

Article

From Understanding *Śūnyatā* to Connecting It with the *Tathāgatagarbha*: The Emergence and Evolution of Sengzhao's *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*

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Abstract: Historical transmission and other controversies related to Sengzhao's *Things Do Not Shift* have long been a subject of scholarly attention. However, his essay *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* has been insufficiently studied, despite being traditionally deemed emblematic of the Chinese understanding of *Mādhyamaka* philosophy. The present study shows that this essay has also historically generated divisions and debates in the Chinese context. It finds that *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* expresses the *Mādhyamaka* philosophy of emptiness in a distinctly Chinese manner by grounding itself in the principle of dependent origination, and by transforming issues of being and nonbeing and the name and the “thing-in-itself” into conditional emergence. Nevertheless, Sengzhao's essay evoked the two markedly distinct construals of *Buzhengkong* 不真故空 and *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 as *Tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha-nature philosophy within Chinese Buddhism. *Bushizhenkong* directly aligned Sengzhao's ostensibly representative theory of *Mādhyamaka* emptiness in China with the doctrinal framework of *Tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha-nature, triggering almost a millennium-long period of discussions and controversies.

Keywords: *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*; Sengzhao; *Things Do Not Shift*; *Mādhyamaka* in China; hermeneutics of Chinese Buddhist classics



Citation: Yang, Benhua. 2024. From Understanding *Śūnyatā* to Connecting It with the *Tathāgatagarbha*: The Emergence and Evolution of Sengzhao's *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*. *Religions* 15: 588. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050588>

Academic Editors: Carla Canullo and Stefano Santasilia

Received: 21 August 2023

Revised: 22 April 2024

Accepted: 9 May 2024

Published: 11 May 2024



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1. Introduction

Sengzhao 僧肇 (384–414), a luminary among the esteemed followers of the celebrated Buddhist translator Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (343–413), was distinguished by his profound scholarship and exquisite literary style. Despite humble origins marked by poverty, Sengzhao's youth was shaped by his occupation as a scribe, laboriously reproducing texts to sustain himself. Remarkably, even in the prime of his life, he had already garnered considerable renown and was venerated as the inaugural Chinese intellectual to accurately expound upon the *Mādhyamaka* doctrine of emptiness (*Kong* 空, *śūnya*). His work, *The Treatise of Sengzhao* (*Zhaolun* 肇論), profoundly influenced Chinese society, signifying that the Chinese had accurately grasped the wisdom of the Indian Buddhist theory of *prajñā* (Bore 般若). *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* (*Buzhenkonglun* 不真空論) was the most prominent (Dhammajothi 2012, p. 9) of the four primary essays included in *The Treatise of Sengzhao*.¹ These four treatises “paved the way for a better understanding of the purport and significance of the idea of emptiness in Chinese Buddhist circles, and its accurate treatment of a theme unique to Buddhism was the unmistakable sign of the presence of a mature Buddhist mind” (M. W. Liu 1994, p. 59).

The academic community has generated a plethora of research findings on this essay, both domestically and internationally. However, such efforts have focused primarily on whether Sengzhao correctly understood the Buddhist wisdom theory in *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*, particularly considering the significant number of Confucian and Daoist terms (Liebenthal 1968, p. 8) employed in the essay. Numerous scholars such as Ren, Jiyu 任繼愈

(Ren 1963, pp. 38–43) and Hong, Xiuping 洪修平 (Hong 1987, pp. 92–102) have contended that the Confucian and Daoist words were inevitable and that their usage did not affect Sengzhao's comprehension of Indian Buddhist philosophy.

Scholars are also concerned with the identity of the objects that Sengzhao criticizes in this essay as “six schools and seven sects” (*Liujia qizong* 六家七宗). Sengzhao censured the schools² that could not correctly understand the concept of *prajñā*; however, an immense controversy erupted among scholars, primarily apropos one significant issue: to which of these seven sects does Sengzhao's rejection of “original emptiness” (*Benwu zong* 本無宗) apply? This question has been contentious since ancient times, and numerous differences of opinion have been recorded.³

This research context allows the observation that the transmission and evolution of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* have not received sufficient scholarly attention. Academic circles in Europe, America, Japan, and China have attended to the overall evolution history of the later annotation and interpretation of *Zhaolun*: for instance, Qiu, Minjie 邱敏捷 (Qiu 2003) and Cao, Shuming 曹樹明 (Cao 2009, pp. 138–276) in China; Liebenthal (1968, pp. 11–15) in Europe; and Nakata (1936, pp. 355–406), Makita (1995, pp. 272–98), Ito (1983–1984, pp. 249–54), and Yoshida (2000, pp. 99–102) in Japan. However, these scholars have either explored the annotated history of *Zhaolun* from the perspective of the entire text or have examined a specific section. Researchers have rarely studied the annotated history of a single piece of Sengzhao's oeuvre. The few such studies that have been conducted have received widespread attention because of the historical controversy surrounding Sengzhao's *Things Do Not Shift* (*Wubujianlun* 物不遷論).⁴ Only Baggio (2010, p. 25) has mentioned the interpretations of “emptiness” in *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*; however, he has not elucidated or analyzed the conception of emptiness.

Emptiness of the Nonabsolute has also historically triggered significant controversies in Chinese scholarship, but this aspect has not received much attention in modernity. This article examines historical disputes to reveal interesting aspects of the interpretation of the title *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* (*Bu* 不 *Zhen* 真 *Kong* 空 *Lun* 論) in terms of its four Chinese characters. It also highlights the interpretative propensities of ancient Chinese scholars toward reconciling the relationships between emptiness, Buddha-nature (*Foxing* 佛性, *buddhadhātu*), and the *Tathāgatagarbha* (*Rulaizang* 如來藏). Thus, the present study reflects how the Chinese have historically assimilated the doctrine of emptiness by accurately understanding the *Mādhyamaka* conception and then embodying the classical interpretative characteristics of Chinese Buddhism.

Therefore, this paper attempts to distinguish the contents related to the annotations and interpretations of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* from the annotations and interpretations of *The Treatise of Sengzhao* as recorded in erstwhile dynasties. Interestingly, it was discovered that *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* caused widespread disagreement during its circulation in later periods. Sengzhao's treatise is generally considered to have accurately captured the conception of emptiness. However, disputes occurred and attacks were mounted as the number of interpreters of the concept increased throughout Chinese history.

A Preface to an Outline on the Annotation of Zhaolun (*Jiake Zhaolun xu* 夾科肇論序) states, “In the past, there were criticisms, and today there are more struggles and jealousy” (古之既有譏謗, 今之鬥爭嫉妬更多, Ven. Xiaoyue, p. 138b). The disputes in the development of this historical context can be roughly classified based on the ways in which the four Chinese characters of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* are deconstructed. First, emptiness is affirmed by splitting the four characters in the middle; thus, *Buzhen* 不真⁵ is the argument and *Kong* 空 (empty, *sūnya*) is the conclusion, thereby conveying the meaning “Because it is not true, it is emptiness.” Second, the first Chinese character of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* is distinguished; thus, the first character *Bu* 不 (negate) represents negation, and the next two characters *Zhenkong* 真空 (absolutely emptiness)⁶ form the negated object to together formulate a negative proposition about emptiness, thus signifying “It is not absolute emptiness.”

