

The “Ardent Zen” style in Tue Trung Thuong Si and Yuan Hongdao works

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Abstract

The article defines “ardent Zen” as expressing one’s true self without being bound by morality or conventional values. Describe the connection between this concept and the Zen poetry of Tue Trung Thuong Si (1230-1291), a Tran Dynasty aristocrat and Zen master in Vietnam, and Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610), a late Ming poet and literary theorist in China. Yuan Hongdao’s ideas on the Nature Sensibility theory, which he developed using Zen philosophy to find the connection between two people from different eras but the same East Asian cultural environment, and some of Tue Trung Thuong Si’s poems serve as the foundation for this essay. Research indicates that “ardent Zen” is a notion in religious practice as well as a lifestyle that strives for authenticity and inner-world liberty.

Keywords: *the concept of “ardent Zen”, Tue Trung Thuong Si, Yuan Hongdao, the Nature Sensibility Theory*

1. Introduction

The term “ardent Zen” (狂禪) is an aesthetic category of East Asian culture. It is associated with the type of Zen master - poet whose thinking and poetry writing are purely based on human experience rather than being didactic or promoting ideologies. Although it is a term related to Buddhist culture, it has gradually moved into the field of literature and art under the influence of specific social contexts. Two author, Tue Trung Thuong Si (慧中上士) of the Tran Dynasty and Yuan Hongdao (袁宏道) of the late Ming Dynasty, express the unique characteristics of the setting. In the 13th century, Zen and Buddhism flourished in Vietnam, coinciding with the country’s victory over the Mongol invasions. It was an era when Buddhism,

instead of only emphasizing doctrines and scriptures, also focused on daily life, creating a free, open, and simple style of Zen practice, of which Tue Trung Thuong Si was a typical figure. In the meantime, Chinese authors, such as Yuan Hongdao, started using Buddhist ideas in conjunction with Wang Yangming’s “learning of the mind” (心學) and Li Zhi’s Childlike Mind theory (童心说) in the late 16th century to produce a “ardent Zen” style that was full of individuality in both poetry and philosophy. The idea of “real/truthfulness” (真), which he stressed in his 1596 proposal of the Nature Sensibility Theory in *Account of the Poetry of Xiaoxiu* (叙小修诗), was also intimately tied

to the idea of “ardent” regarding the poet’s inner reality. Despite not becoming a monk, Yuan Hongdao was influenced by Buddhism at an early age and refined it during his 1601 seclusion in his native Hupei. Therefore, although based on comparisons of the same type of author, if Tue Trung Thuong Si is emphasized more in the role of a Zen master, Yuan Hongdao is noticed in the role of a poet.

This study employs a comparative approach to examine the Zen master-poet author type in Tue Trung Thuong Si and Yuan Hongdao, drawing on the East Asian aesthetic concept of “ardent Zen” and systematizing its literary manifestation through Yuan Hongdao’s short essays and Tue Trung Thuong Si’s poems to identify similarities and differences in thought and writing style.

2. The aesthetics of “ardent Zen” in philosophy and literature

The term “ardent” appears in *The Analects of Confucius* (论语). The Master (孔子) said, “*The ardent will advance and lay hold of truth; the cautiously decided will keep themselves from what is wrong*” (Confucius, 2019: 137). Thus, those who are ardent (狂者) have a strong, distinct, and unwavering will. The term “ardent” was a favorite among the reformist writers of the late Ming Dynasty, including Wang Ji (王畿), Wang Liang (王艮), He Xinyin (何心隱), Li Zhi, Xu Wei (徐渭), Yuan Hongdao, Shang Xianzu (汤显祖), and Tu Long (屠隆). They regarded this as a difficult style to attain because their thinking was deeply influenced by Wang Yangming’s doctrines of the “learning of

the mind” and “innate knowing” (良知). His idea is readily connected to the experience of sudden enlightenment and the Zen understanding of the mind. Regarding this term, he stated: “*The ancients had an ardent will; the intricacies and impurities of daily life were insufficient to harm their souls, therefore their spirit is like a phoenix flying high; even in a brief moment they are saints*” (Zhou Qun, 1999: 18). He also put out the idea that “ardent communicate what is in their hearts”, which implies that people should speak forth their innermost sentiments and thoughts while expressing their uniqueness, will, and character rather than copying others. The term “ardent” can occur up to fifty times in his writings. Wang Liang agreed with this viewpoint, believing that being “ardent” meant behaving freely. According to He Xinyin, it is a societal ideal that is unconstrained by laws.

