

Lacquer Art and Buddhism: Cultural Trophallaxis and Their Aesthetic Commonality*

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Abstract—Originating in the categories of "ideas and beliefs" and "artifacts" respectively, Buddhism and lacquer art belong to two cultural fields with little overlap, but they have forged an indissoluble bond with each other in the long history of evolution. Lacquer art gives Chinese Buddhist culture colorful charm, while Chinese Buddhist culture nurtures the profound verve of lacquer art. In the process of trophallaxis and collision, Chinese lacquer and Buddhism have proved to have commonality in cultural pedigree and consistent aesthetic orientation.

Keywords—Lacquer art; Buddhism; Chinese culture; trophallaxis

I. INTRODUCTION

Lacquer art is the art taking lacquer as its main materials. Chinese lacquer art is the treasure of Oriental civilization and the pearl of world culture. In the early days of China, a man of House Qidiao (漆雕) followed Confucius, the Confucian sage, to travel through all the kingdoms and initiated the Qidiao School of Confucianism; the Taoist philosopher Zhuang Zi lived in seclusion in a wood of lacquer trees, enjoy himself as "a happy official superintending affairs related to lacquer (漆)" and finished his famous work "A Happy Excursion"; in the late Eastern Han Dynasty, jiazhu lacquer statue (a kind of hollow Buddha made of clay and is coated with lacquer) came into being in the Buddhist culture. In the long river of history, Chinese lacquer art not only shines brilliantly in the fields of music, architecture, literature and painting, but also has a prominent position and unique identity in Buddhist culture. The Chinese Lacquer and Buddhism has been nurturing each other and colliding with each other, proving that they share a culture pedigree and the aesthetic orientation, which is unique in the world culture.

The so-called Chinese lacquer, which comes from the raw lacquer produced by the lacquer trees planted in nature, mainly abounds in China's inland areas. In ancient times, the colored lacquer wares were for daily use. In the process of making lacquer ware, people deduce lacquer coating techniques to many fields of life, and for example, Buddhism, sacrifice, military, agriculture, medicine, etc. are all

associated with lacquer. The Chinese lacquer culture has penetrated into Chinese civilization and its historical process. It has been advancing synchronously with the history of Chinese civilization and inextricably linked with Buddhist culture.

II. CULTURAL TROPHALLAXIS AND AESTHETIC COMMONALITY OF LACQUER ART AND BUDDHISM

Originating in the living source of traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese lacquer bearing the profound historical deposits and implies rich cultural connotations. Along with the history of Chinese civilization, it has been inextricably linked with and tightly bound to the Buddhist culture.

During the Yongping period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Buddhism was formally introduced into China, where it collided and blended with traditional Chinese culture represented by Confucianism and Taoism. In other words, foreign Buddhist culture has become the spiritual blood of Chinese culture [1], as Ji Xianlin once said, "Without the introduction of Buddhism, our history, philosophy, literature and art would have been different from the Han Dynasty or Wei and Jin dynasties, and our religion would have been even more different." [2] It can be seen that the complementarity brought by the interaction and integration of Buddhism and Chinese culture should not be underestimated.

As far as lacquer art is concerned, Buddhist culture and Chinese lacquer culture are also nurturing each other and advancing synchronously in religion and art. Deeply liked with each other in the long history of evolution, lacquer art gives Chinese Buddhist culture colorful charm, and Chinese Buddhist culture endows the lacquer art with profound verve.

In terms of material characteristic, there is a certain internal compatibility between the media material of lacquer and Buddhist culture. That is because "Media material itself represents a cultural identity", and is of rich cultural attributes. In terms of the natural attributes of Chinese lacquer, its implicitness, profoundness, refinement and elegance, as well as a deep and restrained aesthetic feeling, are all in line with the dissemination and aesthetic concept of Chinese culture. In a broad sense, this is also isomorphic with the Buddhist religious spirit of nirvana quiescence, ethereality and clarity. Dao An, an outstanding Buddhist

