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Article

Breaking Attachments and Liberation: Resolving Alienation in the Consumer Era through Dialogue between Alienation Theory and Zen Thought

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Abstract

Under the digital wave, the deep intertwining of capitalist logic and sign-value has spawned a dual alienation in the consumer era: new forms such as the "sign cocoon" constructed by algorithmic recommendations and the "frictionless consumption" of digital payments create a closed loop between consumption alienation (capital manipulating individuals through signs) and mental alienation (individuals actively accommodating alienation due to "ego-attachment" – *ātma-grāha*). Individuals become mired in identity anxiety and spiritual emptiness. A single theoretical perspective struggles to fully parse this complex dilemma: While Marxist alienation theory profoundly reveals how capitalist logic shapes social structures, it insufficiently explains the psychological mechanism of individuals' active participation in alienation. Zen wisdom of "breaking attachments" (*po zhi*) can see through the illusions of "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi, pudgala-ātma-grāha*) and "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi, dharma-ātma-grāha*), but struggles to address the social structural roots of alienation. This study employs interdisciplinary dialogue, placing Marxist alienation theory (focusing on social structure critique and historical change) and Zen thought (emphasizing individual mental awakening and inner transcendence) within the same analytical framework. It reveals their complementarity in critical targets (resolving alienation) and paths to liberation (external transformation and internal awakening): The sign domination shaped by capitalist logic requires breaking external shackles through social structural change (e.g., regulating capital operation, constructing a reasonable market order). Meanwhile, the materialistic delusions bred from "ego-attachment" require achieving inner clarity through "mindful consumption" (*zheng nian xiao fei*) and "wisdom through deconstructing attachments" (*po zhi guan hui*). This dual-path approach, addressing both internal and external dimensions, provides an integrated perspective for understanding the dual alienation of the digital consumer era and offers theoretical guidance and practical possibilities for individuals to break free from alienated constraints and regain their subjectivity.

Keywords: alienation; zen thought; consumer era; marxist alienation theory; breaking attachments

Introduction: New Forms of Dual Alienation in Digital Consumption

In contemporary society, capitalist logic and sign-value weave an invisible net enveloping every aspect of life. As Baudrillard noted in *The Consumer Society* (1970): "We want to consume more and more. The compulsion to consume is not derived from some psychological fatality (like the drinker who wants more, etc.), nor is it simply from the social constraint of prestige. If consumption seems unstoppable, it is precisely because it is a completely idealist practice, which (beyond a certain threshold) has nothing to do with the satisfaction of needs, nor with the reality principle." Today, consumption has long surpassed the simple category of "need," evolving into a fervent pursuit of sign-value. This is essentially dual alienation resulting from a collusion between capitalist logic and humanity: On one hand, capitalist logic manipulates human life through commodities and signs, giving rise to consumption alienation. On the other hand, while gradually recognizing how capitalist

logic constantly usurps their own subjectivity, humans actively accept the stimulation of commodity and sign-value to obtain pleasure, causing mental alienation¹ (*xin nian yi hua*) in the process of accommodating consumption alienation. Mental alienation refers to the state where individuals, during consumption, deeply bind their self-worth to commodity signs, leading to their minds being controlled by material desires and losing autonomous awareness. Its essence is what Buddhism calls "ego-attachment" (*wo zhi, ātma-grāha*²) – clinging both to the illusion that "the self is confirmed through consumption" (attachment to self, *ren wo zhi*) and to the delusion that "commodity signs possess constant value" (attachment to dharmas, *fa wo zhi*). This forms a closed loop of "external capitalist discipline ↔ internal psychological response" with consumption alienation.³ Consequently, identity anxiety shadows people, their spiritual homeland becomes increasingly desolate, and they oscillate between endless desire and profound emptiness.

Entering the digital age, dual alienation has spawned numerous new forms, further intensifying the individual's predicament. Algorithmic recommendations build "sign cocoons." Taking TikTok's "interest push" mechanism as an example (Pu, 2024), it precisely targets users with luxury goods and limited-edition content based on user profiles, constantly reinforcing the sign cognition that "ownership equals superiority," trapping users unconsciously in the cycle of consumption alienation. Moreover, the "frictionless" nature of digital payments (Li, 2024), such as Alipay's credit tools "Huabei" and "Jiebei," blurs the tangible connection between money and goods. Transactions are completed with a swipe of a finger, making it easy to overlook the real cost of consumption, encouraging excessive spending, and making mental alienation harder to detect in virtual scenarios. The illusion of "eternalization" of virtual signs cannot be ignored either. For instance, blockchain technology endows NFTs with an "immutable" attribute (Hu, 2023), misleading consumers into seeing them as vessels of constant value. The astronomical prices paid for Bored Ape NFTs exemplify the extreme manifestation of "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*) in the digital realm; people's obsession with these virtual signs further deepens mental alienation. Additionally, "performative consumption" on social platforms, like the "refined life" sharing on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), transforms individual consumption behavior into public sign display. To gain likes and recognition, individuals deliberately pursue sign consumption beyond their means, infinitely amplifying "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) under the digital gaze, exacerbating the impact of dual alienation.