In addition, Yuan Hongdao was greatly influenced by Li Zhi, a representative scholar of the Taizhou school (泰州學派), who embraced individuality, eventually shaved his head, and proclaimed himself a Buddhist monk. Li Zhi had a significant impact on Yuan Hongdao’s literary and theological ideals. Li Zhi was also well-known for his lively thinking and unwavering attitude, which served as the foundation for his philosophy of protecting “the childlike mind”, which holds that “*the childlike mind is the true heart. One loses their inner heart and their identity as a real man if they lose their innocence as children. People who retain their childish innocence write the world’s best essays*”

(Li Zhi, (-); Zhang Jianye et al. (edited), 2010: 276). In his work *The Three Teachings Return to Confucianism* (三教归儒说), Li Zhi declared that Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were one, aiming at the view of equality that the sage is not superior, the common people are not inferior. This created a strong response from poets who both loved Buddhism and lived in a social context that required innovation in perception and lifestyle.

Besides, Xu Wei (1521-1593) - one of the representative poets of the emotional literary trend at that time said "*The core of being ardent is following your own interests*" (Zhu Qun, 1999: 19). Meanwhile, Yuan Hongdao ((-), Qian BoCheng (edited), 1981: 88) also expressed his view on "ardent" in *The small countryside collection* (郊外小集): "*True wandering is not relying on anything, what is this ardent heart like: A cup of wine and idle talk, everything is an ardent song*". The writers of the late Ming who pursued a free spirit also followed the trend of the Wei-Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties (220-589), a period in which the human spirit was relatively unconstrained and allowed to flourish despite social turmoil and instability. The growing recognition of natural temperament as a literary value led writers to break away from rigid regulations and to question the authority of traditional behavioral norms. Naturally, the social environment of the Wei-Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties was not the same as that of the late Ming, particularly the comparatively tranquil Wanli period (萬

曆, 1573-1620). The main reason literati admired these dynasties' scholarly style was that they advocated expressing one's own spirit and did not wish to be constrained by formalities, which was a response to conventional moral ideals. In the late Ming era, such was the "ardent atmosphere". Thus, "ardent Zen" is both a philosophical thought and a personal experience put into poetry.

3. Tue Trung Thuong Si with the Tran Dynasty "one way, no return" era

A unique person in the thirteenth century was Tue Trung Thuong Si. He fought in three battles against the Yuan-Mongol invaders as a nobleman. He went into hiding and studied Buddhist texts once the conflict was over. King Tran Nhan Tong, the founder of the Bamboo Grove Zen sect (竹林), was also greatly influenced by his philosophy at the same time. Due to his three victories over the invading Yuan army and his birth during the heyday of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, Tue Trung Thuong Si had a blend of religion and life. Tue Trung Thuong Si was not just a Zen master - layman but also a poet. Though they are not dogmatic or stereotypical, his poems and verses are not outside the purview of Buddhist studies. They are primarily about the spirit of non-attachment, abiding by the laws of nature, living freely and leisurely, in harmony with life, and carrying out one's civic responsibilities to the Fatherland. His Zen philosophy dismantled spiritual barriers to attain true freedom because of this setting. Hui Neng's cultivation method, which depends solely on transcendent wisdom to attain enlightenment rather than preaching,

chanting sutras, or following rules, was highly regarded by him. Historical records recount that when his sister, the queen mother, questioned why he had become a monk while continuing to eat meat, he responded with a smile, invoking a long-standing belief that enlightenment embodies freedom itself, and asserting that the Buddha remains the Buddha, while he remains himself. According to this relatively liberal viewpoint, people shouldn't rely too heavily on strict ideals in their daily lives. Consequently, each species is either "carnivorous" or "herbivorous" by nature; neither is superior. "*Carnivore and herbivore, it depends on the species; like flowers blooming in spring, there is no such thing as disaster or fortune*" (Chi, 1988: 289), he said plainly in the verse *keeping precepts and enduring insults* (持戒兼忍辱). They still adhere to some of the precepts; therefore, saying so does not imply rejecting them entirely. However, the foundation of that practice and cultivation is the entire purity and genuineness of the body, speech, and mind.

