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# Metaphysics and Metaphysical Poetry in the Eastern Jin Dynasty

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## Abstract

*Sun Chuo comprehensively grasped the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism by using the concept of the Dao as a cord. Therefore, Confucian saints, Buddhist buddhas, and Lao Tzu were considered to be on the same ground as those who mastered the Dao. Moreover, Sun Chuo did not only grasp such metaphysical phases intellectually, but he actually aimed to achieve the metaphysical state himself. And in the end, it became an attempt to fly beyond all relative conflicts, although it first relied on both traditional and foreign ideas. In the literary works written by Sun Chuo, his thoughts based on such multiple religions were lying in the background.*

**Keywords:** Sun Chuo, metaphysical poetry, the Dao, Confucian saints, Buddhism

## 要旨

東晋の詩人、孫綽は儒教・仏教・道教の三教について、「道」という概念を紐帯とすることによって、総合的に把握した。それゆえ、儒教の聖人や仏教の仏陀、老子は「道」を体得する者として、同一の地平にある者とされた。そしてさらに孫綽は、そのような形而上的位相を単に理知的に把握するだけではなく、彼は実際に、自分自身も形而上的な境位を悟得することを目指していた。その試みは、まずは伝統思想と外来思想の両方に依拠していたが、最終的的局面において、あらゆる相対的対立の彼方へと飛翔しようとする営為となった。孫綽の代表作である「遊天台山賦」の内部には、このような複数の宗教にもとづく彼の思想が横たわっていたのであった。

キーワード：孫綽、玄言詩、道、聖人、仏教

## **1. Introduction**

The Six Dynasties (六朝時代), especially the Eastern Jin (東晉) Dynasty, seem to provide rich resources for interdisciplinary research in Chinese classics. The reason for this is that after the collapse of the Han (漢) Empire, which was strongly bound by Confucian scriptures, daoism, a folk belief, first emerged, and then, in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Buddhism, a foreign ideology, began to be accepted in earnest. In addition, the aristocrats of this period were expected to have a wide range of education, not only in the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but also in metaphysics, literature, and history. The basis for the existence of the aristocratic class in the Six Dynasties period was just such a wide range of cultural activities (Watanabe 2004: 28). The study of Chinese classics, therefore, inevitably requires a perspective that crosses multiple disciplines. As a characteristic example of the above, I would like to examine the thoughts and expressions of Sun Chuo (孫綽), a poet and famous aristocrat of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, based on the previous article (Waku 2017 [2012]), and consider the possibility of interdisciplinary research in Chinese classics.

## **2. Sun Chuo and the Three Religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism**

In the history of Chinese literature, the Eastern Jin Dynasty is generally regarded as the period of the rise of metaphysical poetry (玄言詩), reflecting the metaphysics of the *Laozi* (老子) and the *Zhuangzi* (莊子) (Daoism). And the most highly regarded metaphysical poet of the time was Sun Chuo. His biography says, “Sun Chuo’s literary talent was known to the world from his youth. The intellectuals of the time regarded Sun Chuo as the best of his time.”<sup>1</sup> (Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 1974: 1547). His literary talent was based on the broad-ranging knowledge he gained from various books, as his biography says, “Sun Chuo read Confucian scriptures and historical books extensively, and he

was a skillful speller of sentences.”<sup>2</sup> (Song Mingdi 宋明帝 2013: 631). In reality, however, his own interest was first and foremost in Daoist thought. Sun Chuo once made the following statement:

My talents are not equal to those of the wise men around me. I’m also not very good at dealing with real situations, taking into account the current situation. However, despite my lack of talent, I am proud to say that I am second to none when it comes to thinking abstractly, examining Daoist thought, pondering aimlessly, and separating my thoughts from practical work.<sup>3</sup>

(Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 2013: 617-618)

This statement suggests that he was fond of Daoist thought and incorporated it into his literary expression. In fact, his early works are littered with expressions that are based on the vocabulary of Daoist thought. In these literary expressions, he expresses his longing for the Dao of Daoist thought, and advocates his desire for seclusion. Especially, the first part of the poem that Sun Chuo sent to his acquaintance Wen Jiao (溫嶠) contains a reference to the Dao.

