

The Ideological Transformation and Regional Practice of Bashu Chan Buddhism — On the Bashu Path and Cultural Interaction in the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism

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Abstract: The Sinicization of Chan Buddhism constitutes a central issue in the localization of Buddhism in China. Existing scholarship has largely followed a “Central Plains–Jiangnan” narrative framework, paying comparatively little attention to the distinctive developmental trajectory and historical contributions of Chan Buddhism in the Bashu region of Southwest China. Focusing on the Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song periods, this study employs historical analysis—including textual analysis, intellectual history, and regional social history—as well as cross-cultural comparative methods to systematically examine the genealogical origins and ideological evolution of Bashu Chan Buddhism. It further investigates the mechanisms through which Chan Buddhism interacted with Bashu regional society and cultural traditions, thereby revealing a localized path distinct from those of Northern and Jiangnan Chan traditions.

The study finds that Bashu Chan Buddhism was primarily structured around the Jingzhong–Baotang lineage and the Hongzhou lineage. Its Sinicization at the ideological level was achieved through the integration of Confucian and Daoist theories of mind and human nature, the secular transformation of cultivation practices, and the localization of ethical norms. At the practical level, it realized comprehensive regional rootedness through four major pathways: the construction of monastic networks, the integration of folk beliefs, innovations in artistic expression, and mutual engagement with literati culture. Bashu Chan Buddhism was not only a crucial force in the paradigm shift from “Indian Chan” to “Chinese Chan,” but also provided a distinctive Southwestern model for the Sinicization of Buddhism, thereby reshaping the pluralistic narrative of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism in China.

Keywords: Bashu Chan Buddhism; Sinicization of Chan Buddhism; Ideological Transformation; Regional Practice; Cultural Interaction

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Academic Significance

The Sinicization of Buddhism represents a major issue in the history of cultural exchange between China and foreign civilizations, and the localization of Chan Buddhism stands as one of its most representative achievements^[13]. As the most distinctly localized school of Chinese Buddhism, Chan Buddhism did not develop along a single linear trajectory; rather,

it formed diverse developmental paths within different regional cultural contexts^[9]. Previous studies of Chan history have generally adopted the “Central Plains–Jiangnan” framework as their dominant narrative structure, focusing primarily on the ideological confrontation and transmission between the Northern School associated with Shenxiu and the Southern School associated with Huineng, while paying relatively limited attention to Bashu Chan Buddhism in the southwestern frontier region^[10].

In fact, from the Tang dynasty onward, the Bashu region became one of the major centers for the dissemination of Chan Buddhism. It not only gave rise to the independent Jingzhong–Baotang lineage, but also produced Mazu Daoyi, the founder of the Hongzhou School, who played a decisive role in the fundamental transformation of Chan Buddhism. As a result, Bashu developed a distinctive system of Chan thought and a unique model of regional religious practice. Accordingly, this study takes Bashu Chan Buddhism as its object of inquiry and systematically examines both its ideological evolution and its modes of regional practice. This research carries significance in two respects. Theoretically, it challenges the “Central Plains-centered” perspective dominant in Chan historiography, fills a gap in research on the Southwestern path of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism, and deepens understanding of the pluralistic dimensions of Buddhist Sinicization^[17]. Practically, it explores the internal mechanisms through which regional cultures and foreign religions interacted and integrated with one another, thereby providing a historical reference for contemporary efforts toward the Sinicization of religion in China.

1.2 Review of Domestic and International Scholarship

Since the foundational contributions of Hu Shi and Yinshun, domestic research on Chan Buddhism has produced abundant scholarly achievements. Works such as *The Formation and Development of Chan Buddhist Thought* by Hong Xiuping and *A General History of Chinese Chan Buddhism* by Du Jiwen have systematically outlined the broad process of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism, establishing an essential theoretical framework for the present study^[12]. Existing research on Bashu Chan Buddhism mainly concentrates on three aspects. First, scholars have conducted textual and doctrinal investigations of the Jingzhong–Baotang School, particularly through analyses of the *Lidai Fabao Ji* (Record of the Dharma-Jewel Through the Generations), tracing the Chan transmission of Zhishen, Wuxiang, and Wuzhu^{[20][22]}. Second, studies have explored the life and thought of Mazu Daoyi, especially the connotations of the doctrine that “ordinary mind is the Way”^{[21][24]}. Third, archaeological research has examined Chan-related remains in Bashu grottoes and stone inscriptions^{[15][25]}. However, most existing studies remain case-oriented and lack a comprehensive examination that integrates ideological transformation with regional practice. A systematic account of the Bashu path toward the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism has yet to be fully established, and the unique position of Bashu within the broader process of Chan Sinicization has not been sufficiently highlighted.

In international scholarship, Japanese scholars such as Ui Hakuju and Yanagida Seizan have undertaken important philological studies of Chinese Chan historical texts, while Western scholars such as John McRae and Bernard Faure have analyzed theories of Chan localization, providing the field with multiple interpretive perspectives^{[27][28]}. Nevertheless, these studies have largely focused on major figures such as Huineng and Mazu, paying insufficient attention to the influence of Bashu regional culture on Chan Buddhism and failing to reveal the distinctive developmental logic of Chan Buddhism in Southwest China^[29].

1.3 Research Scope, Core Concepts, and Temporal-Spatial Framework

The geographical scope of this study encompasses the historical Bashu region, namely present-day Sichuan, Chongqing, and surrounding Southwestern areas influenced by Bashu culture. The core concepts are defined as follows:

Bashu Chan Buddhism refers to the collective body of Chan lineages, ideological systems, transmission genealogies, and social practices that emerged, circulated, and developed within the Bashu region. It primarily includes the Jingzhong–Baotang lineage and the Hongzhou lineage, while also encompassing other Chan branches active in the region.

