



In Quest of Orthodoxy: The Historiography of the Tiantai Buddhism in the Late Ming

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Abstract

This article aims to reveal the characteristics of the Tiantai Buddhism in the late Ming. During the Buddhist revival in the late Ming, the Tiantai Buddhism also recreated itself from the brink of extinction and became an influential faction in southeast China. By examining the sectarian characteristic of Tiantai Buddhism, this article reveals the quest of orthodoxy was at the core of the recreation and historiography of Tiantai tradition. Through this research, the syncretic tendency in late Ming Buddhism should be further considered, different “models” of syncretism intentionally “prunes the Bodhi tree” according to their own understanding of Buddhism and the needs of their time, all different models of syncretism claimed that they are the orthodox representation of Buddhism. In different scheme of doctrinal classification, all of them inevitably put their own theory as the highest or the core teaching of Buddhism.

Keywords

Tiantai Buddhism, Lineage, Sectarian, Syncretism, Orthodoxy

1. Introduction

The characteristics of the Tiantai Buddhism after the Song Dynasty have been little studied. One of the reasons for the dearth of research on this topic is the opinion that Buddhism was in a state of decline from the Song dynasty, in recent years, the growing body of new research suggests that Buddhism in the Song and late Ming was a period of great efflorescence. The vitality of the Tiantai Buddhism in the Song has been extensively discussed (Gregory & Getz Jr., 1999), however, the revival of the Tiantai Buddhism is still missing from the representative picture of Buddhism in the late Ming.

This article aims to reveal the characteristics of the Tiantai Buddhism in the late Ming by referring to the relevant religious and social backgrounds. During the Buddhist revival in the late Ming, the Tiantai Buddhism also recreated itself from the brink of extinction and became an influential faction in southeast China. The two great clerics of the tradition Baisong Zhenjue (百松真觉, 1538-1589) and Youxi Chuandeng (幽溪传灯, 1554-1628) strove to recreate the glorious history of Tiantai by codifying and defining its orthodoxy to the Buddhist circle and gentry society.

2. The revival of Tiantai Buddhism and the lineage construction

The *Comprehensive History of the Buddhas and Patriarchs* (佛祖统纪) established Siming Zhili (四明知礼, 960-1028) as the last of the patriarchs of Tiantai, after that, during Yuan to mid-Ming, the historiography of the Tiantai lineage remained unedited following the decline of Tiantai Buddhism. Feng Mengzhen (冯梦祯, 1548-1608), who was praised by Zibo Zhenke (紫柏真可, 1543-1603) as two most important outer protectors of Buddhism in the late Ming, expressed his depression of Tiantai Buddhism: A dozen generations after Siming Zhili, Tiantai unexpectedly is not handed down. Monasteries and Buddhist scripture spread all over Jambudvīpa, the number of monks more than bamboos and reeds, however, there is no one continue to inherit the Tiantai teaching

and lineage, as a result, Teaching classification can't be carried out and method of contemplation is in a state of confusion, this is the equivalent of the extinction of Buddhism. (法智十数世以后竟泯泯无传焉。嗟乎！常住教典蒲闾浮提，方袍之徒多于竹苇，而天台教脉竟无有起而续之者，遂使时教不行观道不明，此何异佛法已灭，可慨已！) (Fengmengzhen, 1996).

In this context, both Zhenjue and Chuandeng were not study Tiantai at first, but shifted their sectarian identity form Chan to Tiantai. Zhenjue first studied under Chan master Qiansong Yueting (千松月亭, 1531-1588), who was also a specialist of Huayan teaching. Similarly, Chuandeng first studied under Chan master Ying'an (映菴, 1546-1579), Ying'an told Chuandeng to pay attention to *Anthology of Yongjia of the Chan School* (禪宗永嘉集), which is the unity of Chan and Tiantai teaching. According to Shengyan's study, besides the encounter dialogue (机锋问答) and the investigation of Chan (参禅), Chan masters in the late Ming also made efforts to emphasize the unity of Buddhism (Shengyan, 2000), the "unity of Chan and scriptural teachings" tendency provided an opportunity for the development of Tiantai Buddhism.

However, the term "syncretism" should be further interpreted, otherwise Zhenjue and Chuandeng chose to shift to Tiantai can be hardly explained. Much of the research on late Ming Buddhism mainly focuses on the syncretic tendency, especially the study of the four great masters, Yunqi zhuhong (云栖祿宏, 1535-1615), Hanshan Deqing (憨山德清, 1546-1623), Zhenke and Ouyi Zhixu (藕益智旭, 1599-1655), shows that syncretism, for example, the terms of the "unity of Chan and scriptural teachings", "dual practice of Chan and Pure Land" and the "unity of the three teachings", was the mainstream of the development.

My theory is that syncretism is merely an ambiguous concept, like Araki Kengo mentions that the way to the unity of all schools was determined by their own opinions of different schools and different masters (Araki Kengo, 2001). Even though many masters commonly advocated to syncretism, the four great masters even rejected any lineage affiliation, their theories about syncretism still showed considerable difference.