The interpretation of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* has thus resulted in two vastly different understandings, one affirming emptiness and the other negating it. The intense debates arising between the two opposing viewpoints are easily imaginable. How did these completely different interpretations and explanations originate and evolve? Is there truly no possibility of reconciling them? What issues of Buddhist philosophy do these two completely different construals disclose? How should we approach this controversy? Robinson has described this problem by stating that “a wall of misunderstanding separated the two religions” (Robinson 1967, p. 21). The sections that follow will address these questions.

2. *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* and the Chinese Perception and Comprehension of Emptiness

Sengzhao’s interpretation of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* transformed the idea of “Because it is not true, it is emptiness” to “It is not absolute emptiness.” It is necessary to comprehend Sengzhao’s exposition of Indian *Mādhyamaka* thought through the lens of Chinese Confucianism, Daoism, and Neo-Daoism to understand this evolution. Such an examination offers a logical trajectory for the Chinese solution in discerning emptiness. *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* elucidated the *Mādhyamaka* conception from the perspective of the traditional Chinese dichotomy of being and nonbeing (*Youwu* 有無) and between the name and the thing-in-itself, or the object per se (*Mingshi* 名實). This approach represented a means of apprehending foreign concepts in terms of local conceptual categories (*Geyi* 格義) (Noda 2010, pp. 584–87) and resulted in varied pre-Qin conceptual categories rather than a mere “reinterpretation of Daoist terms” (Mingran 2008, p. 208).

2.1. Translating the Discussion of Being and Nonbeing into Dependent Origination

The issue of being and nonbeing was extensively discussed in Neo-Daoism. The principal standpoints include Wan, Bi’s 王弼 (226–249) original nonbeing (*Benwu* 本無) and Guo, Xiang’s 郭象 (252–312) equal unity of being and nonbeing (*Qitong youwu* 齊同有無). In this context, Sengzhao’s *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* inherited the *Mādhyamaka* philosophy of Nāgārjuna 龍樹. Sengzhao rejected the traditional Chinese debate on being and nonbeing via the standard of whether self-nature is sustained (*Zixing* 自性, *svabhāva*) and proposed the *Mādhyamaka* theory. The dispute then transfigured into neither being nor nonbeing (*Feiyou feiwu* 非有非無), which implied that the two principal notions of being and nonbeing were also conditionally generated.

Sengzhao referenced several Buddhist texts such as the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (*Dazhidulun* 大智度論, *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*) and the *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Zhonglu* 中論, *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā*) to illustrate the self-nature of the emptiness of the being. His argumentation primarily employed the approach of negating both sides of the dualist viewpoint and mooted the conception of neither being nor nonbeing to demonstrate the attribute of dependent origination. The former idea signifies that all phenomena may appear to exist in the world but do not truly exist because they are subject to destruction and change. Similarly, the latter notion emphasizes that the phenomenon of change remains ubiquitous and constant even though all things change. In Sengzhao’s words:

Inexistence can be called “inexistent” if it is profoundly motionless. If the myriad things were inexistent, they should not arise. (Robinson 1967, p. 225) 夫無則湛然不動，可謂之無；萬物若無，則不應起。 (Ven. Sengzhao, p. 152c)

He achieved the transition from being and nonbeing to neither being nor nonbeing by negating the polar sides of the argument and positing the concept of neither being nor nonbeing. Sengzhao believed that if a phenomenon truly existed, it would exist inherently and constantly without relying on external conditions. He cited this example:

If existence were absolute existence, the existence would always exist of itself and would not have to wait for conditions before it existed. In the case of absolute inexistence, inexistence would always inexist of itself and would not have to wait for conditions before it insisted. (Robinson 1967, p. 225) 夫有若真有，有自常有，豈待緣而後有哉？譬彼真無，無自常無，豈待緣而後無也！ (Ven. Sengzhao, p. 152c)

The notions of being and nonbeing underwent a conceptual change through the theory of neither being nor nonbeing presented by Sengzhao in *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*. In this context, being and nonbeing must refer to entities that do not change and remain constant in nature. Being must remain unchanged to be considered being, and nonbeing must remain unchanged to be considered nonbeing. This idea differs completely from the being of metaphysics and the nonbeing of the annihilation of entities.

Sengzhao used traditional Chinese concepts, propositions, thought structures, and ways of understanding, but the main argument of his thesis altered their cognition. His views were directly derived from the *Mādhyamaka* of Indian Buddhism, particularly the ideas posited in *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* as translated by his teacher Kumārajīva. In the aforementioned thesis, the interrogator believes that the self-nature of all phenomena emanates from their usefulness, such as the utility of a bottle or cloth. The nature of the type of being stemming from the union of conditions was considered by the *Mādhyamaka* school as a phenomenon originating from causes and conditions. This nature is not a characteristic of being, rather, it denotes emptiness (*Kongxing* 空性, *śūnyatā*). An example is provided later in the text in the form of a story about a gold mine incorporating copper. The author of the thesis argued that such an ore cannot be called real gold; similarly, a being emanating from a union of conditions cannot be called a being. Such a being is not a true being (*Zhenyou* 真有), just as gold that includes copper impurities is not true gold. The *Mūlamādhyamakakārikā* also mentioned that the following:

An entity that has become different is a nonentity (Garfield 1995, p. 222). 因有有法故，有壞名為無。(Ven. Kumārajīva T.1564, p. 181a)

Nonbeing arises because of the destruction of being. Nonbeing is the disappearance of being, and similar to being, nonbeing also emanates from causes and conditions. Nonbeing does not display stable and constant properties; therefore, it is also not representative of the true nature. In this manner, Nāgārjuna redefined being and nonbeing based on their conditioned origination characteristics. In his view, the idea of being and nonbeing is falsely understood by ordinary individuals. Being should always sustain its nature and remain unchanged by the union of causes and conditions; similarly, nonbeing should also maintain its original nature.

Therefore, being and nonbeing were endowed with a special referential meaning in Nāgārjuna's conception, namely the Buddhist philosophical concepts of eternalism (*Changjian* 常見, *śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi*) and annihilationism (*Duanjian* 斷見, *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi*). This signification contradicted the characteristics of dependent origination in the Buddhist comprehension of phenomena. Consequently, it precluded adherence to the idea of eternalism and annihilationism. Sengzhao evidently applied the *Mādhyamaka* philosophy of Indian Buddhism to remedy the difficulties posed by the mystical concepts of being and nonbeing that then prevailed in Chinese culture. He redirected the discussion of being and nonbeing toward the elucidation of dependent origination and concluded that being and nonbeing are unreal. Subsequently, he deduced that emptiness is the essence of all phenomena.

