

Article

Seng Zhao's *The Immutability of Things* and Responses to It in the Late Ming Dynasty

Yu Liu ^{1,2}, Christoph Anderl ^{2,*}  and Bart Dessein ²¹ School of Chinese Classics, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China; liuyu1205@ruc.edu.cn² Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium; Bart.dessein@UGent.be

* Correspondence: Christoph.anderl@UGent.be

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Abstract: Seng Zhao and his collection of treatises, the *Zhao lun*, have enjoyed a particularly high reputation in the history of Chinese Buddhism. One of these treatises, *The Immutability of Things*, employs the Madhyamaka argumentative method of negating dualistic concepts to demonstrate that, while “immutability” and “mutability” coexist as the states of phenomenal things, neither possesses independent self-nature. More than a thousand years after this text was written, Zhencheng’s intense criticism of it provoked fierce reactions among a host of renowned scholar-monks. This paper explores Zhencheng’s main points as well as the perspectives and motives of his principal adversaries in order to shed light on the nature of philosophical discourse during the late Ming dynasty.

Keywords: Seng Zhao; Zhencheng; Ming Dynasty Buddhism; Mahayamaka; Chan Buddhism; *The Immutability of Things*; *Zhao lun*; immutability/permanence of phenomena; Chinese Buddhist philosophy

1. Introduction

The *Zhao lun* 肇論, authored by Seng Zhao (僧肇; 374–414),¹ has long been regarded as concrete proof that early fifth-century indigenous Chinese monks not only understood the core principles of the Madhyamaka philosophy of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but could also express such notions in the idiom of contemporary Neo-Daoist discourse. However, while modern Western scholars have made full use of mid-twentieth-century translations of the *Zhao lun* to explore Seng Zhao’s thinking,² few have shown any interest in the text’s profound impact on Buddhist philosophical discourse during the late Ming dynasty (1572–1620).³ Initiated by Kongyin Zhencheng (空印鎮澄; 1547–1617; hereafter Zhencheng), who challenged one of Seng Zhao’s four main treatises, the *Zhao lun* debate ultimately preoccupied a wide range of Buddhist monks over the course of several decades.

Zhencheng, a monk who devoted himself to the doctrinal study of the Huayan school 華嚴宗 of Buddhism,⁴ wrote an article entitled *A Logical Investigation of the Immutability of Things* (Wu buqian zhengliang lun 物不遷正量論; hereafter *A Logical Investigation*), in which he expressed fundamental

¹ According to Robinson (1958–1959, pp. 99–120), “Tsukamoto Zenryū [...] establishes these dates as more probable than the traditional ones (384–414).”

² Tsukamoto (1955) and Walter Liebenthal (1968) Japanese and English translations of the *Zhao lun* prompted discussions on some fundamental aspects of Seng Zhao’s treatises, primarily their Neo-Daoist elements (Tsukamoto 1955, pp. 113–65) and mystical tendencies (Liebenthal 1968, pp. 26–27). Neither author cast any doubt on the widely accepted view that the *Zhao lun* played a pivotal role in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

³ Here, “late Ming dynasty” roughly equates to the reign of Emperor Wanli 萬曆帝 (1572–1620). Sheng’s (2006, p. 3) definition of “late Ming” is slightly more specific: 1573–1619.

⁴ Yixue 義學 (“doctrinal study”) generally refers to the systematic, scholarly study of a particular doctrine of Buddhism, such as Huayan 華嚴宗, Yogācāra, and Tiantai 天台宗, in contrast to the meditation practices of Chan 禪 Buddhism.

disagreement with the notion of the “immutability of things” (*wu buqian lun* 物不遷論)—the subject and title of one of Seng Zhao’s most famous treatises. This critique was not only eloquent but bold, given almost every Chinese Mahāyāna faction’s reverence for Seng Zhao and his ideas at the time, and it generated fierce and widespread criticism among many of Zhencheng’s monastic contemporaries. For instance, Hanshan Deqing (憨山德清; 1546–1623; hereafter Deqing), one of the most famous Chan 禪 monks of the late Ming period, recorded an animated conversation in which he expressed his support for Seng Zhao:

I once talked about this with a friend. This friend firmly disagreed. On the contrary, he regarded Master Zhao as “non-Buddhist” (*waidao*) with a one-sided view. He widely cited Buddhist doctrines to refute him. Even venerable Buddhist monks, such as Yunqi, Zibo, and several eminent masters, all strove to debate with him, but unexpectedly failed to refute his hypothesis.

予嘗與友人言之。其友殊不許可。反以肇公為一見外道。廣引教義以駁之。即法門老宿。如雲棲紫柏諸大老。皆力爭之。竟未迴其說。⁵

The friend in question was none other than Zhencheng himself.

Rather than viewing the debate over Zhencheng’s article as a singular event, it should be understood as embedded within the Buddhist “revitalization” (Sheng 2006, p. 3) or “reformation” (Jiang 2006, pp. 367–71) of the late Ming dynasty. *A Logical Investigation* was the product of an open scholarly atmosphere and a theoretical crisis of legitimacy that various Buddhist schools experienced at that time.

In this paper, we shall (a) reconstruct the arguments expressed within *The Immutability of Things*, *A Logical Investigation* and the responses of Zhencheng’s principal contemporary opponents; (b) reveal how these works’ contrasting perspectives reflect divergent intellectual atmospheres and backgrounds throughout China’s Buddhist schools and across historical periods; and thus (c) summarize the internal and external reasons for the schools’ disagreements over the issue of “immutability”. Methods of internal and external analysis will be employed to gain a deeper understanding of the various texts’ philosophical viewpoints and the contexts in which they were written, and to illuminate the complex evolution of the meaning of “immutability” in the intellectual history of Chinese Buddhism.

2. Context and Content of *The Immutability of Things*

Factors such as Indian Buddhism, the early stages of Chinese Buddhism, and Neo-Daoism during the Wei and Jin dynasties (third–fifth centuries) must be taken into account when considering the ideological background of Seng Zhao and his treatises. According to his biography in the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, Seng Zhao was already familiar with Neo-Daoist interpretations of the pre-Qin classics, mainly the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, in his youth, prior to reading the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* (*Weimo jing* 維摩經) and studying Buddhism under the famous translator Kumārajīva (344–413).⁶ From 404 CE onwards, he assisted his master in translating various Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures.⁷ It was during and after this decade of translation work that Seng Zhao wrote four treatises with a view to explaining four fundamental Madhyamaka concepts—immutability (*buqian* 不遷), emptiness (*śūnyatā*, *kong* 空), ultimate wisdom (*prajñā*, *bore* 般若), and nirvana (*nirvāṇa*, *niepan* 涅槃)—to Chinese audiences. The sequence in which these four treatises are presented today does not reflect their composition: *The*

⁵ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 873, p. 336c22–24; R96, p. 590b7–9; Z 2:1, p. 295d7–9. The meaning of the phrase *yijian waidao* 一見外道 is unclear, not least because it does not appear in *A Logical Investigation* itself. Deqing most likely used it to summarize Zhencheng’s opinion that *The Immutability of Things* is biased and therefore violates the core teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. *Jian* 見 equates to *dr̥ṣṭi*—a one-sided, partial, prejudiced, limited idea, opinion, or point of view.

⁶ CBETA 2020.Q1, T50, no. 2059, p. 365a9–22.

⁷ CBETA 2019.Q3, T45, no. 1858, p. 157a20–21.

Immutability of Things appears first in modern editions of the *Zhao lun* even though it was written around 410 CE, after the treatises on emptiness and ultimate wisdom (Liebenthal 1968, pp. 9–10).

Prior to Kumārajīva's arrival in China from Kucha, Chinese Buddhist scholars had formed the so-called "six houses and seven schools" (*liujia* 六家/*qizong* 七宗), based on their contrasting exegeses or theories (*yi* 義) concerning the concept of emptiness. These included theories of "the non-existence of mind" (*xinwu yi* 心無義), "matter as such", or "identity with matter" (*jise yi* 即色義) and "fundamental non-existence" (*benwu yi* 本無義). However, none of the proponents of these theories precisely comprehended the true meaning of emptiness from a Mahāyāna perspective, because they all interpreted the nature of things as either existent or non-existent.⁸ Consequently, in his treatise on emptiness, Seng Zhao first criticized such partial views for clinging to either eternalism or nihilism, then proposed an understanding of the Middle Way (*madhyama-pratipad*, *zhongdao* 中道) on the basis of "dependent arising" (*pratitya-samutpāda*, *yuanqi* 緣起) and by means of Nāgārjuna's method of argumentation. In short, he demonstrated that since all things are subject to dependent arising, they lack "self-nature" (*svabhāva/ātman*, *zixing* 自性) and have no permanent, independent, continuous, or immutable substance. Kumārajīva expressed his great appreciation of this theory, stating that "my interpretation is identical, while my refinement in literary expression cannot compare to yours".⁹

In the meantime, with his "correction" of earlier exegeses of emptiness, Seng Zhao played an important role in summarizing and developing Neo-Daoist thinking. Indeed, his criticism of the "six houses and seven schools" contained an implicit challenge to the Neo-Daoist theoretical modes of "existence" (*you* 有) and "non-existence" (*wu* 無) represented by Guo Xiang (郭象; c. 252–312) and Wang Bi (王弼; 226–249), respectively, because the early Chinese Buddhist schools rooted their metaphysical assumptions in these Neo-Daoist notions. By repeatedly quoting both the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* in his treatises, Seng Zhao revealed his intention to transcend Neo-Daoist metaphysics through reinterpretation of its classics.