Viewed from this perspective, the syncretic tendency in late Ming Buddhism can't be considered as the integration of Buddhism, on the contrary, different "models" of syncretism intentionally "prunes the Bodhi tree" according to their own understanding of Buddhism and the needs of their time. Rebort Sharf argues that the term "Buddhism" is "a site of unremitting contestation, as a cacophony of voices - each averring privileged access to the essence of the tradition - lays claim to its authority" (Sharf, 2002). Because of the ambiguity of the term "Buddhism", all different models of syncretism claimed that they are the orthodox representation of Buddhism. In different scheme of doctrinal classification (判教), all of them inevitably put their own theory as the highest or the core teaching of Buddhism.

The characteristic of Zhenjue and Chuandeng's model is to highlight its sectarian identity, they put their teaching of Tiantai as the highest theory in the scheme of classification of doctrines and as most conforming to the heart of the Buddha's teachings. At the time of Zhenjue, the Tiantai teaching had disappeared from the general discourse, so it was not easy to get the recognition from the Buddhist circle and gentry society, Feng Mengzhen described that at that time no monk could speak even one word about Tiantai, let alone the gentry, Zhenjue was like "a lonely phoenix singing loudly for almost 20 years". Other preachers even laughed at him and denounced his theory as "heretic".

"Heretic" precisely described the unfavorable situation of Tiantai, so the urgent issue facing Zhenjue and Chuandeng was how to demonstrate the orthodoxy of Tiantai tradition and claim their legitimacy to inherit this tradition. Through the two monastic gazetteers edited by Chuandeng - *Beyond the Secular World Gazetteer of Mt. Tiantai* (天台山方外志) and *Special gazetteer of Youxi* (幽溪别志) - we can see that the construction of the Tiantai lineage took the leading role in the historiography of organizational orthodoxy. In *Beyond the Secular World Gazetteer of Mt. Tiantai*, Chuandeng especially wrote a chapter about the biography of Tiantai patriarchs from Nāgārjuna to Zhili. Further in *Special gazetteer of Youxi*, he continued to regard Zhenjue as the eighteenth patriarch of the Tiantai lineage. Koichi Shinohara said that lineage "cannot be uncritically accepted as historical givens but rather should be regarded as constructs, products of a process in which historical data was molded not only to create a higher vision of history but also to serve a number of agendas" (Shinohara, 1999). The lineage construction could not only demonstrate the Tiantai dharma transmission and gain their authority, but also could get the prestige and patronage from the gentry society.

The lineage and their dharma transmission is one of the most important content for scholar-officials to introduce to their friends and the society. Feng Mengzhen was the first scholar-official who linked Zhenjue with Zhili, he

identified the succession from Zhili to Zhenjue with the succession from Nāgārjuna to Huiwen, both Huiwen and Zhenjue inherited the dharma by reading their books rather than directly learn from them. Following Feng, many other scholar-officials gradually accepted Tiantai Buddhism, for instance, Tu Long (屠隆, 1543-1605) who was a friend of Feng, spoke highly of Tiantai equally important to Chan school, both of them are different aspects of the same source.

3. The Suramgama Sutra and the reinterpretation of the Tiantai teaching

The *Suramgama Sutra* (Lengyan jing, 楞严经) was the most influential Buddhist scripture in the late Ming and the study of this sutra was extremely popular among both scholar-monks and the literati. Therefore, it is not surprising that Chuandeng chose this scripture to support Tiantai doctrine and put Tiantai into the general discourse. Yungfen Ma mentioned that the *Suramgama Sutra* was at the core of Chuandeng's nature-inclusion (性具) thought and it was instrumental in his actions for the revival of Tiantai. However, she argued that Chuandeng along with other many other Buddhist masters, all believed that this sūtra demonstrated the unity of the Chan and scriptural teachings and their thought reflected the syncretic trend of Three Teachings in One at that time (Ma, 2011). As we discussed before, the syncretism in late Ming implied the diversity of different development models of Buddhism, so the fundamental meaning of Chuandeng's study on this sutra should be understood in terms of his quest for the orthodoxy of Tiantai Buddhism.

Qian qianyi (钱谦益, 1582-1664) summarized that from the Song, the interpretation of the *Suramgama Sutra* can be divided into three major factions: Chan, Tiantai and Huayan, each faction claimed its authority to this scripture, Gong Jun points out that the heated dispute in fact not only showed their disagreement on the thought level, but to a great extent was a strategy to show the orthodoxy of their own tradition (Jun, 2008).