Great simplicity (大樸) (which is an attribute of the Dao) is not grasped as a substance. Therefore, almost no one is able to fully penetrate this at all. Even though the Dao has a subtle influence, it cannot be stated by words. However, what a great man the philosopher (哲人) is. He surveys the deep and explores the far. Who can say that the Dao is far away? The philosopher feels no difficulty in acquiring it.<sup>4</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2008: 897)

For ordinary people, the Dao is not something that can be experienced and grasped by the senses, nor is it something that can be described and defined linguistically. This is a very common explanation of the Dao according to traditional Daoist thought. However, Sun Chuo believed that it was possible for ‘the philosopher’ to

acquire it without relying on the senses or language. In other words, he saw that it was possible for a special person to acquire the Dao in a special way. In this connection, he said the following in his praise of Lao Tzu (老子):

Lao Tzu never did anything actively, yet there was nothing he could not accomplish. His Dao is consistent with that of Confucian saints such as Emperor Yao (堯) and Confucius (孔子), and no trace of that Dao can be perceived.<sup>5</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2004: 549)

Lao Tzu and the Confucian saints share a commonality in the Dao. And the commonality lies in the fact that the Dao transcends the senses and language. So, we can say that Sun Chuo's argument is an attempt to connect the two traditional Chinese ideas. This argument itself stands in a common perspective with the metaphysics of the Wei-Jin (魏晉) period before him. In addition to this, he also positioned Buddhism on the basis of the above argument and tried to comprehensively grasp the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. This is the uniqueness of the argument by Sun Chuo.

A saint in Confucianism is a Buddha in Buddhism, and a Buddha in Buddhism is a saint in Confucianism. In my opinion, these names are merely the result of foreign and traditional thought naming them as such, respectively. [...] The word Buddha (仏) is a Sanskrit word, and if you take its meaning in Chinese, it means 'enlightenment' (覺). And the meaning of the word enlightenment includes leading people to enlightenment. Thus, the Buddha is the same being that Mencius (孟子) once defined as "the one who leads to enlightenment", referring to Confucian saints. The Confucian saints and the Buddha are in agreement in their aims. However, the way to guide people according to the situation still varies from era to era. Confucian saints dealt with troubled times, while Buddhism explored the roots of them. Confucianism and Buddhism are coherent and their ultimate purpose is the same.<sup>6</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2013: 151-152)

The above discussion is Sun Chuo's attempt to connect Buddhism, a foreign thought, with Confucianism, a traditional thought.<sup>7</sup> He places Confucian saints

and Buddhist buddhas on the same level, and the reason they have different names is not because of any difference in their essence. As for the functional differences between Confucianism and Buddhism, he saw Confucianism as dealing with practical matters and Buddhism as investigating causes. In other words, Sun Chuo thought that Confucianism and Buddhism were different in actuality, but they were the same in purpose. In this discussion, however, he would be acknowledging that it is Buddhism that approaches the more core aspects of essence. He then went on to describe the Buddha's state of mind, which is comparable to that of a Confucian saint, as follows:

In the first place, the Buddha is a being who has mastered the Dao. And the Dao is the basis on which Confucian saints lead people to enlightenment. The Buddha reacted to the movements of people's hearts and took care of everything appropriately, and although he himself did not actively do anything, yet there was nothing he could not accomplish.<sup>8</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2013: 147)

According to Sun Chuo, Buddha (like Confucian saints) is a being who embodies the Dao. This status of the Buddha is consistent with the status of 'the philosopher' in the poem mentioned above. He also said here that the Buddha is the one who leads all things to enlightenment. These references to the Buddha's actions and functions are consistent with the references to Lao Tzu and Confucian saints mentioned above. Here the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are integrally grasped by Sun Chuo's argument, but it should be noted that the key to these discussions is the Dao (Waku 2017: 225 [2012]). In other words, he believed that the Dao was the principle that ran through all three religions.

### **3. Sun Chuo's Literary Works and the Absolute Enlightenment**

From the literary works written by Sun Chuo, we can in fact see that his interest in the Dao was not only intellectual, but that he himself was actually trying to experience or realize the metaphysical world. In fact, the final part of his masterpiece, *A Rhapsody of a Visit to Mount Tiantai* (遊天台山賦), discloses the metaphysical world he is seeking.