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scholar in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, once made a talk about Buddhahood, "(Buddhahood) As statue, with all its inclusiveness, clemency, peace, detachment, everlastingness, solitude and taciturnity, it disputes with no one, as if it does nothing." [4] This is consistent with the quiet and profound cultural character of Chinese lacquer. Ancients had the expression of "quiescent lacquer", which can be interpreted as Chinese lacquer's solemn, quiet and calm cultural attributes. A saying goes like this, "Whenever mentioned without designated color, the lacquer has the connotation of black." Black is the original color of natural lacquer. However, "The black of Chinese lacquer is not the monotonous pitch-dark, but a kind of black with subtle changes, which conceives a chaotic feeling of vitality." The liquid of Chinese lacquer is sticky and thus can absorb and contain various materials such as eggshell, mother-of-pearl, shell, gold and silver foil, jade, bone, wood and metal, etc., making it possible for different materials to be used in lacquer. Since each material has different weight, volume, toughness, color, texture, it has its own artistic personality and aesthetic value. In terms of technique, painting, splashing, carving, engraving, pasting, depicting, piling, excavating, sprinkling, inlaying, changing (It is a painting technique in which regularly change is made according to different materials and tools to form a variety of different decorative patterns) and other techniques can be adopted by use of Chinese lacquer. These characteristics of Chinese lacquer enable the creation of lacquer art have infinite possibilities and changes that are hard to enumerate. From this respect, it naturally coincides with the meaning of the Buddhist "vaya-dhamma sankhara" (whatever is phenomenal is ephemeral).

In the aspect of aesthetic attribute, lacquer and the cultural history of Buddhist are also interlinked. The inclusiveness of the media material Chinese lacquer enables lacquer art to go to a broader field. It can be naturally simple, or profound and solemn, or gorgeously colorful and golden, so there is such description as "dazzling panorama of colors and variety of forms". For Buddhists, lacquer can be used in the colored glazing and gilding in pagodas and main halls in temples to make them resplendent and magnificent, thus adding to the solemnness and splendor. Buddhists often coat their ritual apparatus with Chinese lacquer for decoration. Painting, gold drawing and other methods are used to highlight the gorgeousness and value of the apparatus. For example, in 1962, in the eastern suburb of Chengdu, a lacquered pottery alms bowl with vermilion as grounding was excavated from the residual brick tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty. [6] In 1972, a lacquered alms bowl was also excavated along with other lacquer wares from a tomb of Eastern Han Dynasty in Mozuizi, Wuwei city of Gansu province. [7] In addition, Chinese lacquer's anti-corrosion, moistureproof, acid-resisting and alkali-resisting properties of make it ideal natural coating. As early as in Rites of Zhou · Book of Diverse Crafts, it was recorded, "Artificial objects, like human beings, are spiritual living bodies, and they cannot withstand too much frost and dew. Therefore, they should be coated with lacquer, which stands the coldness and dampness of nature in their place. [8] In his Record of Classic Reel in the Thousand-Buddha Hall of the

Southern Temple in Suzhou, Bai Juyi described, "The Thousand-Buddha Hall is used for classics collection with the reel. The upper part of the hall is covered and the lower part is for collection. Under the cover is a rotating bookshelf of 9 floors on which there are thousands of richly decorated small boxes enshrining the Buddhas. Around the cover hang 62 pieces of mirror. The reel has 8 facets, two of which has doors that are coated with red lacquer and copper and iron for consolidation." [9] It can be seen that Buddha culture and lacquer art culture have shared aesthetic attributes, and their aesthetic inclination leads the two cultures to a broader field.

From the perspective of physical properties, Chinese lacquer's function of sound transmitting is beneficial to the spread of Buddhist creeds. Occasions often occurred in which "instruments make beautiful sound without being played" when Sakyamun expounded the texts of Buddhism. The essence of transmitting doctrines of Buddhism and enlightening people's mind lies in expressing pious praise for the Buddha and Bodhisattva and appreciating their anugraha, delivering the ethereal realm of Buddhism to cleanse the mind of audiences. The lacquer film is solid and compact, mild and elastic, both sound-transmission and resonance-friendly. The fine wrinkles between the surface lacquer layer and the matrix due to the change of humidity and temperature also improve sound transmitting and resonance in particular. The echoes of the classic chanting sound in morning and evening class make it even more profound, pristine and lasting.