The Sinicization of Chan Buddhism refers to the process by which Chan Buddhism broke away from the ideological and institutional constraints of Indian Buddhism and, on the basis of Chinese indigenous cultural traditions, social structures, and ethical norms, achieved comprehensive localization in thought, cultivation, institutions, and modes of dissemination.

Localized transformation refers to the process through which Chan Buddhism adjusted its ideological content and practical

modes within a specific regional cultural environment in order to adapt to local social needs and achieve genuine rootedness. It constitutes the regional manifestation of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism.

Chronologically, this study focuses on the period from the Tang dynasty to the Song dynasty. This era marks a crucial turning point in the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism, as well as the formative and flourishing stage of Bashu Chan Buddhism, during which its ideological characteristics and regional practices became most fully articulated^[11].

1.4 Research Methods and Innovations

This study primarily adopts historical analysis, including historical textual analysis, intellectual history analysis, and regional social history analysis, supplemented by cross-cultural comparative methods.

Historical Textual Analysis

Drawing upon transmitted Buddhist texts such as the Song Gaoseng Zhuan (Biographies of Eminent Monks Compiled in the Song Dynasty), the Zutang Ji (Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall), and the Jingde Chuandeng Lu (Records of the Transmission of the Lamp in the Jingde Era), this study integrates Dunhuang manuscripts related to Bashu Chan texts, as well as Bashu local gazetteers, monastery records, collected works of literati, inscriptions, and commemorative epigraphs, thereby constructing a systematic corpus of historical materials^[14].

Intellectual History Analysis

Taking Chan texts as its primary axis, this study traces the intellectual development of Bashu Chan Buddhism from Zhishen's "Pure Mind Chan" and the doctrine of "no-thought Chan" to Mazu Daoyi's proposition that "ordinary mind is the Way." It further explores the mechanisms through which these teachings interacted with indigenous Confucian and Daoist traditions concerning mind and human nature, thereby demonstrating the Sinicized transformation of Bashu Chan thought.

Regional Social History Analysis

This study situates Bashu Chan Buddhism within the broader context of Bashu regional society, examining its interactions with local clans, gentry groups, and governmental structures. It also analyzes the ways in which Chan Buddhism merged with folk beliefs and everyday customs, reconstructing the full picture of its regionalized practices.

Cross-Cultural Comparative Method

By comparing Bashu Chan Buddhism with Northern Chan and Southern Chan traditions in terms of developmental trajectory, ideological characteristics, and modes of practice, this study highlights the distinctive features of Bashu Chan Buddhism and distills the core connotations of the "Bashu path."

The innovations of this study are reflected in three principal aspects:

Perspective Innovation

Moving beyond the limitations of previous case-based studies, this research integrates ideological transformation with regional practice, thereby constructing a holistic analytical framework for understanding the Sinicization of Bashu Chan Buddhism.

Content Innovation

The study comprehensively investigates the role played by Bashu regional culture in the transformation of Chan Buddhism. In systematically demonstrating the irreplaceable historical significance of Southwest China in the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism, it also enriches existing scholarship in the field.

Narrative Innovation

By challenging the "Central Plains-centered" narrative dominant in Chan historiography, this study reconstructs a pluralistic regional narrative of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism and expands the historical dimensions of Buddhist Sinicization in China.

2. The Historical Context and Regional Cultural Foundations of the Formation of Bashu Chan Buddhism

2.1 Bashu Regional Society, Cultural Traditions, and Religious Ecology: Their Structural Influence on the Spread of Chan Buddhism

The emergence and development of Bashu Chan Buddhism cannot be separated from the distinctive regional society and

cultural environment in which it evolved. Surrounded by mountains yet connected internally and externally through the Yangtze River waterway, the Sichuan Basin developed a cultural character marked by “openness within relative isolation” and “integration amid diversity.” On the one hand, its geographical environment enabled the Bashu region to maintain relative stability during periods of warfare, making it a refuge for Central Plains culture. On the other hand, the Yangtze River facilitated close cultural exchanges with the Jiangnan region, providing a natural route for the transmission and circulation of Chan Buddhism.

Following the Qin and Han dynasties, the construction of the Dujiangyan Irrigation System laid the agricultural foundation for Bashu’s reputation as the “Land of Abundance.” This fostered a stable smallholder agrarian social structure, which not only provided material support for the development of monastic economies but also created favorable social conditions for the spread of Chan Buddhism among the populace^[6].

In terms of cultural traditions, the Bashu region was characterized by the parallel prominence of Confucianism and Daoism. On the one hand, the Han dynasty official Wen Weng’s educational reforms in Shu established the historical lineage of Confucian learning in Bashu, making Confucian ethics of loyalty and filial piety, together with its worldly orientation, the dominant ideology of regional society. On the other hand, Bashu was also the birthplace of Daoism: Zhang Daoling established the Way of the Celestial Masters at Mount Heming, and Daoist ideas of naturalness and non-action, along with immortality beliefs, became deeply embedded in local culture^[5]. This symbiotic Confucian–Daoist tradition provided a crucial cultural point of connection for the localization of Chan thought. Chan theories of mind and nature resonated internally with Confucian doctrines of the innate goodness of human nature and Daoist concepts of natural spontaneity, making Chan Buddhism more readily accepted within indigenous cultural contexts^[16].

From the perspective of religious ecology, Bashu folk religion was notably pluralistic and inclusive. Shamanistic and ghost beliefs, the cult of the Lord of Sichuan, City God worship, and immortality cults were all widely practiced, creating an open and accommodating religious environment. While this pluralistic ecology provided favorable conditions for the introduction of Buddhism, it also required Chan Buddhism to adapt itself to the characteristics of local folk beliefs through corresponding regional adjustments in order to achieve genuine social rootedness.

