics has been formed. This interpretation method not only enhances the cultural confidence of the masses but also provides important support for promoting excellent traditional Chinese culture. In today's globalized context, the Sinicized interpretation of Buddhist scriptures contributes to enhancing mutual learning and dialogue among different civilizations, and offers wisdom and strength for building a community with a shared future for mankind.

4.2. Wisdom Inspiration: Providing Spiritual Guidance for Modern Society

Buddhist scriptures contain rich wisdom and philosophical thoughts, which hold significant inspiration for modern society. Through modern interpretations of Buddhist principles, they can provide people with spiritual comfort and solace, guiding them to face difficulties and challenges in life with a positive attitude [4]. Buddhist practices such as meditation, chanting, and the awakening of the mind help alleviate anxiety and stress among modern individuals, enhancing their mental health. At the same time, Buddhist

concepts of equality, compassion, and wisdom provide important spiritual guidance for building a harmonious society.

4.3. Ecological Ethics: Buddhist "Equality of All Beings" and Environmental Awareness

The Buddhist concept of "equality of all beings" embodies profound ecological ethical implications. In the context of the increasingly deteriorating ecological environment today, this concept holds significant value in enhancing people's environmental awareness. Through the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures that emphasize the interconnectedness of all things and the cherishing of life, it can awaken people's reverence for nature and foster a consciousness of respecting life and valuing resources. Additionally, the simple and restrained lifestyle advocated by Buddhism provides a sustainable living model for modern society, contributing to the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

4.4. Humanitarian Concern: Actively Engaging in the World to Benefit All Sentient Beings

While Buddhism emphasizes detachment and liberation, it also places great importance on engaging in the world to save and liberate beings, demonstrating a profound sense of humanitarian concern. In modern society, actively promoting Buddhist compassion and dedication is of great significance for building a harmonious society. Through the elaboration of Buddhist scriptures that emphasize benefiting and serving humanity, it can guide believers to actively participate in social welfare and public interest causes, striving to solve practical problems and bringing more warmth and hope to society. Furthermore, Buddhist ideas of equality and tolerance contribute to resolving social conflicts and promoting harmonious coexistence among different groups.

5. Future Prospects for the Interpretation of Buddhist Scriptures from the Perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism

5.1. Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Exchange and Mutual Learning Between Chinese Buddhism and Buddhism in Other Countries

In the future, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism should strengthen cross-cultural dialogue and exchange with Buddhism in other countries. After long-term development, Chinese Buddhism has formed a unique system of philosophical principles and interpretive traditions. This valuable legacy not only belongs to China but is also a spiritual wealth for all mankind, deserving to engage in dialogue with Buddhism in other countries for mutual learning and win-win cooperation. On the one hand, Chinese Buddhism should actively disseminate the results of its localized classic interpretations, introduce Sinicized Buddhist thoughts, and promote the characteristics of Chinese Buddhism, thereby enabling the world to understand and recognize Chinese Buddhism, enhancing mutual understanding and friendship between Chinese and foreign Buddhism. On the other hand, it should also modestly learn from the characteristics of Buddhism in other countries, absorbing the outstanding achievements of Buddhism in India, Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea, and other regions, especially in terms of philosophical analysis, language translation, logical argumentation, etc., to broaden its horizons and improve itself by drawing on the strengths of others.

5.2. Interdisciplinary Integration: Combining the Interpretation of Buddhist Scriptures with Modern Disciplines

In the future, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization should actively promote integration with modern disciplines to open up

new research areas and discourse spaces. In today's era, the high degree of differentiation and cross-integration among disciplines has become a major trend. To achieve innovative development in the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, it is necessary to maintain a firm foundation while drawing on the strengths of various disciplines and engaging in in-depth dialogue and integration with modern disciplines. We can draw on the theories and methods of modern linguistics, philology, logic, and other disciplines to study issues such as the interpretation of terms and the argumentation of philosophical principles in classic interpretations from a modern academic perspective, thereby introducing new ideas and activating the contemporary vitality of classic interpretations. Additionally, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures can actively intervene and integrate into applied disciplines such as psychology, ethics, and management [5], leveraging the unique role of Buddhist philosophical principles in areas such as mental healing, business ethics, and corporate culture, and thereby expanding the modern application space for the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures.

5.3. Digital Humanities: Application of Digital Technology in the Interpretation of Buddhist Scriptures

The interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism should actively leverage digital technology in the future to expand research methods and dissemination pathways, thereby pioneering a new realm in digital humanities. In today's era, digital technology is advancing rapidly, bringing revolutionary changes to humanities research. To grasp the digital wave, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures must actively embrace digital humanities. Digital tools such as databases, big data analysis, and knowledge graphs can be utilized to organize and analyze the vast Buddhist literature, revealing the ideological lineage and philosophical networks of scriptural interpretation, and providing new perspectives and methods for traditional research. Moreover, the digital era offers new platforms and modes of dissemination for Buddhist scriptural interpretation. Technologies like digital museums, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence can be employed to present immersive exhibitions, interactive experiences, and intelligent interpretations of Buddhist scriptures, rejuvenating ancient interpretations with digital vitality and helping more people understand the wisdom of the scriptures.

5.4. Innovative Dissemination: Interpreting and Promoting Buddhist Scriptures in the New Media Era

In the new media era, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization urgently requires innovative dissemination concepts and methods, leveraging the advantages of new media to enhance the influence and appeal of classic interpretations. Today, new media has become the primary mode of information dissemination and social interaction. To achieve innovative development in the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, it is imperative to actively integrate into the new media context and utilize new media platforms to innovate the discourse system. By employing new media forms such as WeChat public accounts and short videos, vivid interpretations of Buddhist scriptures can be presented, attracting more young people to learn about Buddhist teachings through lively language and interactive methods. Additionally, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures should utilize new media technologies such as big data analysis and algorithm recommendation to create precise user profiles and deliver personalized content, thereby tailoring the dissemination to individual needs and enhancing its relevance and effectiveness. Furthermore, the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures can harness the openness and interactivity of new media to encourage believers to participate in interpreting scriptures and share their insights, realizing a crowd-sourcing model that ignites the enthusiasm of more people to engage in learning about classic interpretations.

6. Conclusion

The process and laws of Buddhism's transformation from an alien civilization to Chinese religion, recording the continuity, separation, heritage, and innovation between Indian and Chinese Buddhism, and examining the interpretations and fusions with Confucian and Taoist cultures as a result of interaction with Chinese society. The Sinicization of Buddhism is not simply about Buddhism in China, but refers to a process of interpretation and creation of Indian Buddhism by Chinese Buddhists, which finally took root and developed into a new form of Chinese Buddhism.[6] The interpretation of Buddhist scriptures from the perspective of Sinicization of Buddhism is a process of integration and innovation, which not only reflects the absorption and transformation of Buddhism into Chinese culture but also demonstrates the significant influence of Chinese culture on the interpretation of Buddhist doctrines. This interpretive tradition holds great significance for promoting Chinese culture and enhancing exchanges between China and foreign countries. In the future, the Sinicized interpretation of Buddhist scriptures should be rooted in the local context, oriented towards the world, and keep abreast of the times. It should make new explorations in cross-cultural dialogue, interdisciplinary integration, digital humanities, innovative dissemination, and other areas, contributing wisdom to the development of human spiritual civilization.

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