2.2. Translating the Discussion of Name and Thing-in-Itself into Dependent Origination

The conceptual distinctions between the name and the thing-in-itself have been intensely debated in ancient Chinese philosophy since the pre-Qin 先秦 period (?–221 B.C.) and have been much increasingly addressed by Chinese philosophers. For instance, Hang (2001, p. 61) has classified these controversies into dual relationships: that between language and the world, and that between language and practical action. Concurrently, G. Yang (1990, pp. 48–53) posits that the Confucian school, with its emphasis on rationality, the Mohist tradition, foregrounding sensory perception, and the Daoist lineage, privileging intuition, serve as exemplars of distinct interpretive approaches to resolving the pre-Qin conundrum of the name and thing-in-itself correspondence.

Sengzhao offered his own perspective on this classical philosophical relationship, redirecting it toward the doctrine of dependent origination, as evidenced in the following passages attributed to him and relevant annotations:

If you seek a thing through a name, there is no actual thing that matches the name. If you seek a name through a thing, the name has no efficacy in obtaining the thing. (Robinson 1967, p. 226) 夫以名求物，物無當名之實。以物求名，名無得物之功。(Ven. Sengzhao, p. 152c)

If we say that the thing-in-itself is the name, all things are the same as sounds and characters. [Since the thing-in-itself is equated with names, it implies that all substantial entities have become mere nominalized concepts, such as sounds and characters.] 若以物體是名者，則一切物體皆同音聲文字。(Ven. Zunshi, p. 165c)

If we seek a name through a thing-in-itself, does this mean that we have the sensations of coldness or heat near our teeth and cheeks when we talk about fire or ice? [The name has no efficacy in obtaining the thing] 以物求名，如召火呼冰，豈實有寒熱以及齒頰耶？(Ven. Deqing, p. 340c)

The annotations by Zunshi⁷ and Deqing (1546–1623) reveal Sengzhao's concepts of the name and thing-in-itself within the philosophical tradition dating back to the pre-Qin era, affirming that the idea of the thing-in-itself and the notion of the thing's name are inequivalent. Names or terms such as fire or ice do not impart the feeling of coldness or heat, and this disparity signifies the difference between the name and the thing-in-itself. Sengzhao's argumentation proceeds with a two-way reasoning: from the name to the thing-in-itself and from the thing-in-itself to the name. It ultimately results in an incorrect deduction as it refutes the traditional distinction between the name and the thing-in-itself, questions the reliability of the name and the thing-in-itself, and metamorphoses the distinction between the name and the thing-in-itself into the problem of emptiness.

In *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*, Sengzhao cited the example of the phantom man (*Huanhuaren* 幻化人) who has only the name of a human but is not a real human (*Zhenren* 真人). Thus, the phantom man is named as a person but is not truly human. Therefore, if we seek a real human being by evoking the name of a human being (i.e., if we seek the real human being through a phantom man, which is also labeled human in Chinese), we will certainly make a mistake. This is the meaning conveyed by the saying, "A thing without an actual to match its name is not a thing" (*Wu wu dangmingzhishi* 物無當名之實; see Robinson, p. 226). Conversely, seeking the name from the thing-in-itself is also unreliable because it is equally impossible to obtain the conceptual name of a human from that of a phantom man. This is the signification of the statement, "A name without the efficacy to obtain a thing is not a name" (*Ming wu dewuzhigong* 名無得物之功; see Robinson 1967, p. 226).

Sengzhao refuted the traditional debate between the name and thing-in-itself not because he proved that the name and thing-in-itself do not correspond, but because the nature of a thing arising from conditions determines that the name and thing-in-itself do not correspond. Therefore, Sengzhao began with the traditional concept of the name and the thing-in-itself and transmogrified the notion into the philosophy of emptiness.

To understand the cognition of the *Mādhyamaka*, Sengzhao used traditional concepts in Chinese philosophy and culture, from the distinctions between being and nonbeing to the differences between the name and the thing-in-itself. He directed the concepts of being/nonbeing and name/thing-in-itself to the properties of emptiness and the dependent origination of things by introducing the logical notions of truth (*Zhen* 真) and falsehood (*Jia* 假). The cognition of the self-nature of things (*Wuxing* 物性, *svabhāva*) is achieved by recognizing that things are neither constantly existing nor constantly ceasing to exist. This perception is imbibed by refuting both extreme views (*Bianjian* 邊見, *antagrāhadrṣṭi*) and attaining an accurate understanding of reality (*Shixiang* 實相, *tattva*), a state Sengzhao described in *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* as "one fits one's spirit to the interstice between the existent and the inexistent" (契神於有無之間; see Robinson, p. 222).

3. Two Interpretations of the Different and Widely Divergent Reading Modes of the Four Chinese Characters of *Bu* 不, *Zhen* 真, *Kong* 空, and *Lun* 論 from the Jin Dynasty to Tang Dynasty

Sengzhao knew the limitations of language and the tensions of being compelled to use it to communicate (Liebenthal 1968, p. 34). He leveraged the unique charms of the Chinese language to determine the conception of emptiness in China. The Chinese construal of emptiness was shaped by the paradoxical generations (Ho 2013, pp. 505–22; Ichimura 1992, pp. 51–71) of the contents of his thesis which was filled with “wild words” (Thompson 2002, pp. 152–221), as well as the rich interpretations of his work by later generations. As a result, a rich array of divergent interpretations emerged, beginning with the nuanced interpretations of the title itself.

3.1. *Buzhengukong* 不真故空 and *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空: Huida's Annotation and the Unfolding of Dual Interpretive Possibilities

Huida's *Annotation on Zhaolun* posited the two constructions and connotations of *Bu* 不, *Zhen* 真, *Kong* 空, and *Lun* 論, the four Chinese characters forming the title, *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute: Buzhen* 不真 *Konglun* 空論 and *Bu* 不 *Zhenkong* 真空 *Lun* 論. The former connotes *Buzhengukong* 不真故空 [Because it is dependent origination, it is emptiness] and the latter implies *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 [It is not absolute emptiness]. The annotation reads:

The name of “*Bu* 不 *Zhen* 真 *Kong* 空” has two explanations. One is that the elements (*Fa* 法, *dharma*) of the world are not real, and their self-nature is emptiness; the other is that the worldly elements are superficial and false, so the emptiness resulting from the elimination of falsity is not true emptiness, but rather named emptiness. 此不真空名，所作兩釋：一云世法不真，體性自空；一云俗法浮偽，遣偽之空亦非真空，名不真空。(Ven. Huida, p. 58c)