2.2 The Buddhist Landscape of Bashu During the Tang and Five Dynasties and the Historical Opportunity for the Introduction of Chan Buddhism into Bashu

The Tang dynasty marked the most flourishing period in the development of Bashu Buddhism and also the crucial era during which Chan Buddhism entered and rose to prominence in the region. During the turmoil at the end of the Sui dynasty and the beginning of the Tang, Bashu became an ideal refuge for eminent monks fleeing unrest in the Central Plains due to its relative social stability. According to the “Biography of Xuanzang” in the *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* (Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks), Xuanzang “at the age of thirteen followed his elder brother, the Dharma Master Jie, to reside at Jingtu Monastery in the Eastern Capital.” During the late Sui turmoil, “the brothers entered Chang’an together, but because famine afflicted the empire and there was no food in the capital, they traveled together to Shu Commandery and resided at Konghui Monastery,” where Xuanzang studied treatises such as the *Shelun* and *Abhidharma* texts, thereby promoting the development of Buddhist scholasticism in Bashu.

During the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763) and the Huang Chao Rebellion at the end of the Tang dynasty (875–884), both Emperor Xuanzong and Emperor Xizong fled to Bashu. Accompanying the imperial court were large numbers of eminent monks and aristocratic families, further stimulating the prosperity of Bashu Buddhism. Consequently, Chengdu became a Buddhist center of the Tang dynasty comparable to Chang’an and Luoyang^[1].

In the early Tang period, Bashu Buddhism was characterized by the coexistence of multiple schools, including the Sanlun, Tiantai, Huayan, and Vinaya traditions. However, these schools generally emphasized scriptural exegesis, complex doctrinal classifications, and rigorous stages of cultivation, which limited their circulation primarily to the imperial court and elite aristocratic circles. The elitist limitations of scholastic Buddhism created broad space for the development of Chan Buddhism, which emphasized direct insight into the mind and simplified forms of practice. Chan Buddhism’s principle of “not relying on words and letters, but transmitting outside the scriptures” corresponded more closely to the religious needs of Bashu popular

society and was more compatible with the characteristics of regional culture.

The direct historical cause for the introduction of Chan Buddhism into Bashu was the division of Chan into Northern and Southern branches following the death of the Fifth Patriarch Hongren. One of Hongren's ten principal disciples, Zhishen, brought the Dongshan Chan tradition to Bashu in the second year of the Yifeng era (677), transmitting the Dharma at Dechun Monastery in Zizhou and laying the foundation for the spread of Chan Buddhism in Southwest China^[20]. Subsequently, the Silla monk Wuxiang and the native Chan monk Wuzhu respectively established the Jingzhong and Baotang schools, forming independent local Chan lineages in Bashu.

Mazu Daoyi was born in Shifang in the Bashu region and was ordained in Zizhou under Chuji during his youth, where he absorbed the influence of Bashu Chan teachings. He later received Dharma transmission from Nanyue Huairang and established the Hongzhou School in Jiangxi. After Mazu's death, many of his Dharma heirs returned to Bashu to propagate his teachings, enabling Hongzhou Chan to spread widely throughout the region and ultimately making Bashu one of the three principal centers for the dissemination of Chan Buddhism during the Tang dynasty.

2.3 Genealogical Formation of Bashu Chan Buddhism: The Interaction and Integration of Indigenous and Imported Chan Lineages

The transmission lineage of Bashu Chan Buddhism was primarily composed of two interconnected systems. Through mutual influence and integration, these two systems jointly shaped the overall character of Bashu Chan Buddhism. Clarifying the relationship among "indigenous Bashu Chan teachings," "the transmission of external Chan traditions into Bashu," and "the transformative role of regional culture upon Chan Buddhism" is therefore a crucial step toward understanding the historical development of Bashu Chan Buddhism.

The first branch was the Jingzhong–Baotang lineage, an independent Chan school indigenous to Bashu. Zhishen of Zizhou, a direct Dharma heir of Hongren, was summoned by Empress Wu Zetian to Chang'an to preach the Dharma. In the second year of the Chang'an era (702), he returned to Dechun Monastery in Zizhou, where he transmitted the Dongshan Chan teachings and firmly established them in the Bashu region, thereby becoming the founding patriarch of Bashu Chan Buddhism^[23]. Zhishen transmitted the Dharma to Chuji, who in turn transmitted it to the Silla monk Wuxiang. Wuxiang arrived in Bashu in the sixteenth year of the Kaiyuan era (728) and taught at Jingzhong Monastery in Chengdu for twenty years. There he established the Jingzhong School, taking the three phrases "no recollection, no thought, and no forgetting" as the core of his Chan teaching, thus laying the intellectual foundation for Bashu Chan Buddhism^[22].

Wuxiang later transmitted the Dharma to Wuzhu, who became abbot of Baotang Monastery in Chengdu in the second year of the Yongtai era (766) and founded the Baotang School. Wuzhu further developed the doctrine of "no-thought Chan," proposing that there should be "no Buddha halls established, but only Dharma halls erected." In doing so, he radically broke with the ritual norms of traditional Buddhism and pushed the localization of Bashu Chan Buddhism to a new stage.

The second branch was the Hongzhou Chan lineage of Mazu Daoyi, which represented a form of "return-flow" imported Chan tradition. Mazu Daoyi was a native of Shifang in Hanzhou. In his youth, he was ordained under Chuji in Zizhou and was deeply influenced by indigenous Bashu Chan teachings^[21]. He later left Bashu, received Dharma transmission from Nanyue Huairang, and founded the Hongzhou School in Jiangxi. Mazu developed the influential doctrines that "ordinary mind is the Way" and "this very mind is Buddha," thereby facilitating Chan Buddhism's fundamental transformation from "Indian Chan" into "Chinese Chan."