Mount Tiantai (天台山) is a sacred mountain, and the journey to its summit involves first passing through a path of strange gods and spirits, and then stepping into a sacred realm that people cannot enter. And in the process of such climbing, Sun Chuo said that in order to reach the summit, it was necessary to sharpen one's spirit and remove mundane thoughts. Furthermore, in the final part of *A Rhapsody of a Visit to Mount Tiantai*, there is a reference to the moment when he breaks through to the metaphysical realm. And its literary expression is thought to follow both traditional Chinese metaphysics and Buddhist discourse:

I finally had a chance to explore every nook and cranny, and my body and spirit were at peace. Unworthy desires disappeared, and the cares of the world faded away [...] I sat on a steep mountain rock and focused my mind, letting the flowing river echo my chanting voice.<sup>9</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 499)

In this state of absolute stability of mind, Sun Chuo made a specific reference to his own concern, enlightenment. And there we can see the fusion of traditional and Buddhist thought, which is a major characteristic of metaphysical poetry of the time:

I released my mind through the metaphysical discourses of *Laozi* and chanted the discourses of the Buddhist scriptures into my mouth. But I still found myself unable to completely abandon the world of beings (有). I also realized that even if I tried to head for the world of non-being (無), I still couldn't reach it.<sup>10</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 499-500)

As mentioned above, the enlightenment that Sun Chuo spoke of was based on the discourses of *Laozi* and the Buddhist scriptures. However, relying on them is not yet enough to achieve complete enlightenment. It seems that full-fledged enlightenment was still a long way off for him. Because even though he realized the world of the beings and tried to dismiss it because it was different from the more fundamental world of non-being, he could not completely forget the world of the beings. And not only that, even though he tried to reach the world of non-being, he still could not get there. This is because, as far as the discourses of *Laozi* and Buddhism are concerned, the enlightenment Sun Chuo is talking about

had not yet completely broken out of the linguistic phase. In this sense, he was still in the world of linguistically segmentable beings. However, it is noteworthy that Sun Chuo was seeking to go beyond, to rush toward complete enlightenment:

I lost the distinction between existence (色) and non-existence (空) and integrated their traces into one, and immediately I was able to break away from the world of existence and enter the metaphysical realm. And there, the relative relationship between concept and non-concept fizzled out, and the relative relationship between existence, non-existence, and cognition resulted in an absolute Nothingness (無).<sup>11</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 500)

Sun Chuo's discussion of enlightenment is an attempt to fly to the absolute realm by integrating existence and non-existence, and it is also an attempt to take the being as a starting point and fly to the primordial realm behind it. This idea was based on the *Vimala Sutra* (維摩經), a favorite of the intellectuals of the time, and the metaphysical arguments of Wang Bi (王弼) of the Wei Dynasty. Therefore, Sun Chuo believed that it was possible to break through to the metaphysical phase through these methods. And, according to his argument, the ultimate metaphysical state was to nullify all relative intellectual and linguistic oppositions and finally converge on an absolute Nothingness. That Nothingness is not simply a concept in the relative relationship of everyday existence and non-existence. It is an absolute Nothingness as a special concept that converges all of existence and non-existence. Therefore, once he is able to break through to the metaphysical realm, he will have no choice but to abandon all analytical intelligence and become ecstatic. Sun Chuo's literary work *A Rhapsody of a Visit to Mount Tiantai* concludes with the following symbolic words:

If I were to spend all day chatting, I would be in complete silence, as if I never spoke a word. I have mastered everything and regard all things as equal. And in my stupor, in the chaos of abandoning all analytical intelligence, I become one with the Dao, which is such beforehand.<sup>12</sup>

(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 500)

At this point, Sun Chuo seems to have finally reached his true and absolute enlightenment. It was a state of ecstasy and stupor that transcended the relativity



of language and silence. Sun Chuo's mastery of the Dao was thus beyond all relative oppositions, and it was assumed to be a state that could only be described as "such beforehand" (自然), without being brought to any linguistic division or analysis. He was convinced that Lao Tzu and Confucian saints in traditional Chinese thought, as well as the Buddha of Buddhism, a foreign thought, had also mastered such Dao, and went on to try to master and recognize such Dao himself. And he described his sincere process of attaining enlightenment as a literary expression, superimposing it on the ascent of the sacred mountain, Mount Tiantai.

