USE OF THESES

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SENSIBILITY OF THE INSENSIBLE

THE GENEALOGY OF A CH'AN AESTHETIC

AND THE PASSIONATE DREAM OF POETIC CREATION

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This thesis is all my own work

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ABSTRACT

Ch'an Buddhism as an analogy for poetic creation has been a major feature of Chinese poetics from medieval times to the present. The comparison was made either between the techniques for or the contents of Ch'an and poetic "enlightenment." On these bases Sung dynasty critics formulated genealogies of poets couched in the terms of Ch'an lineages. While such comparisons have some merit, the deeper reason lies in the theory of the Buddha-nature (fo-hsing) of the insentient (wu-ch'ing) that was popularized by Ch'an. Classical critics understood that Nature could evoke emotions in man, but never adequately explained why. However, because the potential to become Buddha was present both in insentient Nature and sentient man, this doctrine postulated that there was a commonality between man and Nature and perhaps the possibility of a "mergence." When this theory was adopted by poets there was an increased use of "pathetic fallacy" and the conceit that Nature could preach the truths (of Buddhism) to man. This stimulated poetry critics to write of the "mergence of emotion and scene."

The thesis traces the history of the terminology of wu-ch'ing (insentience) and hsing (nature) in philosophy and poetry, and the continuing debates over the relations of emotion (ch'ing) to human-nature between the Buddhists and Confucians. Many of the most illustrious poets of China were Confucians in public life but involved with Ch'an personally, and their writings reflect these debates. But above all, the majority attempted to dissolve the barriers between man and Nature. Many found the solution in Ch'an meditation, but when this proved too difficult,
opted for achieving states of mind that approximated meditation experience but were more amenable to laymen, states such as dream and inebriation.

These themes all appear in their poetry, but with changing political circumstances, the rise of a Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, and a shallower appreciation by lesser poets and followers, the theory that had inspired these themes was forgotten for the superficial comparisons of lineages and techniques, and the true significance of the sensibility of the insensible was all but lost.
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