After Mazu's death, the disciples of his Dharma heirs, including Baizhang Huaihai and Nanquan Puyuan, successively traveled to Bashu to propagate the teachings. As a result, Hongzhou Chan became the dominant current of Bashu Chan Buddhism from the late Tang through the Song dynasty^[2]. During its transmission in Bashu, Hongzhou Chan absorbed intellectual elements from the Jingzhong–Baotang lineage and interacted deeply with local culture, eventually giving rise to a distinct branch of Hongzhou Chan marked by Bashu regional characteristics.

3. The Intellectual Characteristics and Sinicized Transformation of Bashu Chan Buddhism from a Textual Perspective

3.1 Textual Characteristics and Genealogical Construction in Bashu Chan Literature

The Sinicized transformation of Bashu Chan Buddhism is most clearly reflected in the textual reconstruction and discursive renewal of Chan literature. Its most representative work is the *Lidai Fabao Ji* (Record of the Dharma-Jewel Through the Generations), compiled by disciples of the Baotang School. Written during the Dali era of the Tang dynasty (766–779), this “lamp history” text constituted an independently constructed lineage genealogy of Bashu Chan Buddhism. Several Dunhuang manuscripts of the text survive today, including S.516, P.3727, and P.2125. Together with the Dunhuang version of the Platform Sutra, it became one of the two principal textual foundations of early Chan localization^[22].

The textual features of the *Lidai Fabao Ji* vividly demonstrate the distinctive mode of intellectual expression characteristic of Bashu Chan Buddhism. These features may be discussed from four perspectives:

3.1.1 Localization of the Discursive System

The text broke away from the complex doctrinal terminology of Indian Buddhist scholasticism and instead employed vernacular, narrative-based indigenous discourse to articulate Chan teachings. Rejecting the traditional exegetical format of Buddhist commentarial literature, the work recorded the transmission of Dharma and Chan teachings through storytelling. Its language was plain and accessible, corresponding closely to the linguistic habits of ordinary Bashu society.

Likewise, the recorded sayings of Mazu Daoyi relied heavily on spontaneous repartee and colloquial expression rather than elaborate doctrinal analysis. Through dialogues grounded in everyday life, they pointed directly to the original mind, thereby establishing a distinctly Chinese paradigm for the expression of Chan teachings.

3.1.2 Regional Construction of Dharma Transmission Genealogy

The text identifies Zhishen as the legitimate Dharma heir of the Fifth Patriarch Hongren and constructs a specifically Bashu transmission lineage of “Hongren–Zhishen–Chuji–Wuxiang–Wuzhu,” positioning it alongside the Huineng lineage of Jiangnan and the Shenxiu lineage of the North as one of the three major Chan traditions.

As John McRae has argued in *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*, the construction of Chan genealogies was fundamentally a localized discursive practice aimed at breaking free from the transmission system of Indian Buddhism and establishing the orthodoxy of indigenous Chan schools^[27]. The genealogical construction found in the *Lidai Fabao Ji* thus represents Bashu Chan Buddhism’s effort to claim legitimacy and authority within the broader Chan tradition.

3.2 “Ordinary Mind Is the Way”: The Convergence of Chan Thought with Confucian and Daoist Traditions of Mind and Nature, and Their Intellectual Boundaries

The localization of intellectual content constituted the fundamental characteristic of the Sinicization of Bashu Chan Buddhism. This primarily refers to the deep interaction and integration between Chan theories of mind and nature and indigenous Confucian and Daoist traditions concerning human nature and self-cultivation. The doctrine of “ordinary mind is the Way” proposed by Mazu Daoyi stands as one of the most significant outcomes of this convergence.

In the Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Mazu Daoyi, it is stated:

“The Way does not require cultivation; one must simply avoid defilement. What is defilement? Any mind of birth and death, any intentional activity or striving, all constitute defilement. If one wishes to directly realize the Way, ordinary mind is the Way. What is ordinary mind? It is without contrivance, without right and wrong, without grasping or rejection, without annihilation or permanence, without ordinary or sacred distinctions”^[4].

The conceptual relationship between “ordinary mind is the Way” and Confucian–Daoist traditions reveals important points of convergence, though the three remain fundamentally distinct in important respects.

3.2.1 Relationship with the Confucian Theory of the Innate Goodness of Human Nature

Mencius argued that “all people can become Yao or Shun,” maintaining that moral knowledge and moral capacity are inherently present within the human mind. In this sense, Confucianism treats moral essence as internal to human nature. Similarly, the doctrine that “this very mind is Buddha” maintains that Buddha-nature is inherently present within the minds of all sentient beings and requires no external seeking. Thus, both doctrines converge at the level of the sufficiency of the original mind^[24].

Yet their essential meanings differ significantly. Mencius’s theory of the goodness of human nature is fundamentally a moral ontology centered on ethical nature, whereas Mazu’s “ordinary mind” refers to a primordial state that transcends distinctions

between good and evil and is therefore not confined within the moral sphere.

3.2.2 Relationship with Daoist Naturalness

Daoism advocates that “the Dao follows nature,” emphasizing conformity with the intrinsic state of things. The “non-contrivance” emphasized in the doctrine of “ordinary mind” shares certain affinities with Daoist naturalness. Nevertheless, the two point toward different orientations. Daoist naturalness is fundamentally a cosmological principle of aligning oneself with the Dao of Heaven, whereas Mazu’s understanding of naturalness is rooted in immediate lived practice—the realization of Buddha-nature within ordinary daily life.

At the same time, the Baotang School’s doctrine of “no-thought” combined with Mazu’s principle that “truth is realized precisely within concrete affairs” incorporated the indigenous Chinese mode of thinking known as the “non-duality of substance and function” into the Chan system. In doing so, it dismantled the dualistic opposition between “ultimate truth” and “conventional truth” characteristic of Indian Buddhism, grounding transcendent Buddha-nature within the reality of everyday existence. This marked a fundamental transformation of Chan theories of mind and nature from a world-renouncing orientation to an engaged, worldly orientation^[12].