As examined in the previous chapter, he had an integrated grasp of the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but he saw Buddhism as the one that reached the most essential depths. Similarly, in this literary work, the absolute enlightenment that he suggests seems to have been greatly influenced by the Buddhism of the time. In particular, the idea of absolute enlightenment, such as the attainment of transcendent Nothingness through a kind of meditation, is similar to the *Prajna* philosophy (般若思想) supported by the intellectuals of the time. Sun Chuo had once listened to a lecture on the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* (般若經) given by a visiting ascetic from the north, together with the most famous monks of the time, Zhi Dun (支遁). In other words, it is possible that Sun Chuo had the most up-to-date knowledge of *Prajna* philosophy at the time (Fukunaga 2005: 96). Sun Chuo's high reputation in the history of Chinese literature is due to the fact that he developed his own original metaphysical poetry. As such his literary expressions were based on his active intake of the most advanced foreign thought and its harmonious combination with traditional thought. It is for this reason that a rigorous reading of his metaphysical poetry requires a perspective that crosses multiple disciplines.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Sun Chuo comprehensively grasped the three religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism by using the concept of the Dao as a cord. Therefore, Confucian saints, Buddhist buddhas, and Lao Tzu were considered to be on the same ground as those who mastered the Dao. Moreover, Sun Chuo did not only grasp such metaphysical phases intellectually, but he actually aimed to achieve the metaphysical state himself. And in the end, it became an attempt to fly beyond

all relative conflicts, although it first relied on both traditional and foreign ideas. In the literary works written by Sun Chuo, his thoughts based on such multiple religions were lying in the background.

The ideas and expressions of Sun Chuo examined in this paper were based on multiple religious ideas of different origins. But it is also true that in his discourse, there were misunderstandings and arbitrary readings, such as when he equated Confucian saints with Buddhist buddhas, which is a misunderstanding from the perspective of our current knowledge. However, despite this, the dialogue between different disciplines steadily progressed in his discourse, and new knowledge certainly sprouted from it. And perhaps the above examples are not limited to events in the classical world. In the modern era, our interdisciplinary research is also continuing to produce theories that, on the one hand, are meticulous interpretations of the original texts and, on the other hand, are revolutionizing our worldview. For such a kind of research perspective, I think we can learn one of the original attitudes from Sun Chuo, a classical poet of the Eastern Jin Dynasty.

\* All translations are by the author of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> 綽少以文才垂稱。于時文士、綽為其冠。(Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 1974: 1547)

<sup>2</sup> 綽博涉經史、長於屬文。(Song Mingdi 宋明帝 2013: 631)

<sup>3</sup> 下官才能所經、悉不如諸賢。至於斟酌時宜、籠罩當世、亦多所不及。然以不才、時復託懷玄勝、遠詠老莊、蕭條高寄、不與時務經懷、自謂、此心無所與讓也。(Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 2013: 617-618)

<sup>4</sup> 大樸無像、鑽之者鮮。玄風雖存、微言靡演。邈矣哲人、測深鉤緬。誰謂道遠、得之無遠。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2008: 897)

<sup>5</sup> 李老無為、而無不為。道一堯孔、跡又靈奇。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2004: 549)

<sup>6</sup> 周孔即佂、佂即周孔。蓋外內名之耳。……佂者梵語、晉訓覺也。覺之為義、悟物之謂。猶孟軻以聖人為先覺。其旨一也。應世軌物、蓋亦隨時。周孔救極弊、佂教明其本耳。共為首尾、其致不殊。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2013: 151-152)

<sup>7</sup> There is a noteworthy English translation of his argument by Arthur E. Link and Tim Lee (1967).

<sup>8</sup> 夫佂也者、体道者也。道也者、導物者也。應感順通、無為而無不為者也。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2013: 147)

<sup>9</sup> 於是遊覽既周、体靜心閑。害馬已去、世事都捐。……凝思幽巖、朗詠長川。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 499)

<sup>10</sup> 散以象外之說、暢以無生之篇。悟遺有之不尽、覺涉無之有間。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 499-500)

<sup>11</sup> 泯色空以合跡、忽即有而得玄。積二名之同出、消一無於三幡。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 500)

<sup>12</sup> 終日、等寂默於不言。渾万象以冥觀、兀同体於自然。(Sun Chuo 孫綽 2007: 500)

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