

Interpretation of Zen in Jack Kerouac's Literary Works

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Abstract : The creation of literary works is inseparable from the historical and cultural background of its correspondent times and the author's personal beliefs and thoughts. Starting from his or her works and relying on the author's personal information to do an analysis, the reader can get more information about the thoughts, emotions, spiritual beliefs and values of specific characters in a certain era, which is also the basic elements that a successful work should have. It is also the connotation and extension of the work. Taking the American writer Jack Kerouac as an example, this paper analyzes his works and discusses the Zen thought and culture contains and reflected in his works for a better interpretation of his works and understanding the function of "Zen" in the United States in his time.

Keywords : Jack Kerouac; Literary works; Zen and life; Interpretation

1. The influence of Zen culture on American literary works

Kerouac is known as the "new Buddha in American prose". What is emphasized here is the Buddhism and Zen culture embodied in his works, and he is also one of the outstanding representatives of the "Beat Generation". It can be seen that there are some connections between the "Beat Generation" and Zen culture in him and his works. From his literary works, it can be seen that the consciousness and thought of "Zen" in Buddhism are deeply branded in many of them, such as *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, which can be called the representative promotion and publicity works of Zen culture in America. In terms of Zen, it is the product of the continuous localization of Indian Buddhism in China after its eastward transmission. It also embodies certain Chinese cultural characteristics. The Buddhist Zen culture contains many Confucian thoughts, including benevolent love, mind nature theory, etc., as well as some changes and empty elements of Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi's philosophy and *The Book of Changes*, emphasizing "the unity of heaven and human being" and "Dao operates in accordance with natural conditions of all things". This culture was later spread to the United States, which also set off an upsurge in the society from 1950s to 1970s, and was paid close attention to by the American literary world. Therefore, in American literary works, especially the works of the "Beat Generation", we can find the trace of the spread of Zen culture. Based on the pursuit of human materialism and commercialism and the spiritual crisis environment, the writers of this period actively took part in saving the society and the people, tried to integrate foreign culture with their national culture, and correct the bad ideological and social atmosphere through their transformation. Zen culture provides new ideas for American ideological movement, so it also leaves a deep brand in the history of American literature. This is also the cultural essence of Kerouac's works. Zen culture has opened up a new ideological starting point for his creation.

2. Interpretation of Zen culture in Kerouac's literary works

Zen culture has a far-reaching and lasting impact on Kerouac's creation, and even directly determines his creative style. In Zen culture, one should have an epiphany in thought. Zen culture is perceptual rather than rational, highlighting the importance of intuition. Therefore, in the creation of his works, Kerouac does not persist in clarifying the truth and is not in a hurry to explain the truth, but pays attention to his inner experience and insight, and emphasizes being faithful to his inner thoughts. Therefore, while reading his literary works, one may find that his thoughts are somewhat erratic and arbitrary. Some words record only the experiences of a few tramps on the road, with not too many comments, and a not carefully made story framework. That is why his work is called spontaneous writing. This spontaneous style is also a

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way to conform to and follow his own heart and practice meditation. For example, in his work *On the Road*, “I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes ‘Awww!’” This is the expression of the inner idea of the writer in the work. It can be seen that his understanding of life has reached a realm beyond the material world, showing the most real thoughts in his heart without concealment. In this work, Kerouac presents the random and tramp-like wandering experience of Dean Moriarty and his folks, and also calls for returning to nature and enjoying the real freedom given by nature in the tone of tramps. This freedom is closely connected with the loyalty to the heart in Zen culture.

However, to some extent, Kerouac has a certain over understanding of Zen culture, that is, he is suspected of exaggerating the randomness and freedom in Zen culture. His understanding of human nature’s pursuit of freedom in Chinese Zen culture is to pursue absolute and complete freedom of body and mind. Therefore, he believes that he should act at will in his creation, without too much thinking and arrangement, and without deletion and adaptation in his creation. The most primitive expression is the best and most authentic one. He finished *On the Road* in three weeks, which can be said to be completed at one go. When talking about his creation, he said that his works can be published as they are written. Some works are even created when he is drunk or half awake. He said that his creation is so casual that he has no stereotype of traditional creation, but a stroke of genius. In his works, the thoughts of freedom, human nature and insight emphasized by Zen culture are reflected in varying degrees. In the way of expression of his works, he presents a wild and even crazy spontaneous creative state, which is the Zen culture he understands and transforms.

In addition, in his works, he also shows his pursuit of inner peace, which is also unified with the meditation in Zen culture. It is stated in *On the Road*: “So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry.” This scene is more like the thinking of a meditator sitting in the sunset. After seeing the noise and prosperity, his heart tends to be calm and begins to understand life. When he has experienced many things and seen many people and scenery, he will know what he wants and what he should cherish, so as to obtain inner peace and feel unprecedented indifference. This is also easier to arouse the resonance of the majority of readers. In real life, after a busy life and pursuit, looking back on the past, one will know what the meaning of life is, whether personal life pursuit is really worth remembering, so as to really get the perception of life and inner calm. In his works *On the Road*, Kerouac said, “Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; Somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.” This description is very much like our choices on the road of life. There are many different choices to face in life. Each choice may point to a completely different road and end, and one can’t go again in the future or choose another way. Therefore, one should be calm in the face of these choices. No matter what choice one may make, he or she should not stay in the same and original place. If you don’t move, you cannot see more scenery and gain more. Moreover, in Zen culture, it believes that one can get greater happiness and inner harvest only by experiencing more and more sufferings. Kerouac also pointed out in his *The Dharma Bums*: “I didn’t know anything any more, I didn’t care, and it didn’t matter, and suddenly I felt really free.” This kind of Buddhism thought contains the philosophy of “Stay calm no matter it is in the case of prosperity or adversity”. His thoughts, a kind of thought beyond things, are also consistent with this belief. In the road of life, no matter what difficulties one may encounter, he or she should not to be too persistent. Letting it go is also a kind of redemption and liberation. This view of cultivating in the secular world, taking the hardships in life as a kind of experience and then achieving epiphany, in his opinion, can solve the chaos of American society at that time and help the people to achieve inner peace and gain the ideological emancipation.

Going through the Zen culture in Kerouac’s literary works, we can see that the thoughts and values in many of his works are deeply influenced by Zen culture. Even in the style of Kerouac’s works, there are the characteristics and marks of Zen culture, which shows that Zen culture has a great impact on his works, and the interpretation of this cultural background and thought is more conducive for us to understand the works and feel the cross-cultural power in intercultural exchange and communication. From the perspective of communication and influence of Zen culture, we can see that the thoughts and philosophy about human nature, freedom and insight in Zen culture are very consistent with the real thoughts and pursuit of people in American literary circles at that time. On the premise that they can’t find a way to solve American social contradictions and problems, they then look for ways to gain salvation from foreign cultures. Zen culture is just going well at this time, reflecting their thoughts and providing a new way for their social salvation.

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