More specifically, while the title *The Immutability of Things* seems to be fairly concise and clear, it is actually rather misleading, given what follows in the text. The subject—*wu* 物 ("thing")—had a wide range of meanings in Chinese philosophical literature prior to Seng Zhao's time. As Yuan Kang 元康 (active 627–649) of the Tang dynasty and his famous Japanese disciple Anchō (安澄; 763–814) explain in their commentaries on the *Madhyamaka-sāstra* (*Zhong lun* 中論; hereafter MMK), "Zhuangzi said, 'All of those that possess the appearance, image, colour, and sound are *wu*.' Gongsun Longzi 公孫龍子 stated in *On Name and Substance* (*Ming shi lun* 名實論), 'What sky and earth produce is *wu*.'"¹⁰ Furthermore,

⁸ Seng Zhao intensively summarized and evaluated these three schools in the treatise *On Śūnyatā* (*Bu zhen kong lun* 不真空論). Unfortunately, very few of the schools' own texts survive, although Tang (1955) and Liebenthal (1968) were able to provide some valuable insights into their thinking after careful study of this scant source material. Zürcher (1972) then built on Tang and Liebenthal's efforts, compared the ideas of the Buddhist schools with those of the Neo-Daoists, and pointed out the Buddhists' limitations in terms of their understanding of the concept of "emptiness" as found in the Mahāyāna sūtras. First, he suggested that proponents of *xinwu yi* 心無義 recognized "matter" (*rūpa*, *se* 色) as a real entity endowed with objective existence, whereas the term "emptiness" refers to the mind of the sage that is "non-existence" (*wu* 無) in so far as it is free from all conscious thought, desire, and attachment. This theory seems to be related to a Neo-Daoist trend known as "the exaltation of existence" (*chong you* 崇有), which concerns the inner "emptiness" and "mental immunity" of the sage in his contact with the world of "existence" (*you* 有) (pp. 101–2). Second, Zürcher argued that advocates of *jise yi* 即色義 held that "matter" exists 'as such' (i.e., it lacks any permanent substrate, any sustaining or creative principle that "causes matter to be matter"). This comprised a Buddhist elaboration of Xiang Xiu 向秀 and Guo Xiang 郭象's theory that all things spontaneously exist by themselves, and that there is no creative power or a permanent substance behind things. Seng Zhao severely criticized this notion on the basis that it dealt only with the conditional and causal nature of all phenomena and failed to appreciate the ultimate truth that conditionality and causality themselves are mere names without any underlying reality (pp. 123–24). Third, Zürcher pointed out that members of the *benwu yi* 本無義 school considered *benwu* as the true nature of all phenomena—an absolute that underlies the worldly truth. This notion comes nearest to the true meaning of the *Prajñāpāramitā* doctrine as revealed by Kumārajīva, but it seems to conflate the Daoist idealized *tohu-va-bohu* and the Mahāyāna concept of the "nature of all dharmas" (pp. 191–92).

⁹ 吾解不謝子。辭當相挹。CBETA 2019.Q3, T50, no. 2059, p. 365a25–26.

¹⁰ 而言物不遷論者。元康師云。莊子云。凡有貌像色聲者。皆物也。公孫龍子名實論云。天與地。其所焉物也。 http://21dzk1.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/T2255_65.0112b18:0112b20.cit.

wu is even used in a discussion of the Dao 道 (“Way”) in the *Laozi*.¹¹ In general, in traditional Chinese texts, *wu* may refer to anything that a human can perceive either abstractly or concretely, or anything that exists objectively in the cosmos. The most credible Buddhist synonym is *dharma* (法 法) in the sense of “phenomenon or constituent of existence”. However, there is a stronger implicit meaning in *wu* that it is rooted in the ontological origin of the “sky and earth” or the Dao, and thus objectively exists with self-nature in the world of time and space. By contrast, in Madhyamaka Buddhist discourse, the *dharma* lacks inherent identity and manifests emptiness of the nature of things. That said, even though Seng Zhao used *wu*, rather than *fa*, in the title of his treatise, we should probably not interpret this as a tacit acknowledgement of the objective existence or inherent identity of things. Instead, it seems more likely that he simply chose a word that he knew his Chinese readership would understand.

The phrase *buqian* 不遷 (“immutable” or “immutability”) was much less common in pre-Zhao *lun* Chinese Buddhist texts than a number of quasi-synonyms and related expressions, such as *zhu* 住 (“abide”), *budong* 不動 (“non-movement”), and *buqu bulai* 不去不來 (“not leaving and not coming”). *Buqian* itself probably derives from one of the seven inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, in which an ideal person is described as someone whose “judgement is fixed with respect to the fact that there is no element of falsehood; and, while other things are mutable, he is not”.¹² Here, Zhuangzi means that a sage’s cognition is immutable in the sense that he is able to perceive the unchanging nature of things and so is not confused by superficial phenomena in constant motion. Having extracted the term *buqian* from this passage, Seng Zhao uses it to denote a particular state of things—immutability—that existed before any sage was able to perceive or understand it. So, does this mean that Seng Zhao hoped to demonstrate the “immutability of things”? Not exactly, as is evident in the titles of the other three treatises in *Zhao lun*. For example, *On Prajñā without Knowing* (*Bore wuzhi lun*, 般若無知論) does not suggest that his intention was to interpret *prajñā*, or ultimate wisdom, as “not-knowing”, nor as “knowing” in the sense of ordinary knowledge. Rather, Seng Zhao praises “unknowing/not-knowing knowledge” (*buzhi zhi zhi*, 不知之知)—that is, impartial cognition by transcending both knowing and not-knowing. This also holds true for *The Immutability of Things*: while the title mentions only “immutability”, the text advocates overcoming and transcending the dualistic notions of both mutability and immutability.

It might be assumed that Seng Zhao discusses two dimensions—space and time—in *The Immutability of Things*, but in fact he focuses exclusively on the latter. That said, the word “time” is inadequate in this context, because in Buddhist philosophy, time is merely a fictive concept in ordinary people’s minds through which they perceive changes in aspects of the phenomenal world.¹³ Therefore, although Liebenthal (1968, p. 45) freely translates the title as “On Time”, he notes: “Lit. ‘things cannot alter (their positions in the temporal order)’.” This explanation is more consistent with the content of the treatise. Similar topics are discussed in several chapters of the MMK, including “Examination of Movement and Non-movement (*Gatāgata-parīkṣā*)” (Chapter 2), “Examination of Action and the Agent (*Karma-kāra-parīkṣā*)” (Chapter 8), “Examination of Action and the Agent (*Samāskāra-parīkṣā*)” (Chapter 13), “Examination of Time (*Kāla-parīkṣā*)” (Chapter 19), and “Examination of Occurrence and Dissolution (*Sambhava-vibhava-parīkṣā*)” (Chapter 21) (Kalupahana 1986, pp. 118, 180, 217, 275, 292). In Chapter 2, Nāgārjuna advances his thoughts through a sophisticated form of argumentation: to prove that “movement” is a false assumption, he divides it into three aspects—the mover, the moving time, and the act of moving—discusses each of these in turn as if they truly exist in the sense of self-nature, and finally renders all of them non-viable. Seng Zhao not only developed Nāgārjuna’s ideas and methodology on the basis of a comprehensive and integrated understanding of his predecessor’s

¹¹ Laozi 21.2: “The Way as a thing is vague, ah, diffuse, ah” (道之物，惟恍惟惚). Laozi 25.1: “There is a thing that completes out of the diffuse. It is born before Heaven and Earth [. . .] I do not know its name. Therefore, forced, I give it the style ‘dao’” (有物混成，先天地生 [. . .] 吾不知其名，字之曰道). Translations by Wagner (2000, pp. 297, 283).

¹² 審乎無假，而不與物遷。 <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/seal-of-virtue-complete#n2748>.

¹³ For a comparative study of Buddhist and Christian philosophies relating to the concept of “time”, see Li and Dessein (2015).

work—specifically, by devising the theory of dependent arising and disproving his opponents’ false assumptions—but also used expressions that corresponded to contemporary Neo-Daoist conventions.

The Immutability of Things first presents then explicitly repudiates the “generally accepted proposition” (*ren zhi changqing* 人之常情) that “things glide along (in the flow of time)” (*you wu liudong* 有物流動). Next, Seng Zhao introduces two popular Neo-Daoist notions—“movement and stillness” (*dong/jing* 動/靜)—and explains that “‘non-moving’ here does not mean that motion must cease in order to produce rest but that there is rest with motion going on” (豈釋動以求靜, 必求靜於諸動; Liebenthal 1968, p. 45). This brief summary (illustrated in Figure 1) is crucial when examining the validity of Seng Zhao’s argument, which proceeds as follows:

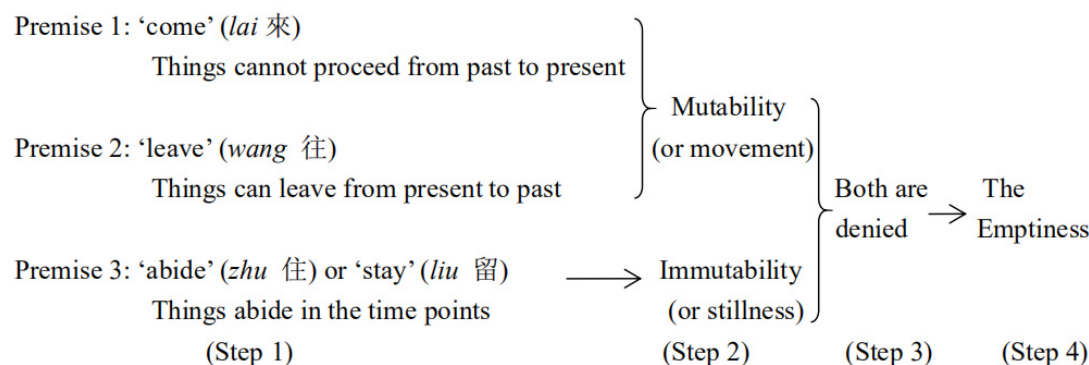


Figure 1. Seng Zhao’s line of arguments concerning the mutability and immutability of things.

This simple, four-step diagram encapsulates Seng Zhao’s reasoning in *The Immutability of Things*. First, he articulates his opponents’ position: “[F]rom the fact that what once has been cannot join what is now, they infer that things move. So they say: they move and are not at rest” (Liebenthal 1968, p. 47). This is Premise 1. He continues: “[T]hey know that past things cannot come [to the present], while thinking that the present things can pass [over to the past].”¹⁴ The first half of this sentence merely reiterates Premise 1, whereas the second half comprises Premise 2. (Of course, as Seng Zhao is concerned only with time, not space, the “movement” he describes here relates to changes in a thing’s characteristics as time goes by, not to any changes in its position.) Thus, according to Seng Zhao, the “generally accepted proposition” of mutability is: as things cannot proceed from past to present, some attributes of the subjects will disappear in a certain temporal point of “present”; thus, things are always changing. At the same time, as things can leave the present and move into the past, a present thing can be traced back to an earlier, partially different version of itself in the past; therefore, it has changed. At first glance, Premise 2 may seem far removed from our everyday experience, but it actually describes the common practice of remembering things. Seng Zhao provides a useful example: a brahman (*brāhmaṇa*, *fanzhi* 梵志) left home as a youngster and eventually returned as a white-haired old man. His neighbors asked him whether the previous brahman still existed, whereupon the brahman answered, “I am similar to the previous man, but not exactly him” (Liebenthal 1968, p. 50). In this hypothetical situation, the neighbors recalled the previous brahman through the present brahman, and they used that memory to think that the present person could be traced back to the same person living in an earlier time, even though he looked much older than before. In the process of recalling, they supposed an unchangeable subject—“brahman”—but also certain changeable aspects of that subject, such as the color of his hair.