Huida believed that the first phase of interpreting emptiness refers to the nature of all elements in the world but is based on the use of skillful means (*Fangbianshanqiao* 方便善巧, *upāyakauśalya*) of articulation. Such expressions of emptiness do not denote “particular practical works”, rather, they represent “normative guidelines.”⁸ Hence, the emptiness expressed through skillful means is not “thatness” but serves as a tool for comprehending thatness. In this regard, Huida actually constructed two phases of the apprehension of emptiness: understanding emptiness through skillful means (*Fangbiankong* 方便空, *upāyaśūnya*) and knowing the thatness-of-emptiness (*Zhenshikong* 真實空, *tattvaśūnya*). The insights of wisdom allow the realization that skillful means of expression are themselves instruments emanating from the other: they are thus tools that point to reality, and must also be refuted. Huida posited in his annotations that this awareness and experience denote reality:

If the wisdom of emptiness is named true emptiness, the convention of emptiness should not be named true emptiness. 若以俗空名不真者，般若之空應名真空。(Ven. Huida, p. 58c)

That is, emptiness grasped through skillful means is not thatness, and one should not confound proficient tools with the goal they indicate. Such an error would result in misconstruing the emptiness apprehended through skillful means for the thatness-of-emptiness.

It must be elucidated that Huida's understanding of the emptiness obtained from skillful means differs diametrically from the discussion inscribed in “the chapter on the destruction of emptiness” (*Pokongping* 破空品) in *One-Hundred-Verse-Treatise* (*Bailun* 百論). Huida's construal of the emptiness of skillful means is intended to constantly eliminate conceptual phenomena and reveal thatness: emptiness that can be destroyed is not the appropriate understanding of emptiness.

The chapter on the destruction of emptiness in *One-Hundred-Verse-Treatise* discusses the mistaken view that emptiness can be destroyed. It is a misunderstanding of emptiness that there is an emptiness that can be destroyed. As the text by master Jizang states:

If you destroy something that exists, it falls into the realm of destruction. If you destroy something that does not exist, what are you destroying? 是破若有，已墮可破中，空無所有。是破若無，汝何所破？ (Ven. Kumārajīva, T.1569, p. 181a)

In the world, people consider things to be real, so they call it truth. In the eyes of sages, things are not real, so they are not true. Therefore, we should know that there is no ultimate reality in things, but we think there is due to our own perceptions. 俗于世人為實故稱諦，俗于聖人不實故非諦。當知實無諸法，於情謂有。 (Ven. Jizang, T1827, p. 237b-c)

Huida's method of interpreting emptiness also avoids this erroneous perspective of grasping emptiness as a thing. He emphasizes that thatness transcends form and is inconceivable; it can only be expressed through skillful means of constant elimination and cannot be directly explained.

3.2. Negating Śūnya or Uccheda? Yuan Kang's Controversial Discourse and Dual Semantics of Bushizhenkong 不是真空

Notably, later commentators and interpreters of the *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* sought to conform to the trends of the Buddha-nature theory of Chinese Buddhism. They further equated skillful means with emptiness and redirected the goal toward the concept of Buddha-nature, which yielded a completely divergent interpretation: the expression "It is not absolute emptiness" in Chinese indicates that Buddha-nature exists along with emptiness.

This change has been highlighted since the early Tang dynasty 唐朝 (618–907) in Yuankang's *Annotation on Zhaolun*, which recorded the following commentary:

There are those who say that *Zhen* 真 refers to being, and *Kong* 空 refers to nonbeing. To say *Buzhenkong* 不真空 is to understand the doctrine of the middle way of neither being nor nonbeing. This is like drawing legs on a snake, not the intended meaning. 有人云：真者是有，空者是無。言不真空，即明不有不無中道義也，此是為蛇畫足，非得意也。 (Ven. Yuankang, p. 170c)

All things arise through dependent origination, therefore they are not truly being, thus they are empty. 諸法虛假，故曰不真。虛假不真，所以是空耳。 (Ven. Yuankang, p. 170c)

Yuankang believed that it was redundant to indicate the middle way by denying being and nonbeing and that *Buzhenkong* 不真空 simply signified "Because it is of dependent origination, it is emptiness." Therefore, emptiness is the middle way and this idea was the focal thought of Sengzhao's *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*.

But were the scholars whom Yuankang criticized really as ignorant of the meaning of emptiness as he claimed? Scrutiny of the aforementioned arguments reveals that both sides of the discussion probably failed to establish their perspectives from the outset.

The difference between Yuankang and the object of his criticism is clearly vested in the divergent meanings assumed for the Chinese character *Kong* 空 in the three Chinese characters *Bu* 不 *Zhen* 真 *Kong* 空. Yuankang stated *Kong* 空 is emptiness (*śūnya*), a meaning congruent with the unbreakable emptiness posited in the *One-Hundred-Verse-Treatise* and the thatness-of-emptiness indicated by Huida through skillful means. Hence, *Bu* 不 *Zhen* 真 *Kong* 空 signifies, "because it is dependent in its origination, it is emptiness."

Conversely, the objects of Yuankang's criticism understand the *Zhen* 真 in these three characters as being (*You* 有, *śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi*) and the *Kong* 空 as nonbeing (*Wu* 無, *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi*). Hence, *Bu* 不 *Zhen* 真 *Kong* 空 implies to them the middle way of denying being and nonbeing, thus deriving the emptiness of the middle way. Yuankang criticizes this view.

Emptiness is based on the great vehicle's (*Dacheng* 大乘, *mahāyāna*) scriptures (*Jing* 經, *sūtra*). Today's scholars are often slanderous, saying that emptiness is not a definitive (*Liaoyi* 了義, *nītārtha*) view. 諸大乘經論皆以空為宗本，今之學者多生誹謗，謂說空者，為不了義。 (Ven. Yuankang, p. 170c)

Evidently, the criticized scholars were expressing the meaning of emptiness in the middle way using negative means (*Zhe* 遮, *pratisēdha*), and described nonbeing as emptiness, a common phenomenon at that time. For instance, Jizang also said.

As Sengzhao's *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* makes clear, there is not real being [they are not real because they are conditioned origination], so there is being, there is emptiness; emptiness is not absolutely nothing, so, although there is emptiness, there is phenomenon of being. 如肇公《不真空論》明有非真有，故雖有而空；空非真空，雖空而有。(Ven. Jizang, T1780, p. 892)

At this juncture, it is clear that the two sides are discussing different connotations of Kong, with one side talking about emptiness (*Kong* 空, *śūnya*) and the other about non-being (*Kongwu* 空無, *uccheda*). Thus, neither perspective is erroneous; rather, Yuankang misunderstood the other side's iterations about Kong.

3.3. Through Negating Śūnya to Connect Buddha-Nature and Tathāgatagarbha: A Reappraisal of Cheng'guan's Appraisal of Huida and Yuan Kang

Cheng'guan 澄觀 (738–839), the famous Tang dynasty master of the *Huayan* sect 華嚴宗, analyzed and responded to Yuankang's critique, mentioning it in his book.