3.3 The Intellectual Differences and Developmental Tensions among the Jingzhong, Baotang, and Hongzhou Schools

Previous scholarship has often treated Bashu Chan Buddhism as a homogeneous whole, overlooking the intellectual differences and developmental tensions among the Jingzhong, Baotang, and Hongzhou schools. In reality, these three traditions differed significantly in their Chan doctrines, modes of cultivation, and religious practices, giving rise to a pluralistic internal landscape within Bashu Chan Buddhism.

3.3.1 The Jingzhong School

Represented by Wuxiang, the Jingzhong School centered its Chan teaching on the three principles of “no recollection, no thought, and no forgetting.” “No recollection” referred to not dwelling upon the past, “no thought” meant refraining from delusive attachment to the present, and “no forgetting” emphasized maintaining awareness of spiritual cultivation. The Jingzhong approach combined gradual cultivation with sudden enlightenment: while emphasizing the sudden realization of the original mind, it also valued sustained daily practice and retained certain ritual elements of traditional Buddhism^[20].

3.3.2 The Baotang School

Represented by Wuzhu, the Baotang School radicalized the doctrine of “no-thought Chan.” Wuzhu proposed that “when not a single thought arises, one directly perceives Buddha-nature,” thereby thoroughly rejecting traditional stages of gradual cultivation. The school abandoned complex practices such as scriptural recitation, seated meditation, and ritual observance, and even advocated the elimination of Buddha halls in favor of Dharma halls alone, effectively negating the institutional structure of conventional Buddhism^[23].

The Chan teachings of the Baotang School thus possessed a strongly revolutionary and anti-traditional character. However, precisely because of this radicalism, the school gradually declined after Wuzhu’s death.

3.3.3 The Hongzhou School

Represented by Mazu Daoyi, the Hongzhou School absorbed elements from both the Jingzhong and Baotang traditions while advancing doctrines such as “ordinary mind is the Way” and “walking, standing, sitting, reclining, and responding to circumstances—all are the Way”^[21]. While inheriting the Baotang School’s tendency toward simplifying religious practice, the Hongzhou School overcame its excessive radicalism by fully integrating spiritual cultivation into ordinary daily life. In doing so, it established a more moderate and adaptable Chan system, which ultimately enabled it to become the dominant current within Bashu Chan Buddhism.

The intellectual differences and developmental tensions among these three schools continuously stimulated the evolution and refinement of Bashu Chan thought, allowing it to respond more effectively to the religious needs of different social strata.

3.3.4 The Internal Accommodation between Chan Ethical Discipline and Confucian Ideals of Loyalty and Filial Piety

A fundamental tension existed between the world-renouncing ethics of Indian Buddhism and the this-worldly moral ideology

of Confucian loyalty and filial piety. This contradiction constituted one of the primary challenges Buddhism faced in its transmission within China. Bashu Chan Buddhism addressed this issue through both intellectual reinterpretation and practical adaptation, integrating Confucian ethical values into the Chan doctrinal system and thereby reconciling transcendence with worldly engagement.

At the intellectual level, Bashu Chan Buddhism redefined the relationship between Chan practice and ethical conduct by proposing that “the mind of loyalty and filial piety is itself the Buddha-mind.” In this formulation, Confucian ethics of loyalty and filial devotion were combined with the Chan ideal of realizing one’s original mind. “Loyalty and filial piety” were understood as expressions of cultivating the true mind, whereas resistance and deviation were viewed as forms of defilement. In this way, the contradiction between Buddhist renunciatory ethics and Confucian worldly ethics was effectively dissolved.

At the practical level, Bashu Chan monks cooperated with the imperial court and local governments in maintaining the established social order. According to the biography of Wuxiang in the *Song Gaoseng Zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks Compiled in the Song Dynasty), during the An Lushan Rebellion, when Emperor Xuanzong fled to Chengdu, Master Wuxiang established a ritual site at Daci Monastery to pray for the emperor, subsequently receiving imperial patronage and honorary recognition.

By the late Tang period, many Bashu Chan monks had developed close relationships with local officials and gentry families. They participated in local governance and charitable activities, combining the Buddhist ideal of compassion with the Confucian virtue of benevolence^[14].

4. A Perspective of Social Interaction: The Deep Integration of Bashu Chan Buddhism with Local Society and Cultural Traditions

4.1 The Construction of Monastic Networks and the Reciprocal Interaction with the Local Gentry

The regional rootedness of Bashu Chan Buddhism depended first upon the formation of an extensive monastic network and second upon reciprocal interaction with local clans and gentry groups. Between the Tang and Song dynasties, the Bashu region developed a temple system centered on Chengdu, with Zizhou, Zizhou, and Kuizhou serving as regional nodes radiating throughout the Sichuan Basin. Monasteries such as Jingzhong Monastery, Baotang Monastery, Daci Monastery in Chengdu, and Dechun Monastery in Zizhou all became major centers for the dissemination of Chan Buddhism^[11].

The formation and expansion of this monastic network relied heavily upon the support of local clans and gentry elites. Bashu gentry families and aristocratic lineages provided economic foundations and political protection for Chan monasteries through donations for temple construction, grants of agricultural land, and the commissioning of stone inscriptions. At the same time, they enhanced their own cultural prestige and social status through interactions with Chan monks and participation in Dharma discussions.

For their part, Chan monasteries relied upon the patronage of the gentry to expand their sphere of influence and enter local power structures, thereby establishing a mutually reinforcing relationship characterized by “gentry patronage and Chan moral instruction.”

A representative example is Daci Monastery. Originally established under imperial decree by Emperor Xuanzong, the monastery later received continuous patronage from prominent Bashu families. According to the Stele Inscription of the Śākyamuni Relic Pagoda at Daci Monastery in Chengdu Prefecture, at its height the monastery comprised ninety-six subsidiary compounds and more than 8,500 monastic quarters. It served not only as one of the principal Chan centers in Southwest China, but also as a hub for local cultural education and commercial exchange^[6].