Chuandeng wrote four exegetical commentaries on *Suramgama Sutra: The Profound Meaning of the Suramgama Sutra* (楞严玄义), the *Pre-Commentary on the Interpenetration of the Suramgama Sutra* (楞严经圆通疏前茅), the *Commentary on the Interpenetration of the Suramgama Sutra* (楞严经圆通疏), and the *Ritual Manual of Suramgama Ocean Seal Samadhi* (楞严海印三昧仪). He explained his understanding about Tiantai and this scripture: Not only did I realize that the *Suramgama Sutra* is the essential abstract of the *Lotus Sutra*, but also I realized that [the thought of] Zhiyi conformed to the original mind of the Buddha: the teaching about the tathagatagarbha is in accord with the essence of nature-inclusion, the practice of Cessation and Contemplation (止观) is secretly in accord with the essence of the Great Concentration [of the *Suramgama Sutra*]. Even when speaking about the different stages of the process for becoming a Buddha and how to prevent demonic states, the Tiantai teachings are totally united with the *Suramgama Sutra*. (非唯悟《楞严》为《法华》之要纲，抑以见智者愜如来之本心：谈藏性则冥符性具之之宗，说止观则暗合大定之旨，乃至悬判地位、预防阴魔，一切名言靡不殚契。)

In Chuandeng's opinion, the teaching of the *Suramgama Sutra* is in perfect harmony with the Tiantai doctrine, his theory can be summarized in three aspects: doctrinal classification, the theoretical unity of Tiantai and the *Suramgama Sutra*, and the practice aspect.

Doctrinal classification is the first step for Chuandeng to interpret this scripture in Tiantai. Peter Gregory points out that doctrinal classification in Chinese Buddhism serves sectarian purpose: different schools arrange Buddhist scriptures according to their value judgments to establish the authority of the scripture which is the foundation for the school's legitimacy to claim itself as the supreme teaching (Gregory, 2002). In this sense, Li Silong regards doctrinal classification as an ideological revolution which essentially is demonstration of their own theoretical system (Li, 2003).^[1] The *Suramgama Sutra* appeared in the mid-Tang period around the eighth century and gradually became popular around the Song period. By that time, the theory of Chinese Buddhist schools had already systematized, due to the rich doctrines in the *Suramgama Sutra*, it cannot be easily classified to a suitable position, from Song to late Ming, there were several opinions on the doctrinal classification of this scripture which were all supported in paele, and the contradictions in fact reflected their sectarian purpose.

The most competitive debate was during which period did the Buddha preach this scripture. Zhiyi's theory of doctrinal classification divided the Buddha's teachings into five periods: the Avatamsaka period (华严时), the Agama period (阿含时), the Vaipulya period (方等时), the Prajna period (般若时), and the Lotus and Nirvana pe-

^[1] See Li Silong, *Tiantai zhizhe yanjiu* 天台智者研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chu ban she, 2003), p. 200, 211.

riod (法华涅槃时). It seems that the teachings in the *Suramgama Sutra* almost cover all of the five periods especially the latter three.

Chuangdeng strongly set himself against the opinion that the *Suramgama Sutra* was preached during the period of the Lotus and Nirvana, which was supported by the Huayan master Changshui Zirui (长水子璿) and the Off-mountain (山外) master of Tiantai school Gushan Zhiyuan (孤山智圆) and Jingjue Renyue (净觉仁岳) in the Song, and this point of view was still very popular in the late Ming because of the Huayan master Jiaoguang Zhenjian (交光真鉴). According to this opinion, the *Suramgama Sutra* was preached after the *Lotus Sutra* and before the *Nirvana Sutra*, Chuandeng thought this would endanger the authority of the *Lotus Sutra*. In Tiantai's system, the *Lotus Sutra* is the most authoritative teaching, Zhiyi asserted that the *Lotus Sutra* conveys the supreme teachings of the One Vehicle (一乘), it opens the provisional teachings to show that they are the true teachings (开权显实) and unites the three vehicles in one (会三归一), this scripture is focusing on the fundamental level of the Buddha's teaching, and no doubt beyond the level of the other sutras, so the *Suramgama Sutra* couldn't be preached during the period of the Lotus and Nirvana.

Therefore, Chuandeng defined the *Suramgama Sutra* should be preached in the Vaipulya period which is the stage the Buddha denounced the Hinayana doctrine and praised the Mahayana teachings to point out the superiority of Mahayana. The teaching of this scripture is on the specific doctrines but not on the fundamental principle like the *Lotus Sutra*. Meantime, given the popularity and influence of the *Suramgama Sutra*, Chuandeng showed its special status in Tiantai, he thought this scripture is the essential abstract (要纲) of the *Lotus Sutra*, both of them illuminate the wisdom and insight of the Buddha (佛之知见). Based on that, Chuandeng further interpreted the Great Concentration (Suramgama Samadhi, 楞严大定) according to the theory of Cessation and Contemplation and "the practice of interpenetration by means of ear-organ" (耳根圆通法门) which is the method practiced by Guanyin (Avalokitesvara). Moreover, Chuandeng also was the first person to ever build the Suramgama Altar (楞严坛) to practice the esoteric teachings following the sutra's specifications and the doctrine of Tiantai.

So far we can see that Chuandeng's interpretation of the *Suramgama Sutra* in Tiantai also could be considered as the interpretation for Tiantai.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we briefly discussed the sectarian characteristic of Tiantai Buddhism in the late Ming, the quest of orthodoxy was at the core of the re-creation and historiography of Tiantai tradition. If so, the syncretic tendency of the late Ming Buddhism--as well as the decline opinion--should be further examined, and from this perspective, the significance of this revival should not be neglected.

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