Facing this predicament, Marxist alienation theory and Zen's *prajñā* (wisdom) stand like twin peaks in the firmament of human thought. Their philosophical foundations are fundamentally different: Alienation theory, grounded in historical materialism, sharply dissects the malignancy of capital operation, its core directed at critiquing "external reification." Zen, centered on "dependent

¹ Mental alienation. A concept originally proposed in this study, integrating Marxist analysis of ideological alienation with Zen Buddhist critiques of "ego-attachment" (*ātma-grāha*). It denotes the paradoxical state where individuals, while recognizing how capitalist logic usurps their subjectivity through commodity/sign manipulation, actively participate in this alienation by internalizing consumerist ideology—binding self-worth to material possessions ("I am what I have") and mistaking sign-values for inherent meaning. Rooted in the Buddhist duality of "*ren wo zhi*" (attachment to self-identity constructed through consumption) and "*fa wo zhi*" (attachment to commodities as sources of permanent satisfaction), *xin nian yi hua* manifests as a self-reinforcing cycle: Capitalist discipline amplifies ego-attachment, while ego-attachment legitimizes capitalist discipline. The term distinguishes itself from traditional "false consciousness" by emphasizing agency in complicity (e.g., knowingly overspending for social validation) and offers a transcultural framework to analyze digital-era phenomena like performative consumption on Xiaohongshu or NFT collectibles obsession.

² *ātma-grāha*. A compound term in Buddhist philosophy combining *ātman* (आत्मन् "self," "ego," or "soul") and *grāha* (ग्रह, "grasping," "seizing," or "clinging"). It denotes the fundamental delusion of "ego-attachment"—the mistaken belief in an inherent, independent, and permanent self (*ātman*). This concept is central to Buddhist critiques of suffering (*duhkha*), as it perpetuates desire, aversion, and ignorance. In the context of the consumer era, *ātma-grāha* manifests as individuals identifying their self-worth with material possessions or sign-values (e.g., luxury brands, social status symbols), leading to mental alienation and spiritual emptiness. The term is philosophically contrasted with *anātman* (निरात्मन्, "non-self"), one of the Three Marks of Existence (*trilakṣaṇa*) in Buddhism.

³ This "Closed Loop of Dual Alienation" framework represents an original contribution of this study. While drawing upon Jean Baudrillard's theory of sign-value domination and Zen Buddhist concepts of "*po zhi*" (breaking attachments) against "*ren wo zhi*" (attachment to self) and "*fa wo zhi*" (attachment to dharmas), it uniquely models the dynamic interplay and mutual reinforcement between capitalist symbolic discipline (driving consumption alienation) and the internal psychological mechanisms of ego-attachment (driving mental alienation and complicity).

origination and emptiness" (*yuan qi xing kong, pratītyasamutpāda-śūnyatā*⁴), points directly to the mind to see through the delusions of ego-attachment, focusing on the path of "internal deconstruction of attachments" (*nei zai po zhi*). This difference defines their philosophical boundaries – Marxism starts from material production relations, Zen centers on mental awakening (*xin xing jue wu*) – they cannot be conflated. However, within the grand narrative of critiquing sign domination and seeking human liberation, they form a complementarity in critical targets and paths to liberation. Foreign scholar Erich Fromm, in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1960), clearly stated that Marxism achieves the return of human subjectivity through social structural change, while Zen achieves the same goal through individual mental awakening – different paths but the same direction. Domestic scholar Li Zehou, in *Historical Ontology* (2002), further elaborated this "complementarity of tension": Marxist social critique focuses on breaking external institutional oppression, while traditional mind-nature studies focus on dissolving internal spiritual constraints, forming irreplaceable critical dimensions in the predicament of modernity. Ernst Bloch's analysis of the religious nature of capitalism in *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), Walter Benjamin's critique of cultural alienation in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), and Georg Lukács's revelation of the essence of "abstract domination" in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) collectively provide intellectual references for understanding this complementarity. They neither confuse the philosophical foundations of the two thoughts nor obscure their potential synergy in resolving alienation and reconstructing subjectivity.

The dialogue between Marxism and Buddhist thought is not a contemporary phenomenon; it has a deep historical lineage. As early as the mid-20th century, E.F. Schumacher proposed the concept of "Buddhist Economics" in *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), combining Marx's critique of capitalist material alienation with the Buddhist concept of "non-attachment to external things," advocating that economic activity should serve human spiritual well-being and oppose the destruction of ecology and humanity by infinite capital accumulation. He believed, "Buddhist economics aims to establish a way of life minimizing material needs, sharing an anti-alienation core with Marxism's pursuit of human all-round development," opening the modern chapter of their dialogue.

In the 1940s, Erich Fromm, in *Man for Himself* (1947), further explored, pointing out that Marxism's critique of social structure and Zen's insight into individual alienation share an isomorphism in the goal of "overcoming alienation and achieving the return of human nature." By analyzing the opposition between the "having mode of existence" in capitalist society and the Buddhist thought of "non-abiding" (*wu zhu, apratiṣṭhita*), he argued for the dialectical relationship between social transformation and mental awakening, building a bridge for deeper dialogue between the two thoughts.

Domestic scholar Fang Litian, in *Essentials of Chinese Buddhist Philosophy* (2002), traced the conceptual meeting points of Buddhist "equality of all sentient beings" (*zhong sheng ping deng*) and Marxist "human liberation" (*ren lei jie fang*) from a historical dimension, arguing that although their paths differ, both are committed to eliminating oppression and inequality. He particularly noted that the "integration of Zen and Confucianism" (*chan ru he yi*) trend during the Ming-Qing period already contained the embryonic thought of combining mind-nature cultivation with social critique, providing local resources for contemporary integration of the two theories.