While Yuankang's view does not reach the comprehension of Sengzhao, Huida's understanding does. *Zhenkong* 真空 is not the opposite of being, but is supposed to be the object to be negated. This is the reason why Sengzhao always uses the negative prefix in his treatises; things are not entirely absent, and this is what *Buzhenkong* means. 康公云萬法不真故空。不得肇意；達公云不遷當俗，俗則不生，不真為真，真但名說。卻得肇意。此中真空非是前文對妙有之真空，此中真空是所破病人，謂真諦一向無物為真空義。是故肇公以不不之，云不一向是無物，故云不真空。(Ven. Cheng'guan, p. 242b-c)

Initially, Cheng'guan censured Yuankang for not understanding the meaning of Sengzhao and affirmed that Huida's interpretation was aligned with Sengzhao's meaning. Then, he argued that the word *Zhenkong* 真空 did not connote emptiness (*Kong* 空, *śūnya*); rather, it indicated the object Sengzhao was attempting to negate. Thus, it denoted nonbeing (*Wu* 無, *uccheda*).⁹ Therefore, according to Cheng'guan, the title *Buzhenkonglun* 不真空論 meant "a critical essay expressing negation," and the object of the criticism was placing the word *Zhenkong* 真空 after the character *Bu* 不, that is, nonbeing. Essentially, the thesis denied that the absolute truth (*Zhendi* 真諦, *paramārthasatya*) is complete nonbeing.

Interestingly, Yuankang was a *Sanlun* 三論 sect (*Sanlunzong* 三論宗) monk specializing in the scriptures on *prajñā* (*Borejing* 般若經, *prajñāpāramitāsūtra*). Was he really unable to distinguish between emptiness and nonbeing as Cheng'guan claimed? It is evident from the attitudes of Yuankang's Tang society toward the system of scriptures on *prajñā* and from the history of Buddhist classics in vogue at that time that this was not the case. The phenomenon confronted by Yuankang was closely associated with the widespread understanding of the scriptures on the *prajñā* system as a provisional view (*Buliao* 不了義, *neyārtha*), as well as to the scriptures about Buddha-nature and the classical *Tathāgatagarbha* popular at the time.

Chinese Buddhism has been dominated by the theory of Buddha-nature since the Sui and Tang dynasties, following the translation of the *Discourse on the Great Decease* (*Daboniepanjing* 大般涅槃經, *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*) and the emergence of the concept of Buddha-nature during the Jin-Song dynasties 晉宋 (420–479). The Chinese Buddhist community of that time generally agreed on the *Kong* 空 (emptiness) and *Bukong* 不空 (nonemptiness) significations because of the prevalence of Buddha-nature classics. Similar theories were recorded in the varied popular scriptures and treatises. Some examples include:

Moreover, two senses of suchness are distinguished through language. What are they? The first is emptiness in accordance with what is real. This is because it is ultimately able to reveal what is real. The second is nonemptiness in accordance with what is real. This is because it has its own intrinsic reality, which is replete

with untainted qualities. (Jorgensen et al. 2019, p. 70) 真如者，依言說分別有二種義。云何為二？一者如實空，以能究竟顯實故。二者如實不空，以有自體，具足無漏性功德故。(Ven. Paramārtha, p. 576a)

Listen! Good friends, Buddha-nature is wisdom and the ultimate truth of emptiness. The emptiness spoken of here is the simultaneous negation of emptiness and nonemptiness..... understanding emptiness and not understanding nonemptiness is not called the middle way. 善男子！佛性者名第一義空，第一義空名為智慧。所言空者，不見空與不空.....見一切空，不見不空，不名中道。(Ven. Dharmakṣema, p. 523b)

Thus, Buddha-nature classics employed the ideas of emptiness and nonemptiness to express the middle way of Buddha-nature and the middle way of extinction (*Niepan* 涅槃, *nirvāṇa*). Chinese monks who followed these scriptures and treatises thus naturally condemned both emptiness and nonemptiness. At that time, the word *Bukong* 不空 was understood as nonemptiness, and this construal was supported by the prevailing scriptures and treatises.

In addition, scriptures about *prajñā* (*Bore* 般若, wisdom) were deemed to articulate flawed views (H. Yang 2001, pp. 185–230) and were commonly included in Chinese Buddhist tenet classifications (*Panjiao* 判教). In actuality, Yuankang criticized the scholars of that time for defaming emptiness because they upheld the conclusions derived from the scriptures of Buddha-nature. The two discrete conceptions of emptiness and nonemptiness were based on discrete scriptures, and differences in understanding were thus expected. As a monk of the *Sanlun* 三論 sect, Yuankang primarily studied scriptures about *prajñā* and would certainly have harbored such contradictions and conflicts.

Two completely divergent interpretations of the title, *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* (*Buzhenkonglun* 不真空論) are thus evident from Huida to Yuankang and Cheng'guan: "Because it is dependent in its origination, it is emptiness" (*Buzhengukong* 不真故空) and "It is not absolute emptiness" (*Bushizhenkong* 不是真空). The signification of the latter viewpoint of "not absolutely emptiness" underwent several transfigurations: from affirming the existence of the phenomenon of being to dialectically expressing emptiness to negating emptiness and dialectically expressing the idea of Buddha-nature. The expression of nonemptiness gradually became mainstream in Chinese Buddhism in tandem with the trend toward the Buddha-nature theory, and the meaning of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* (*Buzhenkonglun* 不真空論) also changed fundamentally. The Buddha-nature theory thus accomplished its legitimate entry into interpretations of Sengzhao's works.

4. The Blending of Interpretations and the Reconciliation of Questioning in the Song and Yuan Dynasties

Once the Buddha-nature theory was introduced into the interpretation of the *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*, the *Buzhengukong* 不真故空 and *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 interpretations of *Buzhenkong* 不真空 were both commonly adopted by annotations inscribed since the Song dynasty. Both construals aimed to integrate the conceptions of emptiness and Buddha-nature in terms of the emptiness and nonemptiness of buddha-nature. Such annotations were presented by Zunshi 遵式, Meng'an 夢庵, Jingyuan 淨源, and Wencai 文才 in the Song and Yuan dynasties. For instance, Meng'an said,

"Zhen 真" means true, "Bu 不" is an intelligent subject capable of breaking down misconceptions, while "Zhen 真" is the object that is broken down. and "Kong 空" is the truth that is revealed after the false understanding is broken. 真者，實也。不字為能破智，真字為所破執，空乃所顯中道、第一義諦。(Zhang, p. 385)

Meng'an cogitated that things are conditionally created and will perish, and that which cannot sustain its self-nature is named an "inconstant existence" (*Feishiyou* 非實有). However, the fact that phenomena are "not totally nonexistent" (*Feishiwu* 非實無) must also be affirmed. The combination of these two implied that the *Buzhen* 不真 and the *Kong* 空 in *Buzhenkong* 不真空 summarized *Buzhen* 不真, which remained an interpretation of *Buzhen*-

gukong 不真故空. Zunshi, Jingyuan, and Wencai also similarly interpreted the term. However, their specific arguments are not detailed in this essay.

