



Zen in Natsume Sōseki's Chinese-Style Poetry and Novels: A Study of Intertextuality in Meian

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Abstract: Natsume Sōseki, one of modern Japan's most iconic literary figures, was deeply influenced by classical Chinese literature from his youth, particularly the works of poets such as Wang Wei and Tao Yuanming. Following his studies in England, Sōseki distanced himself from Chinese-style poetry and prose for nearly a decade, only resuming their composition during his convalescence from a serious illness in Shuzenji. Nevertheless, the worldview of Chinese literature remains vividly present in works such as *Kusamakura* (The Three-Cornered World), *Gubijinsō* (The poppy), *Michikusa* (Grass on the Wayside), and *Meian* (Light and Darkness). This study focuses on *Meian*, Sōseki's unfinished posthumous novel, alongside his contemporaneous Chinese-style poetry. By examining shared thematic elements of Zen Buddhism and the philosophical concept of "Sokutenkyoshi" (Following Heaven, Abandoning the Self) across these texts, the analysis identifies their ideological convergences. Furthermore, it traces the evolution of "Sokutenkyoshi" — a cornerstone of Sōseki's late-period thought — to reveal how Zen philosophy bridges the thematic and ideological realms of his poetry and fiction.

Keywords: Natsume Sōseki; Meian; Chinese-style poetry; Sokutenkyoshi; Zen

1. Introduction

Sōseki authored 280 Chinese-style poems in his lifetime, 75 of which were composed during the same period as *Meian* (Light and Darkness). Any discussion of his creative output during this phase must be contextualized within his lifelong pursuit of "Sokutenkyoshi" (Following Heaven, Abandoning the Self)—an ideal state he sought to embody in both literature and life during his final years. This philosophy, widely regarded as the culmination of his Zen-inspired reflections on personal experience, represents a synthesis of his intellectual engagement with Zen Buddhism and his existential journey.

2. The Philosophical Contours of Sōseki's Late Period: "Zen" and "Sokutenkyoshi"

Zen thought exerted as profound an influence on Sōseki as classical Chinese literature, and any interpretation of "Sokutenkyoshi" must be grounded in Zen consciousness. In Buddhism, the concept of "ten" carries connotations of "illumination, naturalness, spontaneity, and purity[1]". Here, "ten" refers to the natural order of the cosmos, while "shi" signifies human ego and desire. The term "Sokutenkyoshi" first emerged during a gathering in November 1916, shortly before Sōseki's death. Consequently, his posthumous novel *Meian* is often regarded as a literary embodiment of this philosophy. However, the pivotal moment for Sōseki's deepening engagement with Zen occurred earlier, during his grave illness at Shuzenji in 1910. While convalescing, he immersed himself in the works of the monk Ryōkan and composed a Chinese-style poem that reflects this transformative period:

"At Engakuji, I faced the rod and shout of Zen—
Where might this unenlightened one touch a moment of awakening?
The green mountains do not spurn the bones of the ordinary;
Turning back, beneath the Nine Springs, the moon hangs in the sky."

Here, "Engakuji" refers to Engaku Temple. In the line "Where might this unenlightened one touch a moment of awakening?", the term "unenlightened" (literally "blind child") metaphorically denotes someone spiritually obtuse in Zen discourse, while "awakening" signifies a catalyst for enlightenment. In this context, the phrase likely alludes to Sōseki's confrontation with mortality during his severe illness. By identifying himself as the "unenlightened" Sōseki suggests that even someone like him—previously disconnected from Zen insight—could now encounter such a transformative moment, signaling a profound shift in his philosophical outlook. This implies that Sōseki's near-death experience granted him a form of enlightenment, precipitating an evolution in his "Sokutenkyoshi" philosophy.

The evolution of Sōseki's thought is evident not only in his Chinese-style poetry but also in his novels. Torii Masaharu observes, "In works following his illness at Shuzenji, Sōseki persistently placed the grotesque before our very eyes. Yet his aim was not merely to unsettle readers. Rather, he sought to urge us to transcend such states—this was his true intent[2]". In

Meian, though the term “Sokutenkyoshi” never appears explicitly, the philosophy permeates the narrative. Tsuda, a man of brittle pride, and O-Nobu, consumed by vanity, epitomize egoism. Traditional tales often frame characters through binaries of good and evil, with vice inevitably punished. Meian, however, rejects such moral simplicity: no character embodies pure virtue. By portraying humanity’s innate selfishness and deliberately plunging his protagonists into misery, Sōseki conveys that only through relinquishing self-interest can one attain true fulfillment.