This history of intellectual dialogue shows that the complementarity of Marxism and Zen thought is not accidental but an inevitable exploration by humanity in response to the predicament of alienation. They respectively provide theoretical resources and practical paths for resolving the dual alienation of the consumer era from the dimensions of social structure and individual mind-

⁴ *pratītyasamutpāda-śūnyatā*. A foundational concept in Buddhist philosophy, combining *pratītyasamutpāda* (प्रतीत्यसमुत्पाद, "dependent origination") and *śūnyatā* (शून्यता, "emptiness"). It denotes the principle that all phenomena arise interdependently through causes and conditions, lacking inherent, independent existence. This concept is central to the Buddhist understanding of reality, emphasizing that all things are impermanent (*anitya*), devoid of a fixed essence (*anātman*), and ultimately empty (*śūnya*) of intrinsic nature. In the context of the consumer era, *pratītyasamutpāda-śūnyatā* reveals the illusory nature of commodity sign-values (e.g., luxury brands, NFTs) and the futility of clinging to them (*ātma-grāha*), as their perceived "value" is contingent on socially constructed networks of desire and capital. The term is philosophically linked to the Heart Sūtra's declaration, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form," and serves as the theoretical basis for Zen practices like "breaking attachments" (*po zhi*) to transcend mental alienation.

nature. Their synergy will open new paths for humanity to break free from alienated constraints and achieve true liberation.

The Structure, Roots, and Symbiosis of Dual Alienation

Consumption Alienation: Sign Fetishism under Capitalist Logic

In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx Discerned the Pain Points of Labor Alienation's Fourfold Determination:

1. **Alienation from the product of labor:** "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes a cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things."
2. **Alienation from the act of production (labor itself):** "Labour is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind."
3. **Alienation from species-being (Gattungswesen):** "Estranged labour tears from him his species-life, his real objectivity as a member of the species, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken from him."
4. **Alienation from other humans:** "An immediate consequence of man's estrangement from the product of his labour, his life activity, his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man. When man confronts himself, he also confronts other men."

In *Capital, Volume I* (1867), Marx further revealed the structural presentation of alienation: "appears as a relation between things," where the social attributes of labor are obscured by the attributes of things, and producers lose control over their own labor products. This alienation is no longer a deviation from an abstract "essence," but a necessary product of capitalist production relations – capital achieves self-valorization by appropriating surplus value, thoroughly subsuming labor under its logic, turning workers into valorization tools in the cycle of "labor serving capital."

The theoretical evolution from the 1844 Manuscripts to Capital is evident: the former emphasizes value critique, providing an ethical dimension to alienation; the latter focuses on scientific demonstration, revealing the structural roots of alienation within the capitalist mode of production. This difference is not oppositional but represents Marx's deepening of the alienation problem – shifting from a philosophical reflection on the "human state of alienation" to a political-economic analysis of "how alienation becomes a condition for the existence of capitalism."

This fourfold alienation not only persists but proliferates in more subtle and pervasive forms in consumer society. Capitalist logic, with its omnipresent penetration, transforms the sphere of consumption into its final battlefield for value realization, reducing humans to manipulated passive objects. The core mechanism of this proliferation is: The logic of "man dominated by the product" in labor alienation evolves into "man dominated by the sign" in consumer society – capital, by imbuing labor products with sign meanings, alienates workers both in production (laboring for capital valorization) and in consumption (consuming for sign-value), forming an alienation closed loop of "production ↔ consumption." Its manifestations are threefold:

1. **The Usurpation of Human Subjectivity by Commodity Sign-Value:** As Baudrillard described in *The Consumer Society* (1970), if pre-industrial society followed a mystical worship of natural objects (e.g., celestial bodies like the sun, moon), and industrial society formed capitalist hegemony and commodity worship around production activities, then the frenzy of today's consumer society is trapped in the worship of sign-value. Sign-value refers to the social meaning and class symbolism carried by commodities, such as the identity labels and cultural recognition represented by brands (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 1970). For example, the core value of luxury goods is not their use function but their sign encoding as "membership in the high-end class." Capital constructs the myth that "possessing the sign equals gaining recognition" through

advertising and media, causing sign-value to replace use-value as the core of consumption. As reported in *Nongfu Spring's red-bottle "Scream" surges to ¥8,900 per case on secondary markets* (Kong, 2025), Red Bull's "Screaming Red" beverage saw prices skyrocket on second-hand platforms due to factors like "limited reissue" and "discontinued," with purchases no longer based on thirst but driven by social currency and nostalgia economics, becoming a typical case of consumption alienation in the FMCG sector. As described in *Female college student resorts to "blind egg donation" and "naked loans" to buy iPhone, faces tragic consequences* (Fan, 2020), Hunan college student Xiaowen (pseudonym) borrowed money to purchase an iPhone. After her relationship expenses increased, she resorted to multiple online lending platforms, accumulating over 50,000 yuan in debt. To repay loans, she endured the pain of needle egg retrieval for 20,000 yuan compensation, risked her health in drug trials for 4,000 yuan, and ultimately mortgaged nude photos holding her ID card for a "nude loan." Such overconsumption by consumers pursuing so-called "trend and high-end" vividly illustrates consumption alienation caused by sign manipulation in the digital consumption era. Capital further exploits human "ego-attachment" through precise sign encoding. For example, in the infant product sector, Yili Jinlingguan collaborated with China Aerospace to create the "Aerospace Selection" series of formula milk, deeply binding the signs of "scientific parenting" and "high-end protection" with "maternal responsibility," claiming "every scoop undergoes space-grade testing." (CN Beverage, 2022) By leveraging parents' emotional attachment to their children (*ren wo zhi*), the product sold well even with a 30% price premium, reinforcing the erroneous cognition that "consumption amount = intensity of love." The "use-value" of commodities withers in the consumer illusion, while "sign-value" reigns supreme. Where once humans controlled the rhythm of commodities, today the sign-value of commodities controls the rhythm of humans. "The car plays a particularly prominent role here. Man invests in it for the best and worst of all purposes. He gets service from it, but he also accepts and awaits a certain kind of destiny in it, much like in movies, death in a car has become a ritualistic performance." (Baudrillard, 1970) Goods like furniture and cars are no longer simple functional items; they possess sign-value more as objects of consumption. We consume not their materiality but their sign-value. In other words, use-value and exchange-value become unimportant; more important is the sign-value inherent in the commodity itself. Humans are surrounded by commodities and will ultimately be controlled by their sign-value, becoming slaves to commodities.