"Paramita" means transcendent wisdom in Zen. Every scene originates in the human mind and is dictated by human consciousness. Since our minds are incredibly skilled painters, they can depict anything in any form or condition. That mind guides us through infancy, old age, illness, and death. Ultimately, though, that mind is merely a name; it does not exist. "The body is like an illusion, karma is like a shadow, the mind is like the wind, and nature is like the reeds," he stated in *All Things Are the Same* (萬事歸如), "*All*

stars point north, and water flows east, therefore don't inquire about birth, death, devils, or Buddhas" (Chi, 1988: 248). Just remember that every scene originates in your head when you confront it on a daily basis. You will see the enlightenment everywhere when you realize that the mind and scenes are initially empty. Because he believed that observing the laws of the cosmos was the pinnacle of awareness. Dualistic divisions only lead to problems and suffering for individuals.

4. Yuan Hongdao and the Nature Sensibility Theory in the late Ming

One prominent member of the Gong'an school (公安派), a literary movement that promoted expressing the poet's natural sense, was Yuan Hongdao. He was a poet and literary critic of great influence. The "Grape Society" (蒲桃社), a literary society founded by Yuan Hongdao, was named for the grape garden at Chongguo Temple (崇國寺), where the group meets. The Yuan brothers (Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道, 1560-1600 and Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道, 1570-1626), Huang Hui (黃輝), Tao Wangling (陶望齡), Pan Shizao (潘士藻), and Jiang Yingke (江盈科), who graduated to the metropolitan school the same year as Yuan Hongdao, were among the principal members. When they got together, they shared opinions on poetry and talked about Zen while drinking and taking in the sights. Yuan Hongdao wrote essays in the vein of the Three Teachings that addressed Buddhism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism. Among his writings on

Buddhist philosophy are the *Coral Grove* (珊瑚林), the *Outline of the Platform Sutra* (壇經大綱), and the *Gold Shavings* (金屑編). However, the *Comprehensive Treatise on the West* (西方合論), which focuses on Pure Land Buddhism, is the most unique of all. The Wanli era's religious and cultural movements had a significant impact on Yuan Hongdao. He developed theories of poetry, literature, and Zen ideas by transforming philosophical, theological, and theoretical viewpoints. To challenge the practice of writing literature based only on copying well-known Tang Dynasty poets of the era, Yuan Hongdao put forth the Nature Sensitivity Theory. As a result, his theory places a strong emphasis on the idea of the "true self," which refers to expressing what is actually inside the soul. The poet's free spiritual universe is further demonstrated by the clause that "expresses his inner sense, without being constrained by conventionalized diction" (Yuan Hongdao, (-); Qian BoCheng (edited), 2008: 188). Thus, "native sensibility" refers to "natural temperament" or "natural feelings" - all facets of the inherent self that are specific to each person at birth and cannot be learned or developed.

Thus, it is evident that Yuan Hongdao and Tue Trung Thuong Si are similar in

that they are both independent individuals who do not wish to emulate or rely on others. This is also the reason why the two poets employ the idea of "ardent Zen" as a way of living, a way of thinking that expresses genuine emotions from the inside out.