Furthermore, the title Meian originates from the Zen phrase “Light and dark coexist, the moment of profound truth” found in the Chinese Buddhist work *Bi Yan Lu*. In letters to Kume Masao and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Sōseki composed the following Chinese-style poem:

“Seeking immortality, yet not retreating to azure mountains—
I dwell among mortals, my path suffused with feeling.
Light and dark intertwine in thirty thousand words;
A stone seal, freely carved, takes form beneath my hand.”

In these letters, Sōseki explicitly identifies “Light and dark intertwine” as a Zen idiom. The line “Light and dark intertwine in thirty thousand words; / A stone seal, freely carved, takes form beneath my hand” suggests that Meian was not a product of Sōseki’s deliberate authorial control but an organic emergence shaped by a preexisting worldview. This serves as compelling evidence that he composed the novel in alignment with his “Sokutenkyoshi” philosophy—allowing the narrative to unfold through surrender to natural principles rather than ego-driven artifice.

3. The Connection Between Meian and Sōseki’s Chinese-style Poetry

While writing Meian, Sōseki confided in a letter: “I continue to work on Meian every morning—a blend of anguish, fleeting joy, and mechanical routine. The unexpected coolness of the weather brings rare comfort, yet drafting the same scenes nearly a hundred times daily only coarsens my already mundane mind. Thus, for the past three or four days, I have devoted my afternoons to composing Chinese-style poetry, one poem each day. The seven-character regulated verse is arduous; when weariness sets in, I cease at once, leaving my output to chance.”[3]

This letter reveals that Meian and a portion of Sōseki’s Chinese-style poetry were composed contemporaneously, sharing a cohesive worldview and mutually influencing one another. Notably, Sōseki’s anguish stemmed not from the act of writing itself but from the novel’s unrelenting portrayal of a world mired in “selfish desires”—a thematic crucible that likely intensified his existential turmoil. To counterbalance this, he cultivated an alternate realm through his poetry. Intriguingly, while his Chinese-style verses explicitly articulate the tenets of “Sokutenkyoshi”, Meian embodies the same philosophy implicitly, as Sōseki surrendered authorial control to “follow the will of Heaven”. By oscillating between these two creative modes—one a deliberate exposition of ideals, the other an organic narrative unfolding—he preserved his psychological equilibrium. For Sōseki, poetry functioned as therapeutic refuge; through crafting his own utopia, he sought liberation from the morally fraught universe of Meian.

Meian centers on the marital dynamics of its protagonists, Tsuda and O-Nobu, whose relationship is defined by a mutual craving for unconditional love, even as both avoid offering it themselves. Tsuda remains haunted by his unresolved feelings for his former lover Kiyoko, while O-Nobu embodies a woman who “absolutely demands to be loved” and “desires adoration from all.” Through their story, Sōseki critiques the rising tide of individualism imported from the West and the egoism pervading modern conceptions of romance. By meticulously dissecting the couple’s self-serving desires, he constructs Meian’s world as a microcosm of human frailty. Yet in stark contrast to this narrative of grasping egotism, Sōseki’s Chinese-style poetry from the same period brims with expressions of desireless serenity—a deliberate counterpoint to the novel’s moral labyrinth.

“Great Simplicity eludes, ambitions falter—
Fifty springs and autumns vanish like breath.
To witness the Dao, enter wordless stillness;
Plucking verse, seek clarity in solitary lines.
Cloud-shadows drift beyond heaven’s edge,
Wind whispers through the cascade of fallen leaves.
At the idle window—sudden emptiness brightens:
Moonrise over Dongshan bathes half the river in light.”

This Chinese-style poem was composed after Sōseki articulated “Sokutenkyoshi” at a gathering, where he posited that unity with the Dao could only be realized through Zen enlightenment. Particularly in the lines “Great Simplicity eludes, ambitions falter— / Fifty springs and autumns vanish like breath”, Sōseki appears to lament his mortality, as if foreseeing

his impending death. Though he claims to have fallen short of attaining “Great Simplicity”—a Zen ideal of unadorned wisdom—the maturation of his philosophical vision by this period remains undeniable.

4. Conclusion

The seemingly opposing worlds of Sōseki’s Chinese-style poems and Meian both embody the philosophy of “Sokutenkyoshi”. The world driven by personal desire in Meian and the Zen-inspired Chinese-style poetry represent two sides of the same coin. In other words, their relationship is not one of opposition, but of coexistence. In his Chinese-style poems, Natsume Sōseki depicts his utopia, while in Meian, he sharply exposes the realities of the world. Yet, his consistent aim is to convey the principle of “Sokutenkyoshi”. Undoubtedly, the seemingly impersonal world of Sōseki’s poems and the emotionally entangled world of Meian are connected through the underlying philosophy of Zen.

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