It should be noted, however, that these interactions were not entirely harmonious and involved significant struggles over material interests. By the late Tang dynasty, the excessive expansion of monastic economies had led to phenomena described as “temples and monasteries extensively occupying farmland and water mills,” referring to the appropriation of land and property from commoners. As a result, the government repeatedly introduced measures to restrict monastic land accumulation and regulate temple economies^[9]. Such tensions reflect the complex and dynamic relationship between Chan Buddhism and local society.

4.2 The Reciprocal Adaptation between the Dissemination of Chan Teachings and Bashu Folk Beliefs

One of the primary reasons Bashu Chan Buddhism successfully penetrated popular society was its open and adaptive attitude toward indigenous folk beliefs, which enabled a reciprocal process of interaction and integration between Chan teachings and local culture. Bashu folk religion was deeply rooted in shamanistic traditions, the cult of the Lord of Sichuan, City God worship, and various immortality cults. Rather than rejecting these local beliefs, Chan Buddhism adopted an inclusive attitude toward them.

On the one hand, Chan Buddhism integrated its doctrines of karmic retribution and rebirth with popular moral ideas concerning reward and punishment for good and evil actions. In this way, Buddhist ethical concepts became embedded within everyday moral life, facilitating the popularization of Chan teachings among ordinary people^[5].

On the other hand, Chan Buddhism actively incorporated indigenous deities into the Buddhist system of protective gods. Major Bashu folk deities such as Li Bing, the Lord of Sichuan, and Erlang Shen came to be widely worshiped within Chan monasteries as Buddhist guardian figures^[15]. This strategy reduced popular resistance toward Chan culture and made Chan Buddhism more readily acceptable within local society.

At the same time, Buddhist assemblies and ritual gatherings became closely intertwined with Bashu folk customs and gradually evolved into integral components of regional social life. The Lantern Festival assemblies at Daci Monastery and the temple fairs celebrating the Buddha's Birthday on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month were simultaneously religious ceremonies and comprehensive folk events involving commerce, entertainment, and social interaction^[13]. While worshipping the Buddha, ordinary people also engaged in trade, watched performances, feasted, and participated in communal festivities, demonstrating the extent to which Chan Buddhism had become fully integrated into everyday popular life.

4.3 Sectarian Characteristics and Periodization of Chan Buddhist Sculpture in the Bashu Grottoes

The Bashu region constitutes one of the principal areas of Buddhist grotto sculpture in China. Sites such as the Anyue Grottoes, Dazu Rock Carvings, and Guangyuan Grottoes preserve large numbers of Chan Buddhist statues and inscriptional materials dating from the Tang through Song dynasties, providing important material evidence for the Sinicization of Bashu Chan Buddhism^[15]. Previous scholarship has often treated all Tang–Song Buddhist sculptures in Bashu as products of Bashu Chan Buddhism, overlooking distinctions of sectarian affiliation and historical periodization.

Based on sculptural themes, stylistic features, and inscriptional contents, Bashu Chan Buddhist sculpture may be divided into two principal periods:

4.3.1 Mid-Tang Period (mid-eighth century to early ninth century)

This period was dominated by sculpture associated with the Jingzhong–Baotang lineage. The primary sculptural subjects consisted of portraits of Chan patriarchs, including Zhishen, Wuxiang, and Wuzhu, with particular emphasis on scenes depicting Dharma transmission. The artistic style was relatively restrained and concise, focusing on expressing the inner spiritual temperament of Chan monks. The Tang dynasty Chan sculptures at the Chonglongshan Grottoes in Zizhong exhibit clear characteristics associated with the Jingzhong and Baotang schools^[25].

4.3.2 Late Tang to Song Period (mid-ninth century to thirteenth century)

This stage was primarily characterized by sculpture connected to the Hongzhou School. During this period, sculptural themes became considerably more diverse. In addition to traditional images of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Chan patriarchs, there emerged numerous depictions of everyday life embodying the idea that “carrying firewood and drawing water are themselves wondrous manifestations of the Way.”

The artistic style also became increasingly secularized: figures display fuller facial features, vivid expressions, and natural postures, closely resembling the appearance of ordinary Bashu people. These stylistic developments reflect the Hongzhou School's doctrine of the non-duality between the ordinary and the sacred.

Many surviving temple inscriptions and dedicatory texts in the Bashu region document the historical dissemination of Chan Buddhism. These inscriptions were composed by individuals from all levels of society—including members of the imperial family, government officials, gentry elites, monks, and commoners—and thus provide vivid evidence of the widespread diffusion of Chan Buddhism throughout Bashu society^[3].

4.4 Interactions between Bashu Literati and Chan Monks and Their Intellectual Influence

Following the introduction of Chan Buddhism into Bashu, it exerted a profound influence not only upon the region's religious culture but also upon its intellectual traditions and the spiritual outlook of its literati. From the Tang through Song dynasties, Bashu produced numerous prominent literary figures, including Li Bai, Du Fu, Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and Lu You, all of whom maintained interactions with Bashu Chan monks. Chan thought gradually became an integral component of their spiritual worlds^[26].

The relationship between literati culture and Chan Buddhism, however, was not merely one of abstract intellectual appropriation; rather, it was grounded in concrete social interactions and textual exchanges. Taking Du Fu as an example, during his residence in Chengdu he maintained close contact with Chan monks at Daci Monastery and actively sought instruction in Buddhist teachings. In his poem *Accompanying Censor Wang in Ascending the Highest Peak of Dongshan and Banqueting with Yao Tongquan While Boating at Dusk*, he writes:

“Before the lamps, great fish often emerge;
Hearing the songs rise and fall as though seeking something.
At midnight the wind surges and cold waves rise;
Amid laughter and revelry, the boat seems suddenly heavy.”