5. The concept of "ardent Zen" is an expression of true self

5.1. Individuality perception

According to Tue Trung Thuong Si, concepts like mind, form, and appearance were human inventions, so they shouldn't be used as static notions. To illustrate the issues of "no mind," "no thought," and "no knowledge," he assimilated the spirit of "nothingness" found in Daoism. The monks who were "ardent wandering, and liberating" (狂遙適志) were born out of this idea, which was learned from Zhuangzi (莊子). They lived according to their own free inspiration, doing what they were inspired to do and ceasing when they weren't. That was the monk Bu Dai (布袋)¹, who walked around here and there when he felt inspired and carried a large bag by himself. That was the arrogant Zen master Pu Hua (普化)², whom people called "half ardent, half mad". In the poem *To sing wildly* (放狂吟), Tue Trung Thuong Si mentioned the word "ardent" as a concept to transcend those material distinctions: "*We are pleased with the joy*

¹ The monk who lived during the Later Liang Dynasty (907-923) in China, because he often carried a big bag and smiled, was called Monk Bu Dai. He was considered to be the reincarnation of Maitreya Buddha.

² The monk lived during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), belonging to the Linji school (臨濟宗). This

Zen sect often used koans (公案), which are teachings from teachers with interesting and profound hidden meanings, as a method of practice to break down stubborn beliefs in the student's perception.

of *Bu Dai*; *We are ardent with the crazy of Pu Hua*”; “*Seeing countless stars in the broad sky and ground, Leaning on a stick to roam in a place ‘without a location’.*” The poem also opens up a huge expanse, reflecting the spirit of freedom, without belonging to any place, what current literary theory terms “territorialization”: “*We eat whatever we want when we’re hungry, and we sleep in a village ‘without a village’ when we’re exhausted. There are clouds atop tall mountains and water in the deep ocean*” (Chi, 1988: 278). He also stated, “*I once followed Si Ming’s ardent*” (Chi, 1988: 251), referring to the Tang Dynasty poet He Zhizhang (賀知章), who was known as the Si Ming ardent guest (四明客狂) and who lived in isolation after retiring from office. Thus, “ardent” in Tue Trung Thuong Si’s poetry denotes a strong will that is unaffected by classification or label. It’s found in nature.

Meanwhile, Yuan Hongdao discussed the true meaning of “ardent” or “crazy” from a literary perspective. He criticized those who used these two words arbitrarily to comment on the characteristics of the poet’s works. In a letter to his friend Zhang Youyu in 1597, he wrote: “*Those who imitated and learned how to compose poetry once praised Youyu’s poems, saying that it was ‘worthy of being crazy’. The word ‘ardent’ sounded really nice, but they didn’t know that it was also his temperament. It was only because of the ancient saying that “without craziness, one’s reputation would not be brilliant” that they praised him so much. [...] Oh dear, how could the word “ardent” be used to flatter people so easily? I won’t*

talk about ardent because it was a place of reflection for Confucius. As for ardent, it was not easy for the ancients to have it, but if you want to explain it clearly, there is only monk Puhua” (Yuan Hongdao, (-); Qian BoCheng (edited), 2008: 501). Craziness is a type of character that not everyone can easily achieve, especially in the tradition of “stopping at etiquette”. Only Zen masters who realize the emptiness of all things like Pu Hua can be considered true “ardent”. Because it is not a character trait, but it is unique and beyond all common rules of perception.

A similar concept can be found in Tue Trung Thuong Si’s poem *Teaching Everyone* (示眾): “*Ask the youngster in front of you if you want to be enlightened*” (Chi, 1988: 232). The state of childlikeness is not naivete but rather a disciplined return to a child’s uncalculating and selfless disposition; through the transcendence of the fear of death, such practitioners are seen as occupying a distinctive spiritual stance. “*The ardent does not follow the trails left by the ancients, because his knowledge is so profound that it is termed the phoenix in the sky, who can compare?*” (Li Zhi, (-); Zhang Jianye et al. (edited), 2010: 66), he wrote in *A Book to Burn* (焚書); “*Your bones and tendons will be harmed, and your spirit will be hollow, if you are preoccupied with following other people’s opinions. You will always be calm and refuse to chase after people when the time comes; only an elderly guy would understand this crazy (the initial craziness)*” (Li Zhi, (-); Zhang Jianye et al. (edited), 2010: 365). In medieval culture, the “ardent” are individuals who

are not confined or reliant; they are also viewed as a form of “rebellion,” but they use it as a means of expressing their individuality and independence.