¹⁴ 既知往物而不來, 而謂今物而可往. We modified Liebenthal’s (1968, p. 47) translation by deleting his supplementary bracketed information and rendering the original Chinese more literally. Liebenthal added the dimension of space in his understanding of the relationship between things in the past and present; however, we believe it is unnecessary to include this additional information.

The same reasoning is evident in Premise 1. When people say that things change because some properties of those things disappear over time, they presuppose an unchanging subject with changing properties. The Madhyamaka concept of “emptiness” repudiates this notion of an unchanging, independent, continuous subject, yet Seng Zhao does not criticize the unconscious presupposing in these first two premises. Rather, he simply points out that they are inherently contradictory: “If past things cannot come, where should present things go to?”¹⁵ With this echo-question, he seems to suggest that the movement of things in the flow of time should be bidirectional. Thus, if people claim that “past things cannot come to the present”, they should not recall the young brahman when seeing the old brahman who stands before them, because they have already presupposed that the young brahman cannot come to the present. It is in this way that Seng Zhao disproves “the generally accepted proposition” of mutability: “Thereby it becomes clear that no intercourse is possible between things belonging to different time periods” (Liebenthal 1968, p. 48).

After refuting the notion that things can move in the flow of time, Seng Zhao naturally arrives at Premise 3: things permanently abide in the time points (where they belong) or things cannot alter (their positions in the temporal order). He terms this characteristic either “nature abides” (*xingzhu* 性住) or “immutability” (*buqian* 不遷). One might expect his next step to be a thorough repudiation of this notion of “immutability”, because only by negating both “mutability” and “immutability” (opposite dualistic concepts belonging to the phenomenal world) will the Middle Way leading to emptiness—that is, the absolute truth beyond all relativity—become apparent. However, he not only neglects to do this, but even hints at tacit approval of the concept when stating, “[N]othing can move (from its position in time). Therefore, each nature abides permanently in one time period”¹⁶ and “[E]ach nature abides (permanently) in one time period.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, in Step 3, he does deny both mutability and immutability. For example, he states, “(Things are) immutable, so (they) leave while always being still; (things do) not abide, so (they) are still while always moving. (Things) are still while always leaving, thus (they) move without mutability; (things) are leaving while always being still, thus (they are) still while not staying.”¹⁸ With his assertion that mutability and immutability coexist as things’ phenomenal characteristics, Seng Zhao rejects the possibility of either existing independently and self-reliantly, and thereby denies the self-nature of both, and guides his readers towards the notion of emptiness.

Overall, *The Immutability of Things* reflects a rigorous phenomenological standpoint that accords with Nāgārjuna’s understanding of emptiness: never suppose any metaphysical essence as the basis of this phenomenal world. Seng Zhao’s thinking and methodology both conform to the requirements of the Middle Way, with the only “flaw” in his treatise being his failure to disprove immutability—an apparent oversight that he could have resolved through further Middle Way analysis. Similar to how Nāgārjuna demonstrates that movement is a false illusion in people’s perception, Seng Zhao could have divided immutability into three distinct aspects—the subject that stays, the time point in which it stays, and the act of staying—in order to prove that each aspect has no self-nature and, consequently, that immutability itself has no independent self-nature.

So, why did Seng Zhao neglect to do this? One possibility is that, having summarized his opponents’ position as “all things move unceasingly”, he decided to build his counter-argument on the polar opposite of immutability. Moreover, “stillness and movement”—a Neo-Daoist expression that was particularly popular in Seng Zhao’s time—was frequently used in place of both “roots and

¹⁵ 往物既不來，今物何所往？ Liebenthal (1968, p. 47).

¹⁶ 不動，故各性住於一世。 Liebenthal (1968, p. 51). *Xing* 性 (“nature”) is an abbreviation of *wuxing* 物性 (“nature of a thing”), mentioned above, or *shixing* 事性 (“nature of an event”), mentioned below, and therefore should be understood as the thing or event itself, rather than any essential or substantial “nature” of it.

¹⁷ 事各性住於一世。 Liebenthal (1968, p. 52). Once again, we have modified Liebenthal’s translation for the reason given in note 14.

¹⁸ 不遷，故雖往而常靜；不住，故雖靜而常往。雖靜而常往，故往而弗遷；雖往而常靜，故靜而弗留矣。 Liebenthal (1968, p. 49) came close to rewriting this section, so we have used our own, more literal translation. In *The Immutability of Things*, *qian* 遷 (“mutability”) is synonymous with *dong* 動 (“movement”), *lai* 來 (“come”), and *wang* 往 (“leave”); its antonym, *buqian* 不遷 (“immutability”), is synonymous with *jing* 靜 (“stillness”), *zhu* 住 (“abide”), and *liu* 留 (“stay”).

branches” (*ben mo* 本末) and “essence and function” (*ti yong* 體用). For example, Wang Bi assumed that “to reach emptiness is (their) ultimate; to hold on to stillness is (their) blessing. Even while the ten thousand kinds of entities may all act at once, they eventually return to emptiness and stillness. This is called ‘the ultimate returning of things’.”¹⁹ With all this in mind, Seng Zhao’s primary goal may have been to prove that stillness (or immutability) is one of the characteristics of all things in the phenomenal world,²⁰ as opposed to a state that only sages can perceive and comprehend or the original root of all things.

3. Zhencheng’s Criticism and Proposition

No later than the end of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), Chinese Buddhism entered a period of relative decline that continued until Emperor Wanli’s reign in the late Ming era (1572–1620), when Buddhism entered an era of revitalization and reformation. The revival was stimulated by the Emperor himself and his mother, known as Madame Li (1546–1614), who was a devout follower of Buddhism. Generous imperial donations facilitated the rapid recovery of Buddhist communities, the renovation of Buddhist institutions and the printing and distribution of Buddhist scriptures. One important aspect of Buddhism’s resurgence in this period was that it was “heralded by the rise of Buddhist scholasticism”, which could be viewed as evidence that “doctrinal studies (*yixue* 義學) are much more enduring than other sectarian establishments” (Jiang 2008, pp. 24–25). In the late Ming era, while mainstream Buddhism was still Chan, some Buddhist scholars started to devote themselves to doctrinal studies, represented by the Huayan, Yogācāra, and Tiantai traditions. The debate over Seng Zhao’s *The Immutability of Things*, initiated by Zhencheng and perpetuated by many other famous scholar-monks, was a significant event in this “rise of Buddhist scholasticism”.

However, beneath the surface of revitalization, there was a theoretical crisis of legitimacy within the late Ming Buddhist scholastic community. Indeed, the imperial court’s patronage exacerbated this crisis, as it prompted a fierce dispute between the government and the Buddhist community—as well as among the various branches of the Buddhist community—over the admission of genealogies of *dharma* transmission (Jiang 2008). Buddhism’s decline during the Yuan (1271–1368) and early-middle Ming (1368–1572) led to a deterioration in the quality of *dharma* heirs and a hiatus in the transmission of Buddhist scriptures. Buddhist scholars of the late Ming era acknowledged these issues and attempted to address them, but they could not agree on a single approach: while Chan monks retained faith in the personal experience of enlightenment, devotees of doctrinal studies searched for answers in the philosophical theories of the scriptures. Zhencheng was just one of many monks who favored the latter approach, with a particular focus on the works of Huayan scholars of the Tang dynasty (618–907). In addition, he collected some fragments of Yogācāra scriptures and explored that tradition’s philosophy of logic.²¹

Zhencheng’s critique of *The Immutability of Things* was inspired by an ambiguous and somewhat contradictory paragraph in the *Huayan jing suishu yanyi chao* 華嚴經隨疏演義鈔, a detailed commentary on the *Avatamsaka sūtra* by Qingliang Chengguan (清涼澄觀; 738–839; hereafter Chengguan), the fourth patriarch of the Huayan school during the Tang dynasty:

¹⁹ 凡有起於虛，動起於靜，故萬物雖並動作，卒復歸於虛靜，是物之極復也。This is Wang Bi’s reinterpretation of Laozi 16.3: 致虛極，守靜篤，萬物並作，吾以觀復。According to Wagner (2000, p. 277), Wang Bi made a small alteration that had a substantial impact on the overall meaning: (1) it becomes clear that the “simultaneous action” of the ten thousand kinds of entities stands in contrast to emptiness (*xu*) and stillness (*jing*); and (2) the entities’ emptiness and stillness are not immediately apparent in their presence, but rather perceived by the philosophical eye as their ultimate aim. Wagner’s analysis supports our proposal that Neo-Daoist metaphysical scholars used “movement and stillness” to denote “roots and branches” (*ben mo* 本末) and “essence and function” (*ti yong* 體用), and to emphasize the veracity of sagely cognition.

²⁰ Li and Dessein (2015, p. 171) liken this to a movie: “every frame of a movie stays in its position without leaving, but when cast on a screen, the spectator has the impression of continuity”.

²¹ Buddhist logic (*hetu-vidyā*, *yinming* 因明) was one of the five branches of science (*pañca-vidyā*, *wu ming* 五明) in ancient India. Although generally regarded as a philosophical method rather than a distinct Buddhist school, it has been widely used in the Yogācāra tradition.

(*The Immutability of Things*) furthermore said, “As (what has occurred in) ancient times cannot occur (again) in our time, and (what occurs) to-day cannot have occurred in ancient times, (or else) as the nature of each thing abides in (its period), what, then, is able to move freely to and fro (among the historical periods)?” (Liebenthal 1968, p. 52) Analysis: since Master Zhao intended to regard “each nature of thing abides” as “immutability”, this is no different from the notion that “(the conditioned things) cannot move to anywhere else from here” in the Small Vehicle (Hīnayāna). Next, (*The Immutability of Things*) said, “Therefore, when he (the Sage) has in mind the final truth (*paramārtha-satya*), he says that (things) do not move; when he teaches conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*), he says that everything flows” (Liebenthal 1968, p. 50). This is regarding the ultimate truth as “immutability”, while not showing the characteristic of the ultimate truth. If (Master Zhao) used “the nature of each thing abides” as the characteristic of the ultimate truth, why did (he) not (state that) there is nothing mutable because of “emptiness of nature”? It is only in the treatise of *On Śūnyatā* that the meaning of “emptiness of nature” appears. (By contrast, in *The Immutability of Things*, Master Zhao) restricts “immutability” to the realm of the conventional truth.