2. **False Needs Leading to the Loss of Human Subjectivity:** False needs are those superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in a state of repression, needs that perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. As Marcuse argued in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), "Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs." To achieve self-valorization, capital overproduces commodities and induces people, under the control and seduction of commodity sign-value, to desperately chase consumption. False needs are ceaselessly manufactured through the intricate collusion of advertising, marketing, and social comparison. People, caught in the web of desire meticulously woven by capital, unconsciously become "consumption organs" serving infinite capital valorization, their true needs long drowned in the clamorous sea of signs.
3. **Commodity Sign-Value Deepening Class Distinctions:** This aligns with Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) – consumption becomes a tool for class distinction. Individuals display social status by possessing rare signs (e.g., luxury cars, famous watches), alienating consumption into an act of "consuming for identity coding," further solidifying class differences. "In consumer society, everything becomes a sign to be played with and consumed, including the most radical critique of this society." (Baudrillard, 1970) For members of consumer society, the process of consuming items is not merely a process of material expenditure but, more significantly, a process of absorbing signs and being absorbed by signs. In the sign-exchange system dominated by capital, individual value is crudely reduced to their

consumption potential and the quantity of signs they possess. Modern man has largely shifted from a "needs economy" to a "status economy," where the ultimate purpose of consumption is the pursuit of status and prestige.

The consequence is the deepening estrangement of humans from their "species-being" (pointing to the eternal brilliance of free, conscious creation), further trapped in the iron cage constructed by the reifying logic of capital.

Mental Alienation: The Subject Lost as the Mind is Enslaved by Things

With the increasing influence of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, some scholars with Marxist leanings attempted to combine it with Marxism. Austrian scholar Wilhelm Reich, in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1936), combined psychoanalysis and Marxism in two ways: First, using the psychoanalytic "character structure" theory to "supplement" Marxism, arguing that "any historically significant socio-economic process is rooted in the psychic structure of the masses and established in their behavior patterns," viewing "character structure" as a bridge between Freudianism and Marxism. Second, using "sexual revolution" theory to "supplement" Marxist social revolution theory, advocating the "combination" of "psychological revolution" and "ideological revolution" theories with Marxist social revolution theory, believing that "revolutionary ideology, if it does not recognize that what is in the sexual sphere is as much its real content as other things, is only talking about a new morality while actually remaining conventional." First-generation Frankfurt School scholar Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), attempted to combine psychoanalysis and Marxism from the perspective of alienation analysis and critique of the culture industry. He pointed out: "The great capacity of advanced industrial society is being mobilized ever more fully to prevent the use of its own resources for the pacification of human existence. All talk about the abolition of repression, about the rebellion against death, etc., must automatically enter the framework of enslavement and destruction. Within this framework, even individual freedom and satisfaction carry the general tendency of repression." That is to say, the alienation of man by capitalist industrial society is comprehensive, not limited to the economic level, but also involving the ideological or psychological level. Under the manipulation of cultural forces against the backdrop of technological development and consumer entertainment, people often actively identify with the existing order, dissolving negation of the status quo at the psychological level. This alienated psychological mechanism leaves existing society lacking internal drive, causing people to lose the spirit of critique and reflection, gradually becoming "one-dimensional men." Neo-Freudian Erich Fromm, in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), attempted to combine psychoanalytic theory with Marxism from the perspectives of freedom and personality structure. He believed Freud and Marx respectively indicated the prospects and direction of human liberation from the individual psychological and human societal levels, but each had limitations; only by scientifically combining them could a perfect theory be formed. Although the scholars approached from different angles, they all revealed a problem: traditional Marxists paid less attention to the role of "psychological revolution" in social revolution. Especially in consumer society, while people gradually recognize how capitalist logic alienates them, they still choose to participate in the completion of this alienation; although aware that commodities/signs are disciplining humans into manipulated objects, people continue to choose to accommodate this process, constantly stimulating themselves and gaining satisfaction through consumption. This precisely illustrates that human alienation in consumer society conceals a complicity originating from within. This is human mental alienation.

It is worth mentioning that although psychoanalysis has high methodological value, regarding why humans themselves participate in the complicity of alienation, psychoanalysis often reduces it to an analysis of the social mechanisms by which painful behavior produces pleasure. Lacan's "desire of the Other" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1977) explains that consumption is essentially desiring the desire of the Other (*le désir de l'Autre*) – people do not directly desire an object but desire the recognition of the "big Other." Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), explains it through the "Superego" command: Late capitalism's "Superego" (internal moral oppression) has been

distorted into "Enjoy your symptom!" This manifests as society criticizing consumerism on one hand, while demanding individuals gain identity through consumption on the other; not consuming can even trigger guilt (e.g., "I'm not trying hard enough," "I don't deserve it"). Therefore, the typical psychological state of contemporary man is: "I clearly know sign-value is illusory, but I still act according to it." The deep root of this contradictory state requires further explanation through Zen's "ego-attachment" theory: Lacan and Žižek reveal the external mechanism of "Other discipline," while Zen points directly to the internal root of "self-attachment" (*wo zhi*) – precisely because people cling to "the self recognized by the Other" (*ren wo zhi*), they submit to the "desire of the Other"; clinging to the idea that "signs can bring eternal satisfaction" (*fa wo zhi*), they become deeply trapped in the cycle of "enjoying the symptom." Starting from psychoanalytic methods, the phenomenon of human complicity in alienation is explained as a distorted psychology formed by social discipline. But clearly, such analysis still fails to touch individual agency, attributing the cause to social discipline.