Interestingly, these scholars turned immediately to *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 for their explanations and thematic attributions after using the *Buzhengkong* 不真故空 as the basis for their interpretations. According to Zunshi,

It follows from the above inference that the conditionally generated thing is neither *You* 有 nor *Wu* 無. To deny both is the beginning of the process of breaking down misconceptions and revealing thatness. Hence, the title of the essay is *Buzhenkong* 不真空. However, the conditionally generated thing is only an expression of emptiness, and the negation of both *You* 有 and *Wu* 無 [the *Wu* 無 at this point is strictly a reference to emptiness] is to reveal thatness. 由上推之，則因緣性相不實有無。有無雙寂之義，顯於此也。故題曰：不真空。然緣法不有無，即顯性空義，若有無雙寂，即顯第一義諦，乃法性實相之義。(Zunshi, p. 165b)

A pure heart is not conditioned from its source; it is the truth after the breaking down of misconceptions and is therefore called thatness. 一真心本絕諸相，絕相之真，故稱實相。(Zunshi, p.143a)

Zunshi argues that the *Bu* 不 in *Buzhenkong* 不真空 denotes the negation of *You* 有 and *Wu* 無. This argument concerns emptiness, signifying that things are conditionally produced and their ultimate expression is thatness. However, the basis of thatness is posited as the “true heart” (*Zhenxin* 真心), injecting the notion of Buddha-nature. Thus, *Buzhenkong* 不真空 is apparently transformed into an interpretation that combines emptiness with Buddha-nature. Meng’an, Jingyuan, and Wencai also adopted such an interpretation. They employed disparate concepts but amalgamated emptiness with their own conceptions of the true heart theory (*Zhenxinglun* 真心論), which was imbued with the sectionalized concepts of Chinese Buddhism.

5. The Controversy about Emptiness of the Nonabsolute in the Context of the Late Ming Polemics on Things Do Not Shift

The tremendous debate triggered by Sengzhao’s other work, *Things Do Not Shift*, was rejuvenated during the Ming dynasty. The theme of *Buzhenkong* 不真空, particularly the divergent understanding of *Buzhengkong* 不真故空 and *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 reemerged as represented by Huanyou 幻有, and even caused a controversy. Huanyou stated in *An Explanatory Quotation About Xingzhu* (*Xingzhu shi yin* 性住釋引) why he responded to Zhencheng’s 鎮澄 criticism.¹⁰ Huanyou refuted the understanding of *Buzhengkong* as being partial and inconclusive, basing his judgment of “the final nirvāṇa” (*mahāparinirvāṇa*) concept of “neither emptiness nor nonemptiness” as articulated in the chapter titled “Lion’s Roar” (*Shizihouping* 獅子吼品) in the *Great Discourse on the Final Nirvāṇa*. In one of his works, Huanyou mentioned his conversation with a monk as follows:

The monk said, “I have seen yours *An Explanatory Quotation About Xingzhu* and I think Kongyin’s 空印(鎮澄) point of view is correct and yours is flawed. According to your view, does this mean that we should ultimately interpret the three words *Buzhenkong* as a single phrase?” The master replied, “Yes.” The monk continued to question, “Then, there is no such grammatical structure in our language. In my view, these three words mean that all things cannot maintain their nature constantly, and this is emptiness.” The master replied, “Does this mean that there exists a thing that can maintain its nature constantly in the world?” The monk said, “Yes, such as the diamond relics” (*Sheli* 舍利, *śarīra*). The master said, “You have not yet understood the reason why things are conditionally produced, because although the relic can be long-lasting, it still cannot maintain its self-nature, and it will be damaged over time. Based on the above, do you still think there are things that can maintain self-nature forever?” The monk said, “My knowledge is limited. I don’t fully know everything, but as far as I know, nothing can maintain self-nature, so it is emptiness.” The master replied, “Then, do you know that emptiness

is also conditionally generated?” (僧)曰：某看和尚性住釋見，有笑于空印大師處，如和尚意，畢竟要把‘不真空’三字作一句念為是耶？師曰：然。曰：然則世間文字中，但無這樣文法，如某甲看，實以世間法法不真故空耳。師曰：然則世間真故有不空物乎？僧曰：有，即金剛舍利等是。師曰：然汝豈不自迷其源乎，何則？若金剛等以如性故能堅久者，見火則不合鎔，唯舍利以業力熏故，能堅且久者。然亦曾無自性，又何嘗不空哉？除此外，別更有不空物乎麼？僧曰：某識見不廣，世間物未能盡識，如眼前所見，則未有真不空物，其實唯不真故空耳。師曰：然則汝還知世間空亦不真乎麼！ (Huanyou, p. 675b)

The cited dialogue demonstrates that the interrogator introduced a crucial historical controversy that emanated during the late Ming period from Kongyin’s debate about interpreting *Buzhenkong* 不真空 in *Things Do Not Shift*. He then argued that *Buzhenkong* 不真空 was equivalent to *Buzhengukong* 不真故空. However, Huanyou used the example of relics to gradually present the concept of emptiness without self-nature and then negated the affirmation of emptiness in *Buzhengukong* 不真故空. At this point, the dialog actually expresses the transition from *Buzhengukong* 不真故空 to *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空, but this elucidation remains based on Huida’s commentary.

In reality, Huanyou’s denial of *Zhenkong* 真空 results in a theory based on the *Tathā-gatagarbha*. In his words,

In my leisure time, I read the *Discourse on the Great Decease*, through which I learned that the theory of emptiness is not a definitive view. Later, I read the *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Zhonglun* 中論, *Mūlamādhyaṃakakārikā*) and the *Things Do Not Shift*, which express the great vehicle (*Dacheng* 大乘, *mahāyāna*) of Buddhist philosophy and are consistent with the theme of the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofalianhuajing* 妙法蓮華經, *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*) and the *Discourse on the Great Decease*. In the *Lotus Sūtra*’s chapter on parables... the idea of “Three vehicles attributed to one” (*Huisan guiyi* 會三歸一)¹¹ is just like the *Root Verses on the Middle Way*’s theory of the ultimate all phenomena. From this, I understand that the dichotomy of concepts such as the self-nature of emptiness (*Xingkong* 性空, *śūnyatā*) and the self-nature of not shifting (*Xingzhu* 性住) are not the truth... which helped me eradicate erroneous and false knowledge, and thus comprehend thatness. 餘閒簡《涅槃》大典，始知性空之說，尚屬不了義經，豈得無說，再閱《中論》，益知《物不遷》等論，其出有自，皆究竟大乘無生旨來，根本與《法華》《涅槃》潛符密契，如出一口，即《法華》譬喻品.....是破三乘之權，歸一乘之實事耳。正合《中論》破盡諸法，始知性住性空、真諦俗諦，以至般若、涅槃皆為戲論不實.....戲論皆滅，戲論滅故，通達諸法實相。 (Huanyou, pp. 659b–660a)