Early on, Yuan Hongdao was exposed to Li Zhi’s “ardent Zen” philosophy, which states that “the foundation of the patriarchs and Buddhas can only be established according to nature and not based on minor concerns” (Li Zhi, (-); Zhang Jianye et al. (edited), 2010: 357). However, in the preface to *The Comprehensive Treatise on the West*, Yuan Hongdao transcended the influence of ardent Zen over the past ten years and explored the meaning of the Pure Land. He points out ten types of errors that hinder the path to Buddhahood or rebirth in the Pure Land, including the pitfall of lunacy and lack of restraint (狂恣墮). Therefore, the so-called ardent that he learnt from Li Zhi was not the kind of ignorant ardent Zen that did not know how to obey the precepts, because Li Zhi said:

There are some who are devils who specialize in showing off “ardent wisdom”. Unwilling to keep the precepts or engage in religious cultivation, they spout off quotations that sound scriptural, such as “the vexations are wisdom” or “lewdness, anger, and ignorance are brahma-conduct”. From words they produce an understanding, and from this understanding they produce poison (Jones, 2009: 110).

“A thousand days of study and insight do not compare to one day of obeying the commandments”, Yuan Hongdao cited

Nagarjuna as saying. He also valued the practice of “releasing life” (放生) and Yunqi Zhuhong’s³ belief in preserving all living things, including animals. Since Yuan Hongdao criticizes “ardent Zen” adherents for undervaluing introspection and self-awareness, he views “ardent” as more of a lifestyle than a philosophy. He emphasized the value of following commandments in order to achieve the Pure Land through Tiantai and Huayan philosophy, Zen meditation, and enlightenment. In a similar vein, he introduced the idea of “natural sensitivity” in literary production, which refers to the “genuine feelings” that only arise from “actual conditions” and affirms perceptual freedom.

5.2. Perception of liberty

Because he lived in harmony with nature, Tue Trung Thuong Si thought that distinctions between the rich and the poor, as well as between life and death, were meaningless. Even though he was unaffected by death or the desire to live, achieving wealth or becoming an official were pointless goals that common people always sought. In *To sing wildly*, he wrote: “Wow! The scene of wealth is like floating clouds/ Oh my! Time passes through a wall crack like the shadow of a horse./ How perilous the road to officialship is!/ We simply grow accustomed to life’s warmth and coldness/ As long as we are happy and in our proper place/ What does it matter if life or death is imminent?” (Chi, 1988: 278). For Tue Trung Thuong Si, a military leader who had fought in numerous conflicts, death was simply the

³ 雲栖株宏 (1535-1615) was a famous monk of the Linji school in the late Ming Dynasty. Both Tue

Trung Thuong Si and Yuan Hongdao were similar in that they both practiced this sect.

opposite of a grave conclusion. In a similar vein, Yuan Hongdao demonstrated the spirit of playfulness between heaven and hell by writing: *“The way of being an official is like a net [...]; the things we can use to entertain heart, mind, eyes, and ears are singing, chanting, and writing.”* He claimed that the freedom to pursue one’s passions is the most valuable thing in life. Extreme happiness will result *“if we can to achieve those goals. We can investigate the origins of life and death, uncover the secrets of nature and fate, and discover what lies beyond heaven and hell”* (Yuan Hongdao, (-); Qian BoCheng (edited), 1981: 304).

Regarding the matter of being an official, if Tue Trung Thuong Si expressed a decisive and light attitude, Yuan Hongdao expressed a feeling of boredom and wanted to return to a simple daily life. When he was an official in Suzhou, he once sent a letter to his friend saying, *“It’s not that I’m unwilling to be an official, but I can’t help feeling that it simply runs against the grain of my heart!...superiors visit you like gathering clouds, travellers stop by like drops of rain, papers pile up like mountains, and an ocean of taxes in cash or grain must be collected: if you work and write morning and night, you still can’t keep up with all of it!”* (Yuan Hongdao (-); Yang Jialuo (edited), 1978: 22). The status of Yuan Hongdao and Tue Trung Thuong Si differs: Yuan Hongdao was born into a family of scholars, became a Metropolitan Graduate, and became an official, but throughout that time, he always yearned for a simple life in his hometown, far from the complex officialdom. Tue Trung Thuong Si was originally an aristocrat, and after

becoming a monk, he lived in seclusion, close to the countryside. Accordingly, for Tue Trung Thuong Si, the freedom of “ardent” is a philosophy of religion and a way of life, while for Yuan Hongdao, it is an attitude and a way of responding to the political, intellectual, and creative circumstances of the late 16th century.