The poem subtly embodies the Chan concept of “giving rise to the mind without attachment,” reflecting the influence of Chan thought upon Du Fu's literary imagination^[7].

Su Shi, one of the representative figures of Shu learning during the Song dynasty, maintained close relationships with Bashu Chan monks such as Master Biancai and Chan Master Liaoyuan. His celebrated attitude toward life—captured in the phrase “wearing a straw cloak in mist and rain, I face life as it comes”—represents a profound synthesis between the Chan doctrine that “ordinary mind is the Way” and the Confucian ideal of the cultivated gentleman^[8].

The integration of Chan thought with Shu learning gave rise to a distinctive Bashu intellectual tradition characterized by the mutual fusion of Confucianism and Chan Buddhism. This synthesis exerted a significant influence upon the development of Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism. Important Bashu Neo-Confucian thinkers such as Zhang Shi and Wei Liaoweng drew upon Chan theories of mind and methods of contemplation to enrich Neo-Confucian philosophy, thereby contributing to its localized development^[18].

5. The Unique Position and Historical Contributions of Bashu Chan Buddhism in the Process of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism

5.1 Comparing the Regional Paths of Northern, Jiangnan, and Bashu Chan Buddhism

In the broader process of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism, the Northern, Jiangnan, and Bashu traditions each followed distinct regional paths of development, collectively contributing to the pluralistic formation of localized Chan Buddhism.

5.1.1 Northern Chan Buddhism

Dominated by the Northern School associated with Shenxiu, Northern Chan followed a path of “elite institutionalization.” It emphasized gradual cultivation, seated meditation, and strict observance of monastic discipline, maintaining close ties with the imperial court and political authorities. As a result, it circulated primarily among aristocratic and bureaucratic elites in northern China and possessed a distinctly official Buddhist character.

According to the biography of Shenxiu in the *Song Gaoseng Zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks Compiled in the Song Dynasty), Shenxiu was summoned to the palace by Empress Wu Zetian, and both nobles and commoners in the capital flocked to pay homage to him in numbers reaching tens of thousands each day^[27].

5.1.2 Jiangnan Chan Buddhism

Centered on the Southern School of Huineng and further developed through the lineages of Nanyue Huairang and Qingyuan Xingsi, Jiangnan Chan followed a path of “gentry-literati integration.” It emphasized spontaneous encounters, paradoxical dialogue, and direct realization of the original mind, while maintaining close interactions with the scholar-official class, thereby giving rise to the distinctive phenomenon of “literati Chan”^[28].

Wang Wei composed the *Stele Inscription for Chan Master Huineng*, the Sixth Patriarch, while Liu Zongyuan authored the *Stele Inscription for the Sixth Patriarch of Caoxi*, Chan Master Dajian. These works exemplify the close integration between

Jiangnan Chan and literati culture.

5.1.3 Bashu Chan Buddhism

Bashu Chan Buddhism pursued a path characterized by “integration across all social levels and comprehensive regional fusion.” Intellectually, it achieved a more thorough integration with Confucian and Daoist traditions, decisively breaking free from the constraints of Indian Buddhist scholastic terminology and ritual structures to form a distinctly localized Chan philosophy^[29].

Practically, Bashu Chan Buddhism not only received support from the imperial court and upper-level officials, but also penetrated deeply into folk religion and popular customs while simultaneously engaging in profound intellectual exchanges with the literati class. In this way, it achieved comprehensive dissemination across elite, middle, and popular social strata.

In terms of lineage transmission, Bashu produced the independent Jingzhong–Baotang tradition, which stood alongside the Jiangnan and Northern Chan lineages in a tripartite configuration, thereby challenging narratives that portrayed Chan transmission as a singular and unified genealogy.

5.2 Promoting the Paradigmatic Transformation from “Indian Chan” to “Chinese Chan”

The essence of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism lay in the paradigmatic transformation from “Indian Chan” to “Chinese Chan.” This involved a shift from the Indian Buddhist tradition of attaining enlightenment through scriptural teaching toward a distinctly Chinese Chan system characterized by “a special transmission outside the scriptures” and “non-reliance on written words,” as well as a transition from transcendent world-renouncing cultivation toward the integration of practice within everyday life. In this profound transformation, Bashu Chan Buddhism played an irreplaceable role.

“Indian Chan” was rooted in traditional Indian Buddhism and centered upon practices such as seated meditation, scriptural study, and monastic discipline, aiming at liberation from the cycle of birth and death and the attainment of nirvana. Its characteristics included strong reliance on scriptural authority, emphasis on gradual cultivation, and a pronounced orientation toward transcendence and withdrawal from worldly life.

“Chinese Chan,” by contrast, emerged within the cultural soil of China and emphasized direct realization of the mind, sudden enlightenment, and the integration of spiritual cultivation into ordinary daily existence. Its defining characteristics included “non-reliance on words and letters,” “special transmission outside the scriptures,” and an emphasis on worldly engagement^[17].

The Jingzhong–Baotang lineage served as a pioneering force in this paradigmatic transformation. Wuzhu’s doctrine of “no-thought” completely broke through the constraints of Indian Buddhist scholasticism and ritual tradition. His practice of “not establishing Buddha halls, but only erecting Dharma halls” fundamentally rejected the institutional structures and methods of cultivation characteristic of traditional Buddhism, thereby laying the groundwork for Chan Buddhism’s emancipation from Indian Buddhist models^[23].

Mazu Daoyi further completed the theoretical construction of Chinese Chan through doctrines such as “ordinary mind is the Way,” “this very mind is Buddha,” and “truth is realized within concrete affairs”^[24]. He relocated Buddha-nature from a transcendent realm into the ordinary human mind and extended spiritual cultivation from monastic meditation halls into every aspect of daily life. In doing so, he decisively dissolved the dualistic oppositions between ultimate truth and conventional truth, transcendence and worldliness, that had characterized Indian Buddhism, thereby establishing the three fundamental features of Chinese Chan: everydayness, secularization, and inward realization of mind and nature.