下文又云。若古不至今。今亦不至古。事各性住於一世。有何物而可去來。釋曰。觀肇公意既以物各性住而不遷。則濫小乘無容從此轉至餘方。下論云。故談有不遷之稱。導物有流動之。此則以諦不遷。而不顯諦之相。若但用於物各性住諦相。寧非性空無可遷也。不空義方顯性空義。約俗諦不遷耳。²²

In this passage, although Chengguan initially associates Seng Zhao’s account of “the nature of each thing abides” with the unenlightened teachings of Hīnayāna, he then acknowledges that Seng Zhao’s dichotomic explanation of “immutability” and “mutability” accords with twofold-truth teaching.²³ However, Zhencheng cites only the first part of this paragraph in his analysis of *The Immutability of Things*: “[T]his is to say that the nature of each thing abides in one time period, without the possibility to move freely to and fro (among the temporal periods). This is the real meaning of Master Zhao’s *Immutability of Things*.”²⁴ Therefore, according to Zhencheng’s reinterpretation of Chengguan’s analysis, Seng Zhao’s proposition is “immutability” and his main proof of it is “nature abides” (*xingzhu* 性住), as is evident in his assertion that “the abiding nature is immutable 性住不遷”. This brief statement is the principal focus of Zhencheng’s critique of *The Immutability of Things* in *A Logical Investigation*. Thereafter, he presents his own “correct” proof of the “immutability” proposition by declaring that “the emptiness of nature is immutable”.²⁵

²² CBETA 2019.Q3, T36, no. 1736, p. 239b23–c1. Chengguan mentions the teaching of the Small Vehicle, which can be found in Chapter 4 of the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* during a discussion of the concept of *karman* (業). The exposition of the verse states, “(The conditioned phenomena) are produced here and are destroyed right here (i.e., they just exist for an instant). They cannot move to anywhere else from here” 若此處生即此處滅。無容從此轉至餘方; CBETA 2020.Q1, T29, no. 1558, p. 67c14). It affirms the non-continuity of the body (*shen* 身) on the timeline, thus denying the body’s motion. On the surface, this is similar to Seng Zhao’s explanation of “nature abides” (*xingzhu* 性住), but the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* espouses the substantiality of things and the true existence of past, present, and future, whereas Seng Zhao’s explanation stands on the basis of emptiness in the nature of things.

²³ Basically, in Buddhism, the twofold-truth (*satya-dvaya*) encompasses the ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*, *zhendi* 真諦) and the conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*, *sudi* 俗諦), although there are very different interpretations of these two truths in the *sūtras* and *śāstras* of the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna schools. For example, in the Madhyamaka philosophy of the Mahāyāna tradition, the twofold-truth denotes emptiness in the self-nature of things and phenomenal illusions on the basis of the theory of dependent arising; however, the Yogācāra school links the twofold-truth with the theory of “three natures” and regards the perfectly accomplished nature, which is perceived in a non-discriminating mode of cognition, as the ultimate truth. Meanwhile, in China, the Huayan school regards “principle” (*li* 理) and “phenomena” (*shi* 事), based on the division of the “four *dharma*-realms”, as the ultimate and conventional truths, respectively; by contrast, in the Chan school, the ultimate truth is always related to the functioning of the mind (*xin* 心).

²⁴ 是謂物各性住於一世不相往來。此肇公不遷之本旨也。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 913c20v21; R97, p. 731b8–9; Z 2:2, p. 366b8–9.

²⁵ 性空不遷。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, pp. 913a09–19b22; R97, pp. 730a03–43a04; Z 2:2, pp. 365c03–72a04; CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, pp. 919c04–26a22; R97, pp. 743a06–56a11; Z 2:2, pp. 372a06–78c11.

To advance his case, Zhencheng applies the formal logic of the Yogācāra school, specifically a three-part syllogism (*sanzhi zuofa* 三支作法), which comprises *pratijñā* (thesis or proposition, *zong* 宗), *hetu* (reason, *yin* 因) and *udāharaṇa* (example, *yu* 喻).²⁶ This enables him to summarize Seng Zhao's error as follows: "The proposition is nearly right, but the reason is wrong 宗似而因非". Zhencheng explains: "by 'the proposition is nearly right', I mean that motion does not cease in order to produce rest, and that there is rest while motion continues; by 'the reason is wrong', (I mean that) the *sūtras* regard the emptiness in the nature of *dharma*s as immutability, whereas Master Zhao regarded the abiding nature as immutability".²⁷ Furthermore, "In order to prove 'immutability', Master Zhao thought that previous things do not disappear and their nature abides in the past. This violates Mahāyāna teaching on the emptiness of nature."²⁸

This analysis forms the basis of Zhencheng's contention that *The Immutability of Things* violates both the standard of authority (*āpta-āgama*, *shengjiao liang* 聖教量) and the standard of inference (*anumāna*, *biliang* 比量).²⁹ He then provides several examples to illustrate why Seng Zhao's interpretation of "nature abides" contravenes these core components of Mahāyāna teaching.

- a. The proposition that past things do not pass to the present does not prove immutability or permanence but rather "impermanence"

Zhencheng accepts that past things do not join the present, but disagrees with the proposition that this proves that immutability is an aspect of the nature of things. He defines past and present things as "different things" (*yiwu* 異物), and the past and the present as "different time periods" (*yishi* 異世), then demonstrates that any attempt to use *yiwu* and *yishi* to prove immutability, as per Seng Zhao's reasoning in *The Immutability of Things*, violates both the *sūtras* and Buddhist logic.³⁰ Specifically, on the subject of "different time periods", he explains:

Now he (Master Zhao) says that past things abide in the past, while present things abide in the present. If so, they are conditional *dharma*s, falling in (the realm of) moving to and fro. Since (such a "thing") falls under the three time periods (i.e., past, present, and future), it is invalid for (Master Zhao) to call it "immutability". Thus, the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* claimed that the *dharma* that permanently abides is not contained in the three times, and that the Buddha's *dharma*-body is not contained in the three times. It is not contained in the three times, so it is called "permanent". On the contrary, what is contained in the three times must be impermanent. Who can claim what is impermanent is immutable?

今其言曰。昔物住昔。今物住今。是有為法。墮去來。今既墮三世而曰不遷。未之有也。故涅槃云。常住之法。三世不攝。如來法身。非三世攝。故名為常。反顯三世攝者必無常也。誰謂無常而不遷乎。³¹

Later, when discussing "different things", he asks:

²⁶ The three-part syllogism and other Buddhist logic techniques entered the mainstream and were exported to China no later than the lifetime of the Yogācāra philosopher Dignāga (Chen Na 陳那). The "thesis" may be either one's own notion or that of an opponent; the "reason" is used to prove the thesis; and the "example" is usually well known as well as relevant to the reason. See Wayman (1999, pp. 10–11).

²⁷ 言宗似者。即所謂不釋動以求靜。必求靜於諸動；言因非者。修多羅以諸法性空為不遷。肇公以物各性住為不遷。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 913a15–21; R97, p. 730a9–15; Z 2:2, p. 365c9–15.

²⁸ 肇公以昔物不滅。性住於昔。而說不遷。則於大乘性空之義背矣。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 914c3–4; R97, p. 733a9–10; Z 2:2, p. 367a9–10.

²⁹ Generally, there are three means of valid cognition in Buddhist logic: "direct perception" (*pratyakṣa*, *xianliang* 現量)—what is not out of sight, not already inferred and not to be inferred, and non-delusory; "inference" (*anumāna*, *biliang* 比量)—what is addressed with the inferable or what has already been inferred, and the sense object that is inferable; and "argument of authority" (*āpta-āgama*, *shengjiao liang* 聖教量)—what was expressed by the Omniscient One, or heard from him, or is therewith a consistent doctrine. For more detailed information, see Wayman (1999, pp. 12–26).

³⁰ 今以異物異世以釋不遷。教理俱違。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 914a24–b1; R97, p. 732a18–1; Z 2:2, p. 366c18–1.

³¹ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 914b2–6; R97, p. 732b2–6; Z 2:2, p. 366d2–6.

Question: How (do you) know that different things are all impermanent?

Answer: This rests on two assumptions. The first is the teaching of the sage. The holy practices in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* extensively explain that different things are all impermanent. The second is logical inference. There are no differences among the (different things') natures of emptiness, so (the emptiness) is named "permanence". Every form or vessel/tool is different from every other, so they are all "impermanent". To discuss this difference in terms of time, [...] (things) sometimes exist but sometimes do not, so they are impermanent. To discuss it in terms of space, [...] (things) exist somewhere but not elsewhere, so they are called impermanent.

問。何知異物皆無常耶。

答曰。據二量故。一聖言量。涅槃聖行廣說異物皆無常故。二理量。如空不異則名為常。形器異故諸皆無常。論異者。[...]時乎而有。時乎而無。故為無常。若橫論者。[...]有處而有。有處而無。故名無常。³²

As any concrete thing can occupy only one point in time and space, it will become another thing when the time and space change, which leads Zhencheng to the inevitable conclusion that things in the past and things in the present are definitely different. Moreover, this difference proves that the nature of any concrete thing cannot be permanent, in the sense of retaining an inherently consistent self. On the other hand, the nature of emptiness—the ultimate and universal truth in Mahāyāna Buddhism—never differs in any time or place, so it is the only "thing" that exists permanently. Therefore, Zhencheng criticizes Seng Zhao for terming conventional things—that is, things with concrete characteristics—"immutable" (a synonym for "permanent", according to Zhencheng).

- b. The notion that past things existed previously and do not exist now is an extension of the illusion of existence and non-existence

During his discussion of past and present things in *The Immutability of Things*, Seng Zhao uses a pair of antonyms—being/exist (*you* 有) and non-being/non-exist (*wu* 無)—in the form of verbs: "looking for a past thing in the time point where it once has been, the thing never fails to exist in the past" and "looking for a past thing in the time point of the present, this thing has never existed in the present".³³ Zhencheng is especially critical of this approach on the grounds that Seng Zhao's use of *you* and *wu* might lead readers to one of two extreme views: either that things exist with an eternal essence, or that their essence is destroyed at the precise moment when they fade from existence. Both of these concepts conflict with basic Mahāyāna teaching on dependent arising and the emptiness of nature. According to Zhencheng: "Holding on to the notion that the *you* truly exists is an absolute standpoint of *you* that ignores the fact that dependently arisen things are empty in self-nature. Regarding the *wu* as truly non-existing is an absolute standpoint of *wu* and ignores the fact that what has no self-nature has dependently arisen."³⁴ Furthermore, given that Seng Zhao's reasoning is clouded by eternal and nihilistic tendencies, Zhencheng insists that his predecessor's notion of "immutability" is incompatible with "emptiness", which must transcend both eternalism and nihilism. He explains: "The relationship between emptiness and immutability is like that of light and dark: they are opposites conflicting with each other."³⁵

Overall, Zhencheng criticizes Seng Zhao's various errors in *The Immutability of Things* with reference to the "four assumptions" (*si ji* 四計):

³² CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 918c13–21; R97, p. 741b1–9; Z 2:2, p. 371b1–9.