Thus, in terms of cognitive thought, “ardent” is an understanding that does not depend on names, concepts, or conventional rules. It is an understanding that touches the natural essence in each person. Therefore, Yuan Hongdao believes that in writing poetry and literature, it is necessary to express what already exists in the heart, to speak directly, that is called “ardent”. When commenting on the work of his younger brother Zhongdao, he wrote: *“When my brother was very depressed, he would compose poems, so he often expressed his inability to bear the hardships of poverty and illness in his poems. Each poem was like a lament, unable to overcome the feelings of sadness and disappointment. When I read it, I felt very sorry for him. Therefore, putting feelings into poetry can naturally move others; that is called true poetry and can be passed on. Or if not for illness, then one would not know that feelings depend on changing circumstances, while poetry is born from feelings. If one is afraid of not achieving it, then what is the point of expressing it?”* (Yuan Hongdao, (-); Qian BoCheng (edited), 2008: 188). That is, Yuan Hongdao saw Zhongdao as someone who was not bound by worldly norms but had rich emotions, a type of poet with a free-spirited personality. Naturally, this kind of poet was more gifted than others, but their destiny was not easy. In daily life,

as a person who is frustrated, incompetent, poor, sick, and extremely disappointed, he cannot help but express it in poetry. Hongdao does not focus on the resentment in Zhongdao's poetry to defend it, but recognizes the effect of expressing emotions directly, which is "*words that reach the heart, can move people's hearts*". Therefore, the spirit of his entire Nature Sensibility theory is "*expresses his nature sensibility and is not bound by the externals of form*".

Thus, Tue Trung Thuong Si's poetry has a lot of phrases like "emptiness", "nothingness", and "Buddhahood", while "ardent" is a style that embodies the idea of "blending light into dust", implying that meditation is a full life. The ideas of "form", "thought", and "spirit" are inherent to Yuan Hongdao's thoughts, yet "ardent" refers to a part of everyday existence, namely playfulness and entertainment.

6. Conclusion

While "ardent" in Confucianism refers to having a strong will, in Zen it denotes being bold and fearless, accepting everything that occurs with composure. Because it harmoniously blends the free-spirited ideology of Daoism with the strong will of Confucianism, this aesthetic category, when used in Buddhism, represents living by the laws of nature and not depending on the duality of mind. Apart from being impacted by the Three Teachings, "ardent" is also a paradigm shift in terms of personality and perception; it goes beyond the innate convictions that restrict people's ability to make their own decisions. To put it another way, it dismantles the frontiers, limits, or territories that we constantly attempt to

establish against the outside world. Because Tue Trung Thuong Si or Yuan Hongdao embraced this idea via their practice and realization, we can therefore recognize their distinctiveness.

Tue Trung Thuong Si was born and grew up in a period of both national renaissance and development. The image of a Zen master wandering in the middle of a dusty life and a distinctive method of practice were created by the Zen spirit in his poems, becoming free and open in that open and triumphant atmosphere. As a result, the "ardent Zen" in his poetry is the intense will of a Zen master paired with the fervent ideal of a hermit who is constantly devoted to nature and obeys its laws. Yuan Hongdao, a writer and literary theorist, developed the Nature Sensibility Theory during a time when individuals had forgotten to imitate and learn from others. Given that reformist poets aimed to evoke feelings in their writing, Yuan's "ardent Zen" represents a Buddhist worldview that upholds the rules while embracing the soul of every breath. It is the process of dealing with the real person - with all of his pleasures, regrets, resentments, and emotions - in order to get past the rigid etiquette.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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