In the respect of ideology, the religiousness of Chinese lacquer is similar to the culture of Buddhism. "Religious sentiment is always directed towards the unreal object which does not really exist", [10] Buddhism especially attaches great importance to the solemn Buddhist treasures and statues to educate the people. Buddhists call the solemn and dignified Buddha face "the precious face". And the richness of the media material Chinese lacquer makes the solemnness, which is the original idea of the Buddha's precious face more obvious. In Saddharmapundarika Sutra · Sukha Vagga, it is said, "Each statue of Buddha has golden bodies, in that blessings rely on dignity." That is to say, the dignity of the Buddha depends on the gold decoration. The "jiazhu statue" can particularly show the spirit and religious nature of Buddha. The "jiazhu statue" was first recorded in the "Chu Sanzang Jiji" written by Shi Sengyou, a Buddhist monk in the Southern Dynasties, for example, the Record of the Two Dais (referring to Dai Kui and his second son, Dai Yong) Making Jiazhu Statue in Jiao Sate (referring to the Haoxian County in Anhui Province)." [12] It is recorded that Emperor Jianwen of the Liang Dynasty in the Southern Dynasties composed the "Record of making an Eight-zhang-high Jiazhu Statue Foiled with Gold" ("Work Collection of The Three Hundred Schools during the Six Dynasties of Han and Wei" by himself. The statue was decorated with gold foil to make it more sumptuous and magnificent. Gold foils can be used in statue making is due to the plasticity and stickiness of Chinese lacquer. After being polished and brightened, the Chinese lacquer can glow with a warm and elegant luster, of great decorative value. The jiazhu statue is graceful and vivid, and its features of lightness and firmness enable it to be

carried elsewhere, so it is also called "walking statue". This is not only an innovation of painting technique, but also the evolution and extension of lacquer ware function. Considering from the perspective of art, lacquer art adapted to the needs of the Buddha statue to be paid tribute and worshiped, and thus began to enter the religious field from the field of daily use in the Han Dynasty. The jiazhu statue is the direct manifestation of the art of Buddha statues, and also the important feature and obvious evidence of the sinicization of Buddhism. It can be seen that the marriage of Buddhism and lacquer art comes from their respective cultural needs.

In terms of practical functions, during the Wei and Jin dynasties, the vehicle-mounted "walking statue" parade flourished among Buddhists in order to promote enlightenment. Jiazhu Buddha statue is stronger, lighter and less prone to deformation than bronze, mud and wood sculptures. It can better display the Buddha's "lofty and grand image" and thus can be used for "monks and worldly people to pay tribute to". During Tang Dynasty, as foreign exchanges were becoming more and more intensive. This technique of making jiazhu statue was spread to Japan, Korea and countries in the Western Regions. This contributed to the emergence of many well-known masterpieces, like the statues of "the Ten Principal Disciples" and "Eight Kinds of Beings", "Statue of Jianzhen" and the Vairocana Buddha. Countries in the Western Region also learned to apply to the technique of making jiazhu statue, as recorded in the "Records of the Western Regions of the Great Tang", "Dozens of li away from the capital lied a temple called Dirghabhavana, in which there were standing jiazhu Buddha statues that were probably transmitted from Qiuci." [14] These exquisite statues that survive or are recorded in ancient books and records, are not only the empirical evidence of jiazhu technique spreading outside the country during the Tang Dynasty; on the other hand, they served as a tool and media of promoting indoctrination for wide spreading Buddhism, which was also conducive to carrying forward Buddhist doctrine objectively.

III. CONCLUSION

In short, the marriage of lacquer art and Buddhism is the inevitable result of the natural combination of the material characteristics, cultural attributes and artistic character contained in Chinese lacquer and the Buddhist spirit, as well as the inevitable result of the adaptation of lacquer art to the changes of times, social changes and its self-evolution. With the wide spread of Buddhist thought, the traditional imperial and aristocratic thought saw an unprecedented decline. And the religious expression of lacquer art had its own new space since then, and the spiritual religious thoughts are materialized in the lacquer images. Lacquer art gives the verve of Buddha, and Buddha nurtures the beauty of lacquer art in return.

At the same time, in terms of cultural character, the quiet, implicitness, solemnness and magnificence of Chinese lacquer meet the needs of the Buddha; in terms of Buddhism, the aesthetic connotation of lacquer art and the religious verve of Buddha also happen to coincide. In other words, the

aesthetic potential of Chinese lacquer as a decorative material of Buddha statues is of the same nature and structure with the religious spirits such as nirvana quietness and ethereal life pursued by Buddhists.

Following the footsteps of Chinese lacquer culture and history, one can hear the footsteps of the evolution of Chinese lacquer culture and look for the isomology and interaction of Chinese lacquer culture and Buddhist spirit. It is believed that, at the moment of the revival of traditional culture, this pair of ancient cultures closely related to each other, are bound to shine again in people's review and reflection of traditional culture, highlighting the verve of oriental classical culture and bringing people endless fresh culture and more aesthetic enjoyment.

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