³³ 求向物於向。於向未無。責向物於今。於今未有。Liebenthal (1968, pp. 47–48).

³⁴ 執有為有。是為常有。不知緣性之本空。計無為無。是為斷無。不識無性之緣起。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 914a12–13; R97, p. 732a6–7; Z 2:2, p. 366c6–7.

³⁵ 性空性住如明與暗。敵體相違矣。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 914a19–20; R97, p. 732a13–14; Z 2:2, p. 366c13–14.

Master Zhao's "immutability", generally speaking, displays four assumptions—namely "existence", "non-existence", "sameness", and "difference". "Looking for a past thing in the time point where it once was, the thing never fails to exist in the past." This is the assumption of "existence". "Looking for a past thing in the time point of the present, this thing has never existed in the present." This is the assumption of "non-existence". "The past thing was in the past, while the present thing is in the present." This is the assumption of "difference". Only the assumption of "sameness" is absent. All four of these assumptions can contaminate *prajñā* teaching. [If a theory] includes any one of them, it violates *prajñā* teaching. So how could there be any "immutability"?

然肇公不遷。所以總之。不出四計。謂有無一異。‘求向物於向。於向未無。’是有計。‘責向物於今。於今未有。’是無計。‘昔物自在昔。今物自在今。’是異計。唯闕一計耳。四計乃般若之大病。有一於此則與般若之理背矣。尚何不遷哉。³⁶

There are many contrasting interpretations of the "four assumptions" across several Buddhist *sūtras*, and both "existence and non-existence" and "sameness and difference" were familiar concepts in various Chinese Buddhist schools in the late Ming period, so it is impossible to determine which of countless potential sources inspired Zhencheng to couch his criticism in these terms. That said, he mentions that the "four assumptions" can contaminate *prajñā* teaching, so we may at least trace the concept back to a basic principle in one of *prajñā* Buddhism's most important *sūtras*—the "eight negations of the Middle Way" (*babu zhongdao* 八不中道) in the MMK. These "eight negations" are presented as four pairs of concepts: non-ceasing and non-arising; non-annihilation and non-permanence; non-identity and non-difference; and non-appearance and non-disappearance.³⁷ The opposites of three of these pairs—ceasing and arising 生滅, annihilation and permanence 斷常, and appearance and disappearance 去來—relate to existence (that is, "existence" and "non-existence"), while the opposite of the fourth—identity and difference 一異—relates to the relationship between two things. In essence, all eight negations emphasize the importance of avoiding extreme views when exploring things' existence as well as their relationships with other things. Zhencheng clearly believed that he could criticize *The Immutability of Things* on the basis of the "four assumptions" as Seng Zhao had been viewed as an authority on *prajñā*.

- c. If past causes never cease or disappear (lit. transform), it is impossible for all beings to attain Buddha-hood, and there will never be a point of time when through the cultivation of causes one achieves the results³⁸

At the end of *The Immutability of Things*, Seng Zhao states that the fact "that (the Buddha's) karma cannot perish implies that, though acquired in the past, it has not undergone any change 功業不可朽, 故在昔而不化" (Liebenthal 1968, p. 52). Zhencheng interprets this assertion as follows: past things or events, as causes, never disappear. Hence, they extend or pass into the present and the future, leaving no time point for any results to arise. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that the ultimate goal of becoming a Buddha—which Mahāyāna Buddhists believe is achieved through practice—is actually unattainable. Zhencheng then offers an explanation as to why Seng Zhao might have made this "mistake":

"Permanence" has two meanings. One is the "immutable continuity", meaning that thusness (*tathatā*) is immutable. The *Lengyan jing* (*Śūramgama-sūtra*) says, in the real and eternal nature, (if people) look for enlightenment and illusion, birth and death, leaving and coming, (they)

³⁶ CBETA 2020.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 916a22-b2; R97, p. 736a16-2; Z 2:2, p. 368c16-2.

³⁷ 不生不滅。不不常。不一不異。不去不來。 For a detailed explanation, see Kalupahana (1986, p. 101).

³⁸ 若昔因不滅不化者。則衆生永無成佛之理。修因永無得果之期。 CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 914c10-12; R97, p. 733a16-18; Z 2:2, p. 367a16-18.

obtain nothing. The second is the “successive continuity”, meaning that the results of karma are never lost. The *Huayan jing* (*Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra*) says that the essence of the cause disintegrates in every instant but accumulates successively, and the result never loses the form (upon which it acts). The poetic verse says that it is clear that the cause disintegrates and the result then aggregates. Because of the permeating power of the similar and immediately antecedent conditions (*samanantara-pratyaya*) stored in the eight consciousnesses, when the preceding instant of thought ceases, it permeates the subsequent instant of thought. Even when the annihilation at the end of an age burns brightly, the results of karma are not lost. Therefore, it is called the “successive continuity”. Thus, although (Master Zhao said that “immutability”) is “clear”, it belongs to the conditional and changing *dharma*s. Master Zhao used it to prove that thusness is immutable. This goes against the teaching.

常有二義。一凝然常。真如不遷之義也。楞嚴云。性真常中。求於迷悟生死去來。了無所得。二相續常。業果不失之謂也。華嚴云。因自相剎那壞而次第集果不失相。偈云。因壞果集皆能了。以八識藏中等無間緣熏習力故。前念滅時熏起後念。雖劫火洞然而業果不失也。故謂之相續常。則雖曰湛然乃屬有為遷變之法。肇師以證真如不遷。於義左矣。³⁹

In this lengthy paragraph, Zhencheng not only distinguishes between two distinct kinds of “permanence”—the “immutable continuity” and the “successive continuity”—but also draws attention to “thusness” and to the conditional and changing world that is restricted by the law of cause and result. According to his analysis, Seng Zhao misunderstood the “permanence” of the law of cause and result (or “successive continuity”) on the grounds that this relates only to never-ending karma, not to unceasing past causes. In addition, he suggests that the law of cause and result cannot be used to demonstrate “immutability” because only ultimate thusness (or “immutable continuity”) is permanently immutable, while the law of cause and result applies only to dependently arisen things in the “three time periods” (that is, the phenomenal world).

It is worth noting that Zhencheng mainly cites *sūtras* revered by the Huayan and Yogācāra schools, not Madhyamaka scriptures, in his analysis of the “two kinds of permanence”. This is because Madhyamaka texts do not consider thusness as an inner “real and eternal nature”. Chinese readers first encountered the concept of Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*, *foxing* 佛性) following the translation of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra* in the early fifth century.⁴⁰ Two sentences from this *sūtra* encapsulate its main theme: “All sentient beings possess Buddha-nature. The Tathāgata is always abiding and immutable.”⁴¹ The notion of Buddha-nature was then gradually combined with another Buddhist concept—the twofold truth—as well as the indigenous Chinese principle of essence and function (*ti yong* 體用). This explains why Zhencheng insists that only thusness (the “real and eternal nature”) can be categorized as the first kind of permanence—the “immutable continuity” or the “ultimate truth” that is grasped only by the sage. Meanwhile, he argues that the phenomenal world that is restrained by the law of cause and result (that is, the “successive continuity”) changes in every instant. This is the “conventional truth” of the world, as understood by unenlightened people.

As we have seen, Seng Zhao completed *The Immutability of Things* around 410 CE, prior to the translation of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*. Hence, it is hardly surprising that this *sūtra* exerted little or no influence on his thinking. Instead, in all four of his treatises, Seng Zhao remains entirely faithful to the ideas in the Madhyamaka *sūtras* that he and his teacher Kumārajīva were translating at the time. To some degree, Zhencheng knew that his approach was different from Seng Zhao’s,

³⁹ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 915a10–16; R97, p. 734a4–10; Z 2:2, p. 367c4–10.

⁴⁰ In about 416–418 CE, Buddhābhaddra 佛陀跋陀羅 and Faxian 法顯 translated part of this *sūtra* under the title *Dabannihuan jing* 大般泥洹經. Some years later, in Liangzhou 州, Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 translated more of the text in the *Dabanniepan jing* 大般涅槃經 or ‘Northern edition of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*’ 北本涅槃經. See cbetaonline.cn/zh/T0007 and cbetaonline.cn/zh/T0374.

⁴¹ 一切衆生悉有佛性。如來常住無有變易。 CBETA 2020.Q1, T12, no. 374, p. 522c24.

and he explains their contrasting perspectives with reference to a pair of popular Chinese Buddhist concepts—*bore* (般若, *prajñā*) and *niepan* (涅槃, *nirvāṇa*):

The *prajñā* (*sūtras*) clarify the forms and manifest emptiness, therefore they state that “*dharma*s do not leave or come”, which means that if one seeks the characteristics of leaving and coming, one cannot grasp them. Thus, *prajñā* does not manifest permanence. The *nirvāṇa* (*sūtras*) directly reveal the real nature, so they claim that “permanent abiding is beyond cause and result” [...] The essence of *nirvāṇa* that abides permanently, and is not empty, is the Buddha-nature and the true self in the womb of the Tathāgata, which is firm and immutable, thus not impermanent. It truly exists with an essence, so it is not empty. The *prajñā sūtras* do not mention this.

般若蕩相名空。故說法無去來。謂求去來相不可得。故非謂顯常也。涅槃直示實性。故說常住非因果[...]其涅槃常住不空之體是如來藏佛性真我。堅凝不變。則非無常。真實有體。則非空也。般若經中言未及此。⁴²

Zhencheng uses *bore* (般若, *prajñā*) when discussing the teachings of the Indian Madhyamaka 中觀派 tradition and the indigenous Chinese Sanlun school 三論宗, and *niepan* (涅槃, *nirvāṇa*) in reference to theories that largely conform to the doctrines of the Huayan school (i.e., all things originate from thusness). One of the main points of contention between these two traditions is that while *niepan* scriptures acknowledge the eternal existence of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings, *bore* texts tend to negate any eternal essence, including that of the Buddha-nature.⁴³ Therefore, it seems highly likely that Zhencheng knew that Seng Zhao never intended to equate “immutability” with any kind of essential nature of things, as “the *sūtras* of *prajñā* do not mention this”. Nevertheless, he criticizes *The Immutability of Things* on the basis of Huayan reasoning. This may be explained by the fact that Chinese Buddhist thought became preoccupied with *niepan* thinking after the Sanlun school started to decline at the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Indeed, even the Tiantai school 天台宗, which claimed to preserve Sanlun teachings, adopted the theory of intrinsic inclusiveness (*xing ju* 性具)—that is, the Buddha-nature includes both good and evil—as one of its central tenets.