Based on the doctrine of “Three vehicles attributed to one” articulated in the *Lotus Sūtra*, Huanyou believed that the four treatises written by Sengzhao, including *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*, are skillful means of negating *Zhenkong* 真空. Therefore, *Bu* 不 is used to negate *Zhenkong* and reveal the middle path. This middle path also appears in the “Lion’s Roar” chapter in *Discourse on the Great Decease*, which reveals that the great decease indicates the denial of both emptiness and nonemptiness. Huanyou refutes *Buzhengukong* 不真故空 through the traditional interpretation of the Huida doctrine and further unveils the Buddha-nature idea by negating both emptiness and nonemptiness.

Deqing was one of the four great monks of the late Ming dynasty. He wrote the last commentary on the *Zhaolun* in ancient China, titled *A Brief Annotation About the Zhaolun* (*Zhaolunlvhezhu* 肇論略註). Deqing participated in the great debate on the *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* in the late Ming dynasty. His annotation also integrated varied schools of thought and summarized the two meanings of *Buzhenkong* 不真空 as follows:

不真有二義：一有為之法，緣生故假，假而不實，其體本空，此俗諦不真故空，名不真空；真性緣起，成一切法，體非斷滅，不是實實的空，名不真空。 (Deqing, p. 337a)

“Not real” (*Buzhen* 不真) has two meanings. First, it refers to the phenomenon that arises conditionally, which is emptiness because it cannot maintain its self-nature constantly and is thus regarded as “Not real.” Hence, the first meaning of

“Not real” is that phenomena are not real or arise conditionally, which is emptiness. Second, it refers to the *Tathāgatagarbha*, which generates all phenomena when it is obscured by ignorance. However, It is not absolute nothing that exists, so it is called “not really nothing”. (*Buzhenkong* 不真空)

In Deqing’s opinion, the term nonemptiness (*Buzhenkong* 不真空) encompassed the two previously discussed connotations. Deqing actively adopted the classical *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine of “emptiness and nonemptiness” to verify *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空. As a result, *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 is directed toward the affirmation of Buddha-nature and the *Tathāgatagarbha*.

6. Conclusions

In summary, Sengzhao’s *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* represents a sinicized expression of a bilinguistic context of Sino-Indian culture. In this work, Sengzhao derived insights from the *Mādhyamaka* school of Indian Buddhism but simultaneously integrated concepts from the Chinese cultural context, such as being and nonbeing, and the name and thing-in-itself. This assimilation resulted in a sinicized approach that introduced the *Mādhyamaka* doctrine to Chinese Buddhism.

However, the interpretation of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* transformed as Buddhism continued to adapt to the Chinese landscape influenced by the flourishing theory of Buddha-nature. *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* originally exemplified the sinicization of *Mādhyamaka* thought but assumed the theoretical form of the inclusion of emptiness, Buddha-nature, and the *Tathāgatagarbha* in the backdrop of flourishing discussions on the theory of Buddha-nature in the Chinese context. This transformation was influenced by the two distinct interpretations of the four-character title, *Buzhenkonglun*: *Buzhen* 不真 *Konglun* 空論 and *Bu* 不 *Zhenkong* 真空 *Lun* 論. The former connotes *Buzhengukong* 不真故空 [Because it is dependent origination, it is emptiness] and the latter implies *Bushizhenkong* 不是真空 [It is not absolute emptiness], it was particularly intertwined with the Buddha-nature theory, thereby fully integrating the interpretation of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* into a unique framework that combined emptiness with the profundity of Buddha-nature.

The compatibility of the concept of Buddha-nature and the *Tathāgatagarbha* stemmed from the assertion “It is not true emptiness,” and the original doctrinal discourse and the legitimacy of this interpretive fusion invited further deliberations. These theories became recognized before Sengzhao’s passing and before they were widely disseminated. The discrepancies between the *Mādhyamaka* emptiness doctrine and the concepts of Buddha-nature and *Tathāgatagarbha* simultaneously impugned the legitimacy of such an interpretation.

Prominent Chinese scholar Zhang, Chunbo 張春波 argued in *A Scholarly Commentary on the Treatise of Sengzhao* (*Zhaolunjiaoshi* 肇論校釋) that subsequent commentaries on Sengzhao’s treatises imposed ideas that did not exist in Sengzhao’s time onto his original works, resulting in misinterpretations rather than authentic meanings. Zhang presented the following perspectives:

(Zunshi) Transforming Sengzhao’s *Zhaolun* through the lens of the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* text. (遵式)用《起信論》改造肇論。(Zhang 2010, p. 11)

(Jingyuan) The commentary *Comments as Templates* (*Lingmochao*, 令模鈔) actually interprets “*Buzhenkong* 不真空” as “This emptiness is not true,” casting Sengzhao as an essentialist philosopher... This interpretation introduces elements of *Huayan* 華嚴 doctrine into the interpretation of Sengzhao’s *Zhaolun*... fundamentally deviating from Sengzhao’s original intention. (淨源)《令模鈔》正是把‘不真空’解釋為‘此空不真’，而把僧肇改扮為實在論者.....對肇論的解釋難免混入華嚴宗觀點.....根本不符合僧肇原意。(Zhang 2010, p. 14)

(Wencai) Interpreting Sengzhao’s *Zhaolun* through the lens of *Huayan* 華嚴 doctrine, which Zhang contends is a completely incorrect approach. (文才)是以華嚴宗觀點解釋肇論.....這樣解釋完全錯了。(Zhang 2010, p. 20)

(Deqing) Utilizing a unified perspective from Zen Buddhism as the guiding ideology resulted in distortions in many aspects of his commentary. (德清)以禪教一致的觀點為指導思想，這就使得他的注釋在很多地方失真。(Zhang 2010, p. 25)

The confluence of these perspectives underscores the intricate considerations entailing the conflation of these interpretations, especially in the context of Sengzhao's writings and the evolving Chinese Buddhist landscape.

In general, Zhang challenged the legitimacy of commentaries written after the beginning of the Song and Ming dynasties. His perspective deems interpretations of Sengzhao's treatises in varied Chinese Buddhist sectarian frameworks as "distorted," "misleading," "deviating from the original intent," "far removed from the intended meaning," and "entirely incorrect." It is widely acknowledged that the critiques of the concept of "nature and awakening" (*Benjue* 本覺) postulated in the School of Buddhist Inner Learning (*Neixueyuan* 內學院) and modern critical trends toward *Tathāgatagarbha* philosophy profoundly influenced this viewpoint. Zhang was a disciple of Cheng Lv 呂灝, who belonged to this school of thought. Therefore, Zhang's critiques of subsequent interpretations of the *Tathāgatagarbha* and the Buddha-nature theory were based on meticulous editing and extended naturally from his belief system.