Under these conditions, Zen can provide new insights for explaining human "mental alienation." In Buddhism, "non-self" (*wu wo, anātman*), one of the Three Dharma Seals, counteracts people's attachment to "self." The *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, Chapter 1, states:

"All sentient beings, from beginningless time, have been subject to all kinds of upside-down thinking, like a person lost who mistakes the four directions; falsely taking the four great elements [earth, water, fire, wind] as their body's form and the reflections of the six dusts [objects of the senses] as their mind's form. Like a person with diseased eyes who sees flowers in the sky and a second moon... The sky is actually without flowers; it is the sick person who clings falsely."

This corresponds to the Dharma Seal "impermanence of all dharmas" (*zhu fa wu chang, anitya-sarvasaṃskārāḥ*), meaning all things exist dependent on various conditions; they are "existent depending on conditions." That "existence" is not real; things lack self-sufficient existence. The *Heart Sūtra* also reiterates: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form; form is not other than emptiness, emptiness not other than form." Since this is so, the truth is that all dharmas are provisionally existent, their nature empty and quiescent. The eminent contemporary monk Yinshun (1988), in *History of Chinese Chan Buddhism*, said: "In fact, the Three Dharma Seals are comprehensively interconnected; what unifies the three is an emphasis on the Dharma Seal of non-self among the three." Yinshun (1988) pointed out that in the development of Chan Buddhism, the theory of "breaking attachments" (*po zhi*) was continuously inherited and innovated, becoming a key path for practitioners to free themselves from afflictions and achieve awakening. Lü Cheng, in *A Brief Account of the Development of Chinese Buddhist Thought* (1979), expounded the connotation of Chan's "breaking attachments" theory from the perspective of Buddhist thought evolution, emphasizing its important role in breaking dualistic oppositions and returning to the essence of things, providing historical basis for modern interpretation. What governs "impermanence of all dharmas" is "non-self of all conditioned phenomena" (*zhu xing wu wo, sarvasaṃskārā anātman*): On one hand, the law of dependent origination, "all dharmas arise from conditions, all dharmas cease due to conditions," reveals that the existence of all phenomena depends on the mutual dependence of various conditions; the existence of "I" is no exception. Once this dependency changes, phenomena of illusion and impermanence arise, hence "I" has no constant nature; it is provisionally existent (*jia you*). On the other hand, if people cling to provisionally existent dharmas or the nature of emptiness, they fall into "ego-attachment," which includes "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) and "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*). Attachment to self produces afflictive obstructions (*klesa-avarana*), attachment to dharmas gives rise to cognitive obstructions (*jñeya-avarana*); both are roots of suffering. Therefore, one must sever "ego-attachment" to achieve "nirvāṇa quiescence" (*nie pan ji jing, nirvāṇa-upaśama*).

The critique of "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) in the *Samyuktāgama Sūtra* is particularly profound. *Samyuktāgama Sūtra*, Chapter 1, clearly states: "Is form self? Is self other than form? Is form other than self? Is self not separate from form? So too for feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness." The scripture, by deconstructing the five aggregates (*skandhas*: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness), emphasizes that "I" is a temporary aggregation arising from the dependent origination of the five aggregates, lacking constant inherent nature. Like the

simile in the sūtra, "like dew, like lightning, all dharmas are empty and quiescent," it points directly to "attachment to self" as a false clinging to the "provisionally combined body of the five aggregates," i.e., the individual mistakenly takes the temporary aggregation of physiological and psychological phenomena as a "real self."

The *Platform Sutra* (*Tan Jing*) focuses on dissolving "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*). The *Platform Sutra, Prajñā Chapter*, proposes the three methods of "no form, no thought, no abiding" (*wu xiang, wu nian, wu zhu*), among which "no form means to be apart from form while in form" points directly to the refutation of "attachment to dharmas." Master Huineng, with his verse "The bright mirror also has no stand; Originally there is not a single thing," negates that any external thing (including commodity signs) possesses constant inherent nature, emphasizing the essence of "dharmas" is "dependent origination and emptiness" (*yuan qi xing kong*). As stated in the *Platform Sutra, Chapter on Doubts and Questions*: "When the mind is deluded, the Lotus Sūtra turns you; when the mind is awakened, you turn the Lotus Sūtra," revealing that the root of "attachment to dharmas" is the mind's deluded clinging to "external things being constant." Only by "in thought after thought not dwelling on any dharma" can the false cognition of the "eternal value" of commodity signs be broken.

The *Samyuktāgama Sūtra* and the *Platform Sutra* together constitute the classical basis for "ego-attachment": the former deconstructs "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) from the perspective of analyzing the five aggregates, providing a phenomenological analysis; the latter deconstructs "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*) from the perspective of mental awakening, providing a practical path.