When Zhencheng turns to the “real meaning” (*zhengyi* 正義) of “immutability”, he begins with a summary of the relationship between the completely enlightened mind (*yuanjue xin* 圓覺心) and myriad phenomena (*wanxiang* 萬象). He uses *maṇi* (*moni* 摩尼)—a bright, round jewel that features prominently in Buddhist texts—as a metaphor for the sage’s wholly enlightened mind, in which the images of myriad things are perfectly and completely reflected. Unenlightened people who are constrained by ignorance (*wuming* 無明), on the contrary, take it for granted that these images really exist.⁴⁴

Next, Zhencheng presents a more detailed analysis based on the concept of the “four *dharma*-realms” (*si fajie* 四法界). In this core doctrine of the Huayan school, the four *dharma*-realms are phenomena (*shi fajie* 事法界), principle (*li fajie* 理法界), non-obstruction between the principle and the phenomena (*li-shi wuai fajie* 理事無礙法界), and non-obstruction among the phenomena (*shi-shi wuai fajie* 事事無礙法界). The concept is designed to illustrate the different levels—from low to high—of philosophical insight relating to the status of the existence of phenomena and their relationship to the noumenon of principle. Zhencheng’s use of this framework to explain immutability (or permanence) is illustrated in the following chart (Figure 2):⁴⁵

⁴² CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 915b21–22; R97, p. 735a3–4; Z 2:2, p. 368a3–4.

⁴³ See also the DDB entries on 空宗 and 涅槃宗: <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E7%A9%BA%E5%AE%97>; <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E6%B6%85%E6%A7%83%E5%AE%97>.

⁴⁴ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 916b24–c14; R97, p. 737a6–2; Z 2:2, p. 369a6–2.

⁴⁵ The chart is based on CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, pp. 916c14–17a21; R97, pp. 737b02–38a15; Z 2:2, p. 369b2–15.

Four <i>dharma</i> -realms	Relevance to permanence	Further explanation
Phenomena	All things are impermanent.	All conditioned things that are dependently arisen are impermanent. They change in every instant, so they are not immutable.
Principle	The principle of emptiness is permanently abiding and immutable.	Things are empty in nature and thus identical to the permanently abiding true mind.
Non-obstruction between principle and phenomena	Immutability and mutability are identical without any obstacles.	As the permanent principle of emptiness can change according to conditions, its immutability is shared by conditioned things.
Non-obstruction among phenomena	If a part is mutable then the whole must be mutable. There is no mutability or immutability.	As all conditioned things are reflected by the true mind, their nature of existence interpenetrates.

Figure 2. A schematic overview of Zhencheng’s understanding of impermanence and immutability/permanence.

Zhencheng’s “proof” of permanence may be summarized as follows: the conditioned things in the *dharma*-realm of phenomena arise dependently and change in every moment, but as they derive from the emptiness in the *dharma*-realm of principle (which is similar to the noumenon of thusness in Huayan thinking, Buddha-nature or the true/one/enlightened mind), the phenomenal things share the nature of permanent abiding or the immutability of emptiness. Therefore, the relationship between the noumenon and myriad phenomenal things may be expressed as “all are identical to the one, and the one is identical to all” (一切即一, 一即一切). Within the *dharma*-realms framework, only emptiness in the realm of principle truly possesses the trait of immutability or permanence; meanwhile, phenomenal things should be seen as “immutable” or “permanent” only in the sense that they encompass and interpenetrate the principle of emptiness.

All of this stands in marked contrast to Seng Zhao’s elaboration of Madhyamaka thinking in *The Immutability of Things*, because he makes no mention of anything like Buddha-nature in his explanation of the phenomenal things. According to Seng Zhao, the only possible methodology leading to emptiness is emptiness itself. This serves to deflect any alternative positive proposition, and ultimately negates any attachment to the concept of emptiness itself. In general, while Seng Zhao uses “immutability” and “mutability” to denote the coexisting and equal characters of all phenomenal things, Zhencheng uses these terms to denote the discrete *dharma*-realms of principle and phenomena. To the latter’s mind, “immutability” has logical priority over “mutability”, so he flatly refuses to describe phenomenal things as “immutable”.

4. Contemporary Responses to Zhencheng’s Criticism of Seng Zhao

Zhencheng requested feedback from a number of fellow scholar-monks after completing the main part of *A Logical Investigation*. Unfortunately for him, their responses were generally negative, which marked the start of a fierce debate that continued up to and even beyond Zhencheng’s death. As Daoheng 道衡 (n.d.) reported, “After Master Cheng wrote the refutation, there were dozens of

venerable masters who refuted his refutation.”⁴⁶ No more than twenty texts by approximately ten of these monks have survived.

The debate can be divided into two distinct phases, with the first recorded in the second volume of *A Logical Investigation*, which includes contributions by “a recent master holding a different view (*jinshi yijie shi* 近世異解師)”, “a venerable monk without name (*wuming zunzhe* 無名尊者)”, Haiyin Dashi (海印大士; hereafter Haiyin; n.d.), Mizang Daokai 密藏道開 (n.d.), Yihuan Daoren 一幻道人 (n.d.), and Yunqi Zhuhong (云栖祿宏; 1535–1615). Counter-arguments written after Zhencheng completed his final draft include treatises and discourse records (*yulu* 語錄) by Daoheng, Longchi Huanyou (龍池幻有; 1549–1614; hereafter Huanyou), Zhenjie 真界 (n.d.), Zibo Zhenke (紫柏真可, 1543–1603), and Deqing. Almost all of these scholar-monks rejected Zhencheng’s assessment of Seng Zhao’s text. The remainder of this section focuses on the main points of contention raised by Deqing, Haiyin, and Huanyou.

4.1. Deqing

Although a member of the Linji branch of Chan 臨濟宗, Deqing, one of the most influential monks of his generation, posited himself against the nominal claims of “orthodox” Chan genealogy of *dharma* transmission and the iconoclastic style that was popular at the time. The attainment of enlightenment was viewed as the primary condition for Chan practitioners to gain entry into the genealogy, and the decline of the tradition prior to the late Ming was reflected in practitioners imitating and plagiarizing the records of earlier enlightened monks’ deeds and proclamations. In a bid to counter this epidemic of fakery, Deqing praised the authenticity of individualistic and specific experience in Chan meditation. Moreover, he suggested combining meditation with other forms of practice, such as Pure Land and doctrinal studies.

Deqing resided for a time with Zhencheng on Mount Wutai, and he entered the debate over *A Logical Investigation* while the latter was still in the process of preparing his manuscript. As mentioned in the previous section, Zhencheng criticizes *The Immutability of Things* with reference to the first part of a paragraph from the *Huayan jing suishu yanyi chao*. By contrast, Deqing’s *A Brief Commentary on the Zhao Lun* (*Zhaolun lüzhu* 肇論略注) focuses on the second part of Chengguan’s analysis, which leads to the conclusion that Chengguan actually “praises (the arguments) expressed (in *The Immutability of Things*) as they subtly conform to the Buddha’s doctrines”.⁴⁷

Unsurprisingly, given his support for Chengguan’s use of the twofold-truth theory, Deqing’s defence of Seng Zhao aims to prove that the latter’s understanding of “immutability” belongs in the realm of ultimate truth or the ‘one mind’ (*yixin* 一心). Indeed, he states that all four of Seng Zhao’s treatises “take the one mind as their doctrinal foundation” (所宗本乎一心), as does *The Awakening of Faith* (*Qixin lun* 起信論).⁴⁸ He also uses this theory in his analysis of Seng Zhao’s title: “the *wu* 物 refers to the myriad *dharma*s that are observed, and *buqian* 不遷 refers to the true characteristic of every *dharma* in the essence”; “every *dharma* is immutable in the essence. It is not (valid to say that) its characteristic is mutable while its nature is immutable.”⁴⁹

Later, Deqing suggests that language lacks the capacity to express the “true characteristic” (*shixiang* 實相) of *dharma*, because it derives from human consciousness, which rests on false conceptualizations of external things, whereas the true characteristic of *dharma* is the inconceivable absolute. He presents

⁴⁶ 澄師駁論以，海尊宿大老，駁其駁者，亡十家。CBETA 2020.Q1, X54, no. 878, p. 910b8–9; R97, p. 725a2–3; Z 2:2, p. 363a2–3.

⁴⁷ 推其所見妙契佛義也。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 873, p. 336c21–22; R96, p. 590b6–7; Z 2:1, p. 295d6–7.

⁴⁸ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 873, p. 330c9–11; R96, p. 578a12–14; Z 2:1, p. 289c12–14. *The Awakening of Faith* is one of the most influential texts on the subject of Buddha-nature theory. It defines the “one mind” as the origin of the world, and explains that it has two aspects—a thusness aspect (*zhenru men* 真如門) and an arising and ceasing aspect (*shengmie men* 生滅門)—with the former manifested by the latter. In this sense, the relationship between the two aspects is similar to that between the two truths.

⁴⁹ 物者。指所觀之萬法。不遷。指諸法當體之實相; 法法當體本自不遷。非相遷而性不遷也。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 873, p. 332b6–11; R96, p. 581b3–8; Z 2:1, p. 291b3–8.

several well-known cases (*gong'an*) of prominent monks comprehending the true characteristic of *dharma* through the direct experience of intuition, then criticizes those who “adhere strictly to the Buddha’s teachings expressed in written words”.⁵⁰ Of course, Zhencheng falls into the latter category, as he routinely cites the “teachings of the sage” and “logical inference” in support of his arguments. Deqing implies that such an approach is counter-productive, as immutability in the nature of things can be grasped only through personal experience. He then describes how he himself came to comprehend immutability in the nature of ever-changing things:

Suddenly, the wind blew the trees in the courtyard, and the fallen leaves flew in the air. But I did not see any leaf moving. Ah, there is faith in “the raging storm that uproots mountains in fact is calm”. Then (I) went to the toilet to relieve myself, but could not see any characteristic of “flowing”. (I) exclaimed, “It is true, indeed! The two rivers of China (i.e., the Yangzi and the Yellow River) rush along and yet do not flow.”

忽風吹庭樹。落葉飛空。則見葉葉不動。信乎。旋嵐偃嶽而常靜也。及登廁去溺。則不見流相。歎曰。誠哉。江河競注而不流也。⁵¹

Clearly, Deqing believed that personally *experiencing* immutability amid conditional things that, at first glance, seem to be changing rapidly is a far more persuasive demonstration of the concept than any amount of rational reasoning based on the study of scriptures. Although he never belittled doctrinal study, he always insisted it was supplementary to meditation. For example, his treatises on the subject of Yogācāra philosophy include such caveats as:

(Those who read this) should just enlighten their minds with the help of this treatise, instead of specifically differentiating the names and characteristics.

正要因此悟心。不是分名相也。⁵²

Those who practice meditation do not need to read Buddhist doctrines widely. With this treatise, they can verify (their state of) mind in order to prove the depth of their enlightenment.