From the late Tang through the Song dynasty, major Chan traditions such as the Linji School and the Yangqi branch all developed upon the foundation of Mazu’s Hongzhou Chan. Bashu Chan Buddhism thus provided crucial intellectual resources and practical paradigms for the final formation of Chinese Chan and represented a decisive turning point in the broader process of the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism^[10].

5.3 Providing a Southwestern Regional Model for the Sinicization of Buddhism

The Sinicization of Buddhism was not a singular or linear process, but rather one shaped through continuous interaction and integration between Buddhism and diverse regional cultures. Bashu Chan Buddhism emerged from the cultural soil of Southwest China and developed a comprehensive model characterized by the intellectual synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism, practical rootedness in popular society, broad social dissemination across all levels, and deep cultural integration. In

this sense, it provided a distinctive Southwestern regional model for the Sinicization of Buddhism^[16].

The historical significance of this model lies in the way it challenges the Central Plains-centered narrative that has long dominated studies of Buddhist Sinicization, demonstrating instead the substantial contributions made by frontier regions in Southwest China to the localization of Buddhism. Situated in the southwestern interior, Bashu historically served as a center of exchange between Central Plains culture and the cultures of southwestern ethnic minorities. As Bashu Chan Buddhism developed, it not only completed its own process of localization, but also became a bridge through which Buddhism spread into southwestern minority regions, facilitating both the dissemination and localization of Buddhism along China's southwestern frontier^[14].

From a historical perspective, the successful rooting and development of foreign religions within China depended upon their ability to adapt to dominant indigenous ideologies, integrate with regional cultural traditions, and connect with everyday social life. Only when localization was achieved simultaneously at the levels of thought, institutions, practice, and culture could a foreign religion truly become integrated into Chinese society and ultimately transform into a component of Chinese culture itself.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Main Conclusions

Through an examination of the intellectual evolution and regional practices of Bashu Chan Buddhism from the Tang through Song dynasties, this study reaches the following principal conclusions:

6.1.1 The Tang–Song period represented the flourishing stage in the formation and development of Bashu Chan Buddhism.

The Jingzhong–Baotang lineage, represented by Zhishen, Wuxiang, and Wuzhu, together with the Hongzhou lineage represented by Mazu Daoyi, collectively constituted the major transmission systems of Bashu Chan Buddhism. These traditions produced a distinctive Chan intellectual system and established Bashu as one of the three major centers for the dissemination of Chan Buddhism during the Tang dynasty.

6.1.2 Bashu Chan Buddhism achieved a profound integration with indigenous Confucian and Daoist traditions concerning mind and human nature.

By secularizing modes of cultivation and reconciling Buddhist monastic ethics with Confucian ideals of loyalty and filial piety, Bashu Chan Buddhism accomplished a fundamental Sinicized transformation at the intellectual level, thereby creating a distinctly localized system of mind-nature philosophy and spiritual cultivation.

6.1.3 Bashu Chan Buddhism realized comprehensive regional rootedness through multidimensional social and cultural integration.

Through reciprocal interactions with local clans and gentry elites, integration with folk beliefs and customary life, artistic expression in grottoes and inscriptional culture, and mutual engagement with regional literati traditions, Bashu Chan Buddhism became deeply embedded within Bashu regional culture at both the ideological and practical levels.

6.1.4 Bashu Chan Buddhism developed a regional path distinct from those of Northern and Jiangnan Chan traditions.

Characterized by “integration across all social levels and comprehensive regional fusion,” this path promoted the transformation of Chan Buddhism from “Indian Chan” into “Chinese Chan.” In doing so, it provided the Sinicization of Buddhism with a distinctive Southwestern regional model and occupied an irreplaceable historical position in both the Sinicization of Chan Buddhism and the broader history of Buddhist localization in China.

6.2 Research Limitations and Future Prospects

Although this study focuses on the Tang through Song dynasties as the formative and flourishing period of Bashu Chan Buddhism, several limitations remain:

6.2.1 Insufficient attention to developments after the Song dynasty.

The study does not fully reconstruct the transmission and transformation of Bashu Chan Buddhism during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. In particular, it does not address the development of important later traditions such as the Juyun Chan

lineage of the Ming dynasty and the Shuanggui Hall lineage of the Qing dynasty^[19].

6.2.2 Limited discussion of interregional Buddhist exchange.

The interactions between Bashu Chan Buddhism and the Buddhist cultures of regions such as Yunnan, Guizhou, and Tibet, as well as its role in cultural exchange among southwestern ethnic groups, are discussed only briefly.

6.2.3 Insufficient incorporation of newly excavated materials.

The study does not fully utilize recently discovered Tang dynasty Chan inscriptional materials from the Bashu region, such as the Pagoda Inscription for Chan Master Wuzhu of Baotang Monastery of the Tang Dynasty, excavated in Chengdu in 2018. Such newly uncovered sources are of major importance for clarifying the transmission genealogy of the Jingzhong–Baotang lineage.

Future research may be expanded in the following directions:

Broadening the temporal and spatial scope of research.

Newly excavated inscriptions, grotto materials, and documentary sources may be employed to reconstruct the complete historical development of Bashu Chan Buddhism from the Song through Qing dynasties, thereby enriching historical narratives.

Strengthening research on regional cultural exchange.

Future studies should further investigate the role of Bashu Chan Buddhism in cultural interactions along China's southwestern frontier and explore its cultural significance in the formation of the Chinese national community.

Promoting interdisciplinary research.

By integrating methodologies from history, religious studies, archaeology, and anthropology, future scholarship can develop a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the regional practices of Bashu Chan Buddhism.

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