In consumer society, human mental alienation is actually the intertwining of "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) and "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*). In Buddhism, the "five aggregates" refer to the five components constituting a person (Form: body; Feeling: sensations; Perception: cognition; Mental Formations: volitional actions; Consciousness: awareness). "Attachment to self" means clinging to the "self" aggregated by the five aggregates as real, such as equating "I drive a luxury car" with "I am successful." "Attachment to dharmas" means clinging to external things (e.g., commodities) as having constant inherent nature, such as believing "owning a mansion can bring permanent happiness." Both cling to the substantiality of "self" and "external things," jointly causing the mind to be enslaved by external objects. So-called attachment to self is also called "view of self" (*ren wo jian*), abbreviated as "ego-attachment" (*wo zhi*), i.e., clinging to the body and mind formed by the provisional combination of the five aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness) as a real self. Attachment to dharmas is also called "view of dharmas" (*fa wo jian*), abbreviated as "dharma-attachment" (*fa zhi*), i.e., falsely conceiving that all dharmas have real substantiality. Attachment to self arises from attachment to dharmas. The essence of all dharmas is originally provisional existence; deluded by this provisional existence and clinging to it as real, attachment to dharmas arises. Based on this dharma-attachment as cause, deluded about the five aggregates and clinging to them as "me," attachment to self is then regenerated on top of dharma-attachment. Specifically, mental alienation in consumer society manifests in two ways:

1. **The Materialized Projection of "Attachment to Self":** Individuals mistakenly anchor their illusory "self" identity to the material objects "I possess" (*I am what I have*), e.g., "Only by buying a Rolex am I a successful man," "I bought an apartment in Shanghai outright, this proves I am also upper class," etc. Consumption is alienated into a tool to constantly fill and reinforce this illusory self-image; every consumption of a commodity/sign becomes a fragile confirmation of the existence of "I."
2. **The Solidification of Desire through "Attachment to Dharmas":** This means modern people develop increasingly strong possessive desires and dependencies towards commodities and the symbolic meanings they carry. People view these ever-flowing, conditionally arising and ceasing things as real, unchanging entities capable of bringing eternal satisfaction (as if buying a full set of Haier appliances could guarantee permanent high-quality living). This is the concrete manifestation of "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*) in the consumer field. This dharma-

attachment is particularly prominent in digital consumption. For instance, the limited-edition "Mickey's Dream Planet" digital avatars (including rare variants) co-launched by social platform Soul and Disney, whose scarcity is guaranteed by blockchain technology (globally limited to 18,000 copies with rare variants accounting for only 5%), have been endowed by Gen Z users with the symbolic meaning of "virtual identity badges." Individuals aged 23 to 26 purchase dozens of such digital cultural products annually to craft personalized social personas. Even fully aware that these products are essentially replicable virtual code, they persistently pursue building a "digital identity repository" through collecting behaviors. Trapped in a "collect-display-collect again" cycle, this phenomenon epitomizes the deep entanglement of "attachment to dharmas" and consumption alienation(Caibao Wang, 2024; China.org.cn Finance, 2025). These two "attachments" trap individuals in "ignorance" (*wu ming, avidyā*), thereby nourishing endless "greed, hatred, and delusion" (*tan chen chi, rāga, dveṣa, moha*). Because modern people do not understand the truth of "dependent origination and emptiness," they generate endless greed for commodities/signs; when unable to obtain them, resentment and dissatisfaction arise; becoming addicted to the repetitive cycle of consumption → satisfaction → consumption without perceiving its illusory nature is falling into delusion. The consequence is that the mind is enslaved by external things; the inherent clarity, awareness, and inner freedom are heavily obscured, deeply mired in anxiety, lack, and spiritual emptiness, unable to extricate themselves. Subjectivity is lost in the endless pursuit of external objects.

Mutually Constitutive: The Intertwining Mechanism and Reinforcement Logic of Dual Alienation

Consumption alienation and mental alienation are not isolated existences; they are intertwined like vines, mutually causal and reinforcing each other, presenting an ascending double-helix structure.

On one hand, external capitalist logic, for self-valorization, uses the sign meaning of commodities to discipline humans, trapping them in a process of constantly intensifying "attachment to self" and "attachment to dharmas." Consumption originally satisfied people's real and necessary needs for survival and development; its purpose was primarily to obtain the use-value of products, and production and promotion focused on their physical attributes. But when capital, to valorize, decided to sell surplus commodities by any means necessary, it determined that attention could not be solely on use-value and physical attributes but must shift more intensively to the spiritual meaning commodities could carry. This shift stems from the sales pressure of surplus goods: when basic needs are saturated, capital must create "non-essential consumption" by imbuing commodities with "emotional value" or "identity meaning" (e.g., "diamonds = eternal love"). Sign-value thus becomes the core tool for digesting surplus capacity and maintaining the capital cycle. Precisely because of this, the sign-value or symbolic meaning of commodities becomes the object that must be focused on in the capitalist production process, even replacing the use-value or physical attributes themselves as the primary factor consumers consider when constructing their identity. Even if humans recognize capital's discipline, the individual's "attachment to self" and "attachment to dharmas," amplified through repeated consumption stimuli, become entrenched. For example, Hermès, by strictly controlling the production quantity and sales channels of the Birkin bag, constructs a sign barrier through the "quota system" (requiring purchase of a specified amount of other goods to gain eligibility), encoding "owning a Birkin" as "access to the top tier of society." (Qing, 2024) Consumers seeking this sign not only pay premiums of hundreds of thousands but also undergo the brand's rule domestication – like the "ritual" of waiting years on a list, compliantly completing "quota tasks" for sales associates. This is essentially a collusion between "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) (proving "I belong to the elite" through the sign) and capitalist discipline. Furthermore, the premium circulation of Birkin bags on the secondary market (Hashimoto & Xiaoma, 2025) reinforces the "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*) belief that "scarce signs have eternal value," trapping consumers in a "purchase → appreciation → repurchase" cycle. Capitalist logic and ego-attachment here form a mutually nourishing closed loop. Another example is the Nike x Off-White Air Jordan 1 sneakers. Through the