而參禪之士不假涉教義。即此可以印心。以証悟入之深。⁵³

Deqing succeeded in assimilating Yogācāra analysis of consciousness with the Chan theory of the one mind. This not only simplified the highly complicated Yogācāra teachings, but also provided much-needed guidance for Chan practitioners as they attempted to enlighten their minds in everyday life.

4.2. Haiyin

The correspondence between Zhencheng and a scholar-monk named Haiyin is recorded in the second volume of *A Logical Investigation*. Some researchers have suggested that Haiyin was simply an alternative name for Deqing that reflected his residence at the Haiyin Temple 海印寺 on Mount Lao 牢山 in a remote corner of modern-day Shandong Province (e.g., Jiang 2006, p. 344). However, if that were the case, Deqing must have experienced a profound philosophical conversion, because Haiyin’s conception of immutability is radically different from the one that Deqing expresses in *A Brief Commentary on Zhao Lun*:

⁵⁰ 守教義文字之師。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 873, pp. 336c24–37a12; R96, pp. 590b9–91a3; Z 2:1, pp. 295d9–96a3.

⁵¹ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 873, p. 335b4–9; R96, p. 587b1–6; Z 2:1, p. 294b1–6.

⁵² CBETA 2020.Q3, X55, no. 893, p. 424c2; R98, p. 591b2; Z 2:3, p. 296b2.

⁵³ CBETA 2020.Q3, X55, no. 893, p. 420b21–23; R98, p. 583a15–17; Z 2:3, p. 292a15–17.

(Master Zhao uses) “immutability” to denote conventional things, and he takes the unreal for the real. Therefore, it is the thing that is immutable, rather than the truth. As things are changing (according to regular perception), (Master Zhao) now demonstrates that immutability is the most profound. If (he regards) the truth as immutable, it does not deserve mention [...] Moreover, Master Zhao clearly points out that “immutability” refers to things, but you (i.e., Zhencheng) falsify him by referring to the truth.

且以不遷當俗。不真為真。由是觀之。是物不遷。非真不遷也。以其物有遷變。故今示之以不遷為妙。若真不遷。又何足云[...]且肇公明指不遷在物。而足下以真冤之。⁵⁴

Haiyin repeatedly emphasizes that Seng Zhao views conventional things, not the truth, as immutable. Zhencheng then confirms this interpretation in his response to Haiyin’s letter: “Great Master Haiyin wisely wrote thousands of words in the letter, but his main point is that Master Zhao proposed immutability based on conventional things, rather than proved the immutability of thusness.”⁵⁵ Haiyin comes close to identifying the crux of Seng Zhao and Zhencheng’s disagreement on the basis of the twofold-truth theory: that is, is it acceptable to use “immutability” in reference to conventional/phenomenal things (i.e., the opposite of “mutability”) or is it only ever applicable to the ultimate truth of emptiness (or thusness, Buddha-nature or one mind)? However, his analysis is constrained by the strict structural separation of the conventional and ultimate truths in Huayan philosophy, which prevents a Madhyamaka-inspired exploration of the relationship between these two truths. Zhencheng seizes on this limitation to rebut Haiyin’s critique.

He then tables three questions for Haiyin’s consideration: if conventional things are immutable, is it because the conventional things are identical to (i.e., share the nature of) the truth and therefore are immutable? Or is it because they are not identical to the ultimate truth, and are thereby immutable? If conventional things are identical to the ultimate truth and therefore are immutable, then the ultimate truth is immutable, and this hypothesis certainly offends against the truth. If conventional things are not identical to the truth, and one states that they are immutable, then this does not go beyond the two notions (i.e., understanding) [of Hīnayāna or Abhidharma]. Firstly, claiming that conditioned phenomena are vanishing in an instant, then they do not move to another place from this place; this is the correct understanding according to Hīnayāna. Secondly, stating the nature of each thing is abiding, then past things do not disappear (lit. transform). Then the nature abides in the past and therefore is immutable. This is the eternalist view of the heretics.⁵⁶

Haiyin, along with most of Zhencheng’s Chan opponents, also criticizes him for obsessively focusing on a few specific words in *The Immutability of Things*, seemingly with little regard for Seng Zhao’s overall intent. In his defence, Zhencheng refers to the relationship between “word” (*yan* 言) and “meaning” (*yi* 意)—a recurring Chinese philosophical concern since the Neo-Daoist era. He argues: “Words are the traces of the mind, and the mind is the origin of the words. It is called such ‘since (their) minds appreciate the non-existence, when encountering something (they) often speak in a way of obeying the non-existence’. Thus, by comprehending somebody’s words, (you will) certainly comprehend his mind; based on the traces, (you will) understand the origin.”⁵⁷ Following

⁵⁴ CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 924a21–b5; R97, p. 752a10–18; Z 2:2, p. 376c10–18.

⁵⁵ 海印大士慧書千言。其要則言肇公約俗物立不遷。非真如不遷也。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 924b6–7; R97, p. 752b1–2; Z 2:2, p. 376d1–2.

⁵⁶ 今更詰之曰。肇公俗物不遷。為此俗物即真故不遷耶。為不即真而不遷耶。若俗物即真故不遷者。則真不遷矣。而論固違真。若俗物不即真而言不遷者。然不出二義。一謂有為之法剎那滅。故不從此方遷至餘方。此小乘正解也。二謂物各性住。昔物不化。性住於昔故不遷。此外道常見也。CBETA 2020.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 924b8–13; R97, p. 752b3–8; Z 2:2, p. 376d3–8.

⁵⁷ 夫言者心之跡。心者言之本。所謂心尚無。多觸言以賓無。故得其言必得其心。因跡以見其本也。CBETA 2019.Q3, X54, no. 879, p. 924c6–7; R97, p. 753a7–8; Z 2:2, p. 377a7–8. Zhencheng cites “心尚無。多觸言以賓無” from another Zhao lun treatise, *On Śūnyatā*. The original sentence is “本無者。情尚於無。多觸言以賓無”, which Seng Zhao uses to explain the *benwu zong* 本無宗 proposal (CBETA 2020.Q1, T45, no. 1858, p. 152a19–20). As for the word *bin* 賓, Yuan Kang 元康, a Tang dynasty monk who annotated the Zhao lun, explains: “Bin means guest, and the guest faces towards the direction of the host 賓者, 客

this affirmation of words' effectiveness, Zhencheng answers his critics by pointing out that if people could directly comprehend words' meaning while neglecting the written words themselves, then the teachings of every Buddhist or non-Buddhist school could be regarded as the ultimate truth.⁵⁸ Moreover, if that were the case, Haiyin would be unable to criticize him, because it would be impossible for him to demonstrate that he had correctly grasped Seng Zhao's true meaning in *The Immutability of Things*, while Zhencheng had not. This is a crucial point, because it highlights the fact that all attempts to determine "original meaning" are futile unless readers first accept that words are a valid means of communicating an author's ideas.

4.3. Huanyou

For many years, another of Zhencheng's critics, Huanyou, was widely regarded as the leading *dharma* heir of the Linji master Xiaoyan Debao (笑巖德; 1512–1581), not least because several of his own disciples played key roles in the revival of the Linji branch. Notwithstanding recent challenges to this designation (Jiang 2008, pp. 301–6), Huanyou was certainly an erudite scholar, as his correspondence with Zhencheng testifies.

Unfortunately, Zhencheng did not include any of Huanyou's correspondence in his "Reply to Chan Master Huanyou" 答幻有禪師書 in *A Logical Investigation*, so most of our insights into the latter's thinking are based on his treatises.⁵⁹ The two men's debate revolved around the relationship between *xingzhu* 性住 ("nature abides") and *xingkong* 性空 ("emptiness of nature"): while Zhencheng insisted that these two ideas are "contradictory and conflict with each other" (*diti hurwei* 敵體互違), Huanyou believed that they are "an integrated body of the true characteristic" (*yiti shixiang* 一體實相). The latter built his case by dissecting three of Zhencheng's main points of contention in *A Logical Investigation*. Each of these is examined in turn below.

a. Challenge the application of the twofold-truth theory and Zhencheng's interpretation of "immutability"

As we have seen, there is a subtle contradiction in Chengguan's appraisal of *The Immutability of Things* in the *Huayan jing suishu yanyi chao*. On the one hand, he insists that the theory of twofold truth should be used only to distinguish *The Immutability of Things* from another of Seng Zhao's treatises, *On Śūnyatā*, as it is only in the latter that Seng Zhao explains the concept of emptiness or the ultimate truth. On the other hand, he states that *The Immutability of Things* "regards the ultimate truth as immutability, while not showing the characteristic of the ultimate truth", which seems to imply that "immutability" does precisely denote the ultimate truth. In other words, Chengguan is rather ambivalent on the question of whether "immutability" equates to the ultimate truth. By contrast, Huanyou is certain that *The Immutability of Things* is concerned solely with the realm of conventional truth.

Furthermore, Huanyou points out that Seng Zhao never violated the teaching of emptiness, even though he used the notion of immutability to "correct" unenlightened people's attachment to mutability through the expedient means (*upāya*) of conventional language and concepts. Once again, this comment could be interpreted as a mild rebuke of Chengguan, on the grounds that he was such a staunch advocate of immutability that he strayed from the Middle Way of emptiness, which aims to eliminate *all* attachment (including attachment to the notion of immutability).

After highlighting this "erroneous" tendency in Chengguan's commentary, Huanyou turns his attention to Zhencheng:

也, 客皆向主". In addition, he cites the book of *Erya* 爾雅 when suggesting that the same term may be used as a verb: "Bin means 'obey' 賓, 服也" (CBETA 2020.Q1, T45, no. 1859, p. 171c26–29).

⁵⁸ 若果如是。即九十六種之言與夫百家世諦之談。苟能忘之。皆第一義。又奚止肇公之言哉。CBETA 2020.Q1, X54, no. 879, p. 924c3–5; R97, p. 753a4–6; Z 2:2, p. 377a4–6.

⁵⁹ Primarily Refutation (Boyū 駁語), *An Analysis of "Nature Abides" (Xingzhu shi 性住釋) and The Main Ideas of the Immutability of Things (Wu buqian lun tizhi 物不遷論題旨) in the Longchi Huanyou chanshi yulu 龍池幻有禪師語錄*. See cbetaonline.cn/zh/L1637.

Although (Chengguan) improperly used the “ultimate truth” and “conventional truth” to prove (Seng Zhao’s) intention in *The Immutability of Things*, he did not incorrectly interpret the word “mutability” as “disappear” (*mie* 滅) or “transform” (*hua* 化). Now, Kongyin (i.e., Zhencheng) is different. He definitively regards “mutability” as “disappearing” and “transforming” [...] (Zhencheng) misrepresents the statement “existing in the past while not existing in the present” as the *dharma* of impermanence and hence a demonstration of immutability. But this demonstration is invalid, because it is redundant. This is because the “immutability of things” refers only to “not leaving or coming”, and the coexistence of movement and stillness, not to impermanent arising and ceasing.