How should we approach such creative interpretations? Certainly, posthumous theories cannot be retroactively inserted into the author's mind. However, this proscription does not imply that an author's texts cannot accommodate later ideas without completely losing their legitimacy. From the perspective of accepting contents related to Buddha-nature and *Tathāgatagarbha*, the studied text presents significant factors such as the *Mahāpārīṇirvāṇa* from *Prajñāpāramitā* and the role of *prajñā* as the cause of Buddha-nature. Thus, subsequent theories absorb elements of preceding theories, and although such interpretations moot innovative elements and content, they are also imbued with the distinct characteristics of Chinese Buddhist interpretations. They reflect the transitions in the theoretical interests of Chinese Buddhists and mirror the evolution of preferences toward *Tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha-nature in the evolutionary processes of Chinese Buddhism. The varied interpretations of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* and their developmental differences epitomize the historical reception of the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Mādhyamaka* doctrines in China, from the sinicization of emptiness to the interpretation of *Tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha-nature which, in turn, intensified the process of the sinicization of Buddhist philosophy.

We must recognize the theoretical tensions evoked by discrete interpretive theories, and acknowledge the creative elements in subsequent annotations and interpretations of *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* while identifying their distinguishing elements. We should concurrently approach such distinctive interpretations with sympathy and not negate their rationality, value, and entire significance. This approach could serve as an excellent fundamental attitude toward the interpretation of Chinese Buddhist classics.

Funding: This research was funded by the Chinese National Social Science Fund for Young Scholars Project, 'A Reception History Study of Things Do Not Shift' (23CZJ003).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The Treatise of Sengzhao is a collection of descendants, which is mainly composed of four articles: *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute*, *Things Do Not Shift*, *Prājñā has No Knowing* (*Borewuzhilun* 般若無知論) and *Nirvāṇa is Unnameable* (*Niepanwuminglun* 涅槃無名論), which was praised by later generations as "the four unparalleled papers" 四絕論 in China (Liebenthal 1968, pp. 9–11).

- 2 They are “Emptiness of mind (*Xinwu* 心無)”, “Emptiness is identical with matter (*Jise* 即色)”, “Original emptiness (*Benwu* 本無)”, “Variant of original emptiness (*Benwuyi* 本無異)”, “The world is a dream (*Shihan* 識含)”, “The word is *māyā* (*Huanhua* 幻化)” and “The world is conditioned (*Yuanhui* 緣會)” (Liebenthal 1968, pp. 133–49).
- 3 Huida 惠達 believed it was Dao'an 道安 and Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠, whereas Tang, Yongtong 湯用彤, believed it was Dao'an 道安. Yuan Kang 元康, Zunshi 遵式, Jingyuan 淨源, Wencai 文才, Deqing 德清, Lv, Cheng 呂澂, Hong, Xiuping 洪修平, and others all believed it was Zhu, fatai 竺法汰, and Jizang 吉藏 believed it was Chen 琛. This article adopts the view of Zhu, fatai because I think “Variant of original emptiness” is what Sengzhao criticized and the meaning of “variant” should be that they hold views different from the sect of “original emptiness”, which is precisely the reason why Sengzhao criticized them (Hong 2011, pp. 234–35).
- 4 Presently, scholars have investigated the evolution history of Sengzhao's *Things Do Not Shift* in the Ming dynasty (Jiang 1990, p. 317; Liu et al. 2020, pp. 1–22). There are also scholars who have discussed the controversial philosophical debates in the Ming Dynasty (Liu et al. 2020, pp. 1–22; Zhu 2012, pp. 114–19; Fang 1998, pp. 55–60). Moreover, from the perspective of the topic of time and change discussed in Sengzhao's paper, the understanding of Chinese Buddhism on the topic of time and change since Sengzhao to Zen (J. Liu 2023, pp. 1–15), There was even the participation of the Japanese monk Mujaku Dochu 無著道忠 in the larger discussion of Ming dynasty (Jorgensen 2007, pp. 25–56). The above related research results in the Chinese, English, Japanese academic circles are quite numerous, and will not be repeated here.
- 5 *Buzhen* 不真 means unreal. This is the way the Chinese express conditioned origination (*Yuanqi* 緣起, *pratītyasamutpāda*), according to Chinese Buddhism, things that arise conditionally are not real.
- 6 *Zhenkong* 真空 (Completely Kong) cannot be directly translated as “Completely *śūnya*”, because later changes in the interpretation of the *Emptiness of the Nonabsolute* appear to understand *Kong* as *śūnya* (emptiness) and *ucchedadr̥ṣṭi* (view of annihilationism), which are two completely different understandings.
- 7 The author of *Zhuzhaolunshu* 注肇論疏 written by Ciyun Zunshi 慈雲遵式 or Yuanyi Zunshi 圓義遵式 is disputed by scholars such as Zhang (2010, preface: p. 11), Cao (2009, p. 208), and B. Yang (2023, pp. 80–84), and Japanese scholars such as Makita (1995, p. 277) and Ito (1983–1984, p. 250) in the early time believe that it is the former. However, since the investigation and research of Japanese scholars Suehiro (Yoshida 2000, p. 102) and Yoshida (Yoshida 2000, p. 102), They concluded that the author should be the latter, and scholars such as Ito have changed their previous views. This is a very complex issue, but it is not the subject of this article and will not be covered here.
- 8 John W. Schroeder consider that “The issue is not only whether any particular practice works, but whether it is possible from a Buddhist perspective to establish normative guide lines for all practitioners.” (Schroeder 2001, p. 150).
- 9 When Sengzhao expressed his agreement with the king of Qin's refuting of “absolute true means nothing 真諦廓然無物” (Ven. Sengzhao, p. 157b), he may refer to this wrong understanding of emptiness at that time.
- 10 Huanyou thought that since Zhencheng was his classmate and they worshiped Monk Xiaoyan 笑嚴 together, he had to correct the name of the righteous dharma so as not to defame Xiaoyan or even the reputation of Zen Buddhism (Huanyou, p. 658a-b).
- 11 Three vehicles are vehicles of the disciples (*Shengwencheng* 聲聞乘, *śrāvakayāna*), pratyekabuddha (*Yuanjuecheng* 緣覺乘, *pratyekabuddhayāna*) and vehicle of bodhisattva (*Pusacheng* 菩薩乘, *bodhisattvayāna*). in *Lotus Sūtra*, the above three vehicles are attributed to one vehicle, the vehicle of buddha (*Focheng* 佛乘, *buddhayāna*).

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