sign encoding of "globally limited to 5000 pairs," binding "scarcity" with "trendy identity," (TMTPost, 2019) it stimulates consumers to overspend: a sneaker enthusiast, to buy the latest colorway, resorts to monthly credit card installments. His mental activity is precisely driven by the dual forces of "attachment to self" (proving "I am a core player" through the sneakers) and "attachment to dharmas" (believing "limited editions will appreciate"). The social recognition gained after each consumption further reinforces the obsession that "self must be confirmed through signs." Or consider a trendy rooftop café in a Beijing hutong south of the Second Ring Road, packaging coffee with a "camping theme," where weathered wooden tables, canvas folding chairs, and simulated string lights under an awning create an urban camping imagery. Priced at 58 yuan per latte, it still draws consumers queuing for photo ops. Customers hold coffee cups against the sunset to capture the "same shot as friends' circle," constructing a "refined lifestyle" persona through social media dissemination, forming a closed loop of "sign consumption → virtual recognition → deeper consumption." (Li, 2025) This is essentially the "co-dependence" (*gong yi cun*) relationship mentioned by Itō Akio in *Love Addiction* (2009): Under consumer society, the relationship between capitalist logic and the individual is a fixed interpersonal pattern like "one party as parent, one party as child." After individuals become accustomed to being disciplined by capitalist logic according to its "parental will," even if they deeply recognize the consumption alienation and deprivation of subjectivity brought by this discipline, because they are already familiar with and adapted to this alienation and unclear about situations beyond it, they fear rashly attempting to overthrow this alienation. The resulting false solution is that individuals psychologically actively accommodate capitalist logic, spontaneously transforming commodity/sign consumption into "comfort" for the deprivation of their own subjectivity and self-deception reinforcing "ego-attachment."

On the other hand, individuals' deeply rooted "ego-attachment" (clinging to an illusory self, delusion of external things providing constant satisfaction) makes them more susceptible to accepting, internalizing, and even actively embracing consumerist ideology. This mental alienation can even feed back into consumption alienation. For instance, "minimalism," originally advocating a "dematerialized" lifestyle, was deconstructed by capital into a new sign: NetEase Yanxuan launched "high-end minimalist storage boxes," marketed as "same factory, same quality, affordable alternative to Muji," priced three times higher than ordinary storage boxes. Yet consumers, to craft a "minimalist persona," are still willing to pay. Under the "minimalist life" topic on Xiaohongshu, sales of high-priced "decluttering tools" grew by 230% annually, forming the paradox of "appearance of breaking attachments → deeper consumption," confirming Baudrillard's (1970) assertion in *The Consumer Society* that "anti-consumption is itself consumption." Reflection on and severance of the root of suffering is accomplished through continuous theoretical study and practice. As Aristotle stated in *Nicomachean Ethics* (c. 350 BC), "Young men can become proficient in geometry and mathematics, and wise in these matters, but we do not see them possess practical wisdom... Practical wisdom is concerned with particular things, and this requires experience, which young men lack." The journey from contemplating "ego-attachment" to practicing "non-self" is also a long process. The *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment, Chapter 2*, states:

"By firmly holding to a mind of detachment, even the mind that is like an illusion is also to be detached from. Detachment that is like an illusion is also to be detached from. Detaching from detachment and illusion, that too is to be detached from. Attaining that which has nothing to be detached from, then all illusions are eliminated. It is like drilling for fire: two pieces of wood rub together; fire comes out and the wood is consumed; ashes fly and smoke vanishes. Cultivating illusion with illusion is also like this. Though all illusions are extinguished, one does not enter extinction."

Therefore, "non-self of all conditioned phenomena" (*zhu xing wu wo*) emphasizes "all conditioned phenomena" (*zhu xing*), not being "non-self" in a single act or thought. This is a long-term process, resonating with Zhu Xi's (1189) idea in *Collected Commentaries on the Four Books*: "Today investigate one thing, tomorrow investigate another; when accumulated practice is abundant, then suddenly there will be thorough penetration." This is what Master Huineng meant by "The samadhi of one

practice means constantly practicing straightforward mind in all places, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down." Due to the general lack of long-term cultivation, modern people find it difficult to eradicate "ego-attachment." Individuals in "ignorance" mistake the desires shaped by capitalist logic for their own true needs. This becomes the most silent and widespread cornerstone for consolidating capitalist domination. Capitalist logic and individual mentality form a collusion here, jointly constructing the dual shackles that suppress subjectivity.

The Foundation for Critical Dialogue between Alienation Theory and Zen Thought

Analytical Marxist Jon Elster (1985), in *Making Sense of Marx*, argued that a complete theory of alienation consists of three parts: first, a conception of human nature; second, a revelation of its alienation; and finally, a description of its return. Regarding the conception of human nature, Marx rejected the "reason" commonly acknowledged by Enlightenment philosophers as the human essence, believing "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations." Therefore, Marxist alienation theory reveals the phenomenon of humans deviating from their material production relations, spiritual relations, and historical relations. In *The German Ideology*, the initial cause of alienation is attributed to the division of labor under capitalist historical conditions: "In fact, division of labour and private property are identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity. ... As long as activity is not voluntarily, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him." This means alienation occurs under capitalist conditions; eliminating alienation signifies that humans can master their social relations, achieve comprehensive liberation and freedom. This requires the proletariat, under the premise of enormous growth and high development of productive forces, to achieve through revolution. This is what Lukács (1923) in *History and Class Consciousness* called the class consciousness where the proletariat, as the bearer of history, simultaneously acts as the subject of history, realizing the freedom of "subject as substance."