雖以真諦俗諦而誤證物不遷歸旨不合。未謬解遷字為滅化義也。今空印則不然。務以論題遷字斷斷乎為滅也。化也[...]曲引向有今無為無常法證不遷者。此證不成。乃贅且剩也。物不遷唯指無去來,即動靜。非以無常生滅為論也。⁶⁰

Here, Huanyou’s argument rests on careful consideration of three seemingly identical—but actually subtly different—terms. As he points out, *qian* 遷, the core concept in *The Immutability of Things*, relates to the actions of phenomenal things, whereas *mie* 滅 and *hua* 化, in the Buddhist discourse, are always linked with the impermanence of conventional things. By distinguishing “mutability” from the notions of “disappearing” and “transforming”, Huanyou narrows *The Immutability of Things*’ scope to “movement and stillness”, which leads to the accusation that Zhencheng is guilty of overinterpretation by equating “immutability” with “permanence”. While Seng Zhao uses the concept of “nature abides” to explain the stillness of phenomenal things—which was later negated as they acquired self-nature—Zhencheng attempts to demonstrate that phenomenal things are impermanent and lack self-nature. These two propositions relate to different topics in different realms, so they are not actually contradictory, but Zhencheng’s criticism is invalid and unjustified, because he misunderstands *The Immutability of Things*’ core concept.

b. Challenge Zhencheng’s interpretation of “past causes never disappear”

As discussed earlier, Zhencheng argues that the phrase “past causes never disappear” will lead to the erroneous assumption that “practices as causes can never achieve results”, because readers will conclude there is no time left for results to arise if past causes occupy both the present and the future. In response, Huanyou stresses that Seng Zhao never claimed that past causes the present or the future to move.⁶¹ He accounts for Zhencheng’s misinterpretation of this part of the treatise by highlighting the latter’s use of the theory of “two kinds of permanence” to attack Seng Zhao’s views on cause and result. This, Huanyou suggests, reveals that Zhencheng’s analysis is based on the incorrect assumption that *The Immutability of Things* is a treatise on the *permanence* of conventional things, whereas, in actuality, Seng Zhao’s sole focus is on the theme of “time”.

c. Prove that Seng Zhao’s assertion that “each nature of the thing abides in one time period” conforms to the “eight negations of the Middle Way”

In order to demonstrate that the “nature abides” concept accords with Mahāyāna teaching, Huanyou first explains the relationship between “time” and “thing”, then argues that this is consistent with the “eight negations of the Middle Way”, as outlined in the MMK.⁶²

⁶⁰ CBETA 2019.Q3, L153, no. 1637, pp. 646b15–47a12.

⁶¹ 論中分明謂。果不俱因。因因而果。因因而果。因不昔滅。果不俱因。因不來今。不滅不來。則不遷之致明矣。何嘗謂。因復來今而不滅耶。因既未嘗來今。何衆生永無成佛之理。何修因永無得果之期。CBETA 2020.Q1, L153, no. 1637, p. 649b2–6.

⁶² For more information on the ‘eight negations’, see note 37 and the main text that precedes it.

“Time period” means “at the time of (a thing)”. Thus, a time period cannot exist without the thing, and a thing cannot be separated from the time period. As such, (we) know that the time exists only if the thing exists, and if the time vanishes, the thing would also be extinguished. So why should (we) not say that “nature abides in one time period”?

夫世者當時之謂。由是知世不能外物。物又安能離世。所以知物在時亦在。時亡則物亦亡。安得不可謂性住一世耶。⁶³

As discussed earlier, Chapter 2 of the MMK divides the concept of “movement” into three distinct elements: the mover, the moving time, and the act of moving. Huanyou mirrors this technique by dividing “nature abides in one time period” into the thing, the abiding time, and the act of abiding. Then, in another nod to Nāgārjuna, he explains that the thing and the abiding time depend on each other. Furthermore, he confirms that the “nature abides in one time period” concept accords with the “eight negations” by addressing each of the latter in turn: first, nothing comes from outside of a time period, so the concept conforms to “non-appearance” (*bu lai* 不來); second, nothing is able to free itself from the restriction of a time period, so it also conforms to “non-disappearance” (*bu qu* 不去); third, as the time and the thing are interdependent, they are different yet linked, so their relationship accords with both “non-identity” (*bu yi* 不一) and “non-difference” (*bu yi* 不異); fourth, as the time and the thing are inextricably bound to each other, neither can arise independently or last permanently by itself, and neither can be destroyed or cease if the other continues to exist, so their existence conforms to “non-arising” (*bu sheng* 不生), “non-ceasing” (*bu mie* 不滅), “non-annihilation” (*bu duan* 不斷), and “non-permanence” (*bu chang* 不常). According to Huanyou, the essence of these eight negations is inherently coherent as they are rooted in the “one reality of the uncreated” (*wusheng yishi* 無生一實).⁶⁴

Huanyou elaborates on some other valuable ideas in his personal discourse records. For example, he argues that relative and opposite conceptions are restricted to the conventional world, while the ultimate truth is beyond all relativity.⁶⁵ Therefore, it is inappropriate to use the term “immutability”—the opposite of conventional things’ “mutability”—to denote the ultimate truth. In other words, any differentiation between mutability and immutability must be confined to the realm of phenomena. Nevertheless, Huanyou found it impossible to shed his Huayan and Chan Buddhist background entirely, or to comprehend Seng Zhao’s treatise in purely Madhyamaka terms. This is especially evident during his discussions of the concept of the mind,⁶⁶ and when he draws parallels between “mysterious comprehension” (*shenhui* 神會) in *The Immutability of Things* and “subtle contemplation” (*miaoguan* 妙觀) in Chan meditation.⁶⁷

In summary, all three of the scholar-monks discussed here challenged Zhencheng’s assessment of *The Immutability of Things* for the same three reasons. First, they all believed that the theory of twofold truth was key to resolving the “nature abides” (Seng Zhao)/“emptiness of nature” (Zhencheng) conflict. Second, on the issue of “words and meanings”, while Zhencheng insisted that words are an effective means through which authors are able to communicate their ideas, his Chan rivals felt that full comprehension of meaning cannot be achieved merely by reading an author’s words in a text. Finally, Zhencheng was a devotee of Yogācāra formal logic and the Huayan theory of the “four *dharma*-realms”, whereas most of his opponents favored direct awareness and meditation practice. Huanyou was an

⁶³ CBETA 2019.Q3, L153, no. 1637, p. 665a7–10.

⁶⁴ *Wusheng* 無生 (lit. “uncreated/unborn”) equates to “emptiness” in the sense that the original quality of all things is emptiness, and there is no such thing as arising, changing or ceasing.

⁶⁵ 況肇公分明云。以性空言去不必去。以性住言住不必住。既言去住之不必者。知皆因對待言也。以對待言。故是知即去住而非去住也。 CBETA 2019.Q3, L153, no. 1637, p. 672b5–9.

⁶⁶ For example, in one passage he asserts, ‘Once you see the broad essence of mind, you will recognize that “one thing abides in a period of time”, as stated by Master Zhao, is not beyond the mind. Nor does it differ from “the *dharma* abides and is established” in *Fahua jing* 倘爾見得廣大心體了。便識得肇公性住一世。亦不出心外。既知得性住一世不出吾心。即與法華法住法位有何揀別’ (CBETA 2019.Q3, L153, no. 1637, p. 664b11–13).

⁶⁷ 可以神會, 難以事求。可以神會者, 是吾儕禪寂中妙觀也。 CBETA 2019.Q3, L153, no. 1637, p. 649a7–8.

exception, as his analysis was based on the dialectical method and the “eight negations” of the MMK, one of the main Madhyamaka *sūtras*.

In short, Zhencheng attempted to resolve late Ming Buddhism’s legitimacy crisis through doctrinal study, Deqing preferred meditation, and Huanyou felt that a combination of the two was the best course of action.

5. Conclusions

There were two crucial philosophical developments in Chinese Buddhism and Neo-Daoism in Seng Zhao’s lifetime: the “six houses and seven schools” of Buddhism’s deliberations on how to understand the term “emptiness”; and Wang Bi and Guo Xiang’s in-depth metaphysical explorations of the concepts of “existence” (*you* 有) and “non-existence” (*wu* 無). In his treatises, Seng Zhao skilfully utilized the wisdom of the Madhyamaka Middle Way to transcend the Neo-Daoist dualistic assumptions of *you* and *wu*; meanwhile, he also clarified the discussions among the “six houses and seven schools” by interpreting “emptiness” on the basis of “dependent arising”. Embedded within this febrile intellectual atmosphere, he wrote *The Immutability of Things* with the dual aims of proving the coexistence of stillness and movement in the phenomenal world, and transcending the extreme concepts of mutability and immutability.

The Chinese philosophical community was no less turbulent more than a thousand years later, when Zhencheng composed his fierce critique of Seng Zhao’s treatise. Buddhism was enjoying a significant revival after a long period of decline as a result of the generous patronage of the imperial court, but it was also embroiled in a crisis of legitimacy due to the lengthy suspension of Buddhist traditions. A remedy was clearly necessary, but Buddhist scholars could not agree on the best approach: some advocated authentic enlightenment through meditation, while others felt the answer could be found in detailed analysis of the ancient scriptures. Zhencheng was a typical late Ming Huayan scholar-monk. Although guided by the doctrines of his own school, he also made full use of Yogācāra argumentation and formal logic techniques to challenge Seng Zhao’s ideas. Specifically, with reference to Buddha-nature, the twofold truth and the four *dharma*-realms, he highlighted what he viewed as three major flaws in *The Immutability of Things*: (1) immutability cannot prove permanence; (2) Seng Zhao’s use of “existence” and “non-existence”; and (3) a break in the logical chain that connects the cause to the result.

A host of Zhencheng’s contemporaries subsequently voiced their opposition to his analysis, most notably Deqing, Haiyin, and Huanyou. Each of these scholar-monks offered a fresh interpretation of “immutability” on the basis of the theory of the twofold truth. In particular, Huanyou advanced the debate by clarifying some key terms, scrutinizing the law of cause and result and exploring the theory of twofold truth itself, mainly through use of the dialectic method and with reference to the “eight negations”. However, all of these “opponents” were more or less rooted in the doctrine of Buddha-nature, just as Zhencheng was, so they were unable to comprehend *The Immutability of Things* purely in the framework of Madhyamaka discourse.

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