Like Marxist alienation theory, Zen thought also aims at "freedom," but their respective "freedoms" are fundamentally different. Marxist "freedom" is comprehensive liberation constrained by historical conditions; its realization depends on the fundamental transformation of capitalist production relations: Only when productive forces develop to the point where "the majority are rendered propertyless" and "world intercourse is universally developed" (*The German Ideology*), and through proletarian revolution eliminating private property and forced division of labor, can humans break free from the external reification of capitalist logic and achieve the all-round development of "free association of producers" where "each contributes according to his ability, each receives according to his need." This freedom has a distinct historical stage; it is the overcoming of alienation by "real individuals" within concrete social relations. As Marx stated in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), "Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby."

Zen's "freedom" is the inner transcendence of "in thought after thought not dwelling on any dharma, then there is no bondage" (*Platform Sutra, Chapter on Actions*). It does not rely on specific historical conditions but is achieved through the individual's awakening to "dependent origination and emptiness" (*yuan qi xing kong*), breaking the bondage of "ego-attachment" (*wo zhi*) to the mind-nature in the present moment. The teaching "Dwelling nowhere, let the mind arise" (*ying wu suo zhu er sheng qi xin*) from the *Diamond Sutra, Chapter 32*, reveals the core of this freedom: not clinging to the constancy of external things (commodity signs), not trapped by the substantiality of the self (identity), thereby maintaining the autonomy and clarity of mind-nature in any circumstance. This freedom possesses trans-historical universality – "all people have Buddha-nature" (*Platform Sutra, Prajñā Chapter*) means individuals in any era can attain it through awakening. However, its scope is limited to the individual spiritual realm; it cannot directly change external social structures.

Their dialectical relationship manifests as: Social liberation clears external obstacles for mental freedom; mental freedom provides internal impetus for social liberation. On one hand, when the

external oppression of capitalist logic is eliminated (e.g., the weakening of sign worship in socialist society), the resistance for individuals to break "ego-attachment" significantly decreases – without advertising's bombardment of sign-value, "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*) loses its main breeding ground; without the stimulation of class solidification on identity anxiety, "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*) lacks reinforcing power. On the other hand, the group effect formed by individual mental awakening can provide spiritual momentum for social transformation: When more people contemplate consumption alienation through the lens of "dependent origination and emptiness," they spontaneously resist sign manipulation and participate in practices opposing capitalist hegemony. As Fromm stated in *Man for Himself* (1947), "The spiritual awakening of the individual is often the precursor to social change."

Their emancipatory intent is isomorphic. Jürgen Habermas's theory of "emancipatory interest" (*emanzipatorisches Erkenntnisinteresse*) in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) can serve as corroboration. He proposed that human cognitive activity is underpinned by three interests: technical interest (controlling nature), practical interest (understanding social interaction), and emancipatory interest (achieving freedom by overcoming oppression through critical reflection). This theory provides an important intermediary for the dialogue between Marxism and Zen – although their paths differ drastically, both ultimately point towards the "emancipatory interest."

Marxism's emancipatory interest manifests as the critique of capitalist production relations, seeking to break capital's external oppression of humans through transforming social structure. Its "liberation" is "real individuals" freeing themselves from the slavery of things in historical practice, achieving all-round development within the "free association of producers." This directly echoes Habermas's "liberation through critique of social institutions." Zen's emancipatory interest manifests as the breaking of "ego-attachment," freeing oneself from internal bondage through awakening to "dependent origination and emptiness." Its "freedom" is the inner transcendence of "mind being able to transform things" (*xin neng zhuan wu*), as in the practice of "illuminating the mind and seeing the nature" (*ming xin jian xing*) in the *Platform Sutra, Chapter on Actions*. This is essentially dissolving self-oppression through mental critique, aligning with the core of "reflective self-liberation" in "emancipatory interest."

This isomorphism is reflected in: Both oppose "alienated domination" (external capital or internal ego-attachment), both aim for "human freedom and consciousness." Marxism focuses on "liberation of social relations," Zen focuses on "liberation at the mind-nature level." Together, they constitute the dual dimensions of humanity's pursuit of liberation.

Their applicable boundaries are clear: Marxism's critique of "external oppression by capitalist logic" is irreplaceable; it reveals the institutional roots of alienation and provides a scientific guide to action for social transformation. Zen's breaking of "internal bondage by ego-attachment" is equally indispensable within its domain; it cannot replace historical materialism's analysis of social structure, nor can it shake the fundamental principle that "social being determines social consciousness." It can only serve as a method for individuals to attain spiritual freedom under given historical conditions.

Since consumption alienation and mental alienation exist in comparison, Marxism's alienation critique, which takes human liberation as its ideal, and Zen's *prajñā* wisdom, which takes individual liberation as its goal, should be applied simultaneously in the practice of overcoming alienation. In fact, they provide profoundly complementary critical perspectives and paths to liberation.

Alienation Theory: The Critique and Liberation Path of Historical Dialectics

Marx firmly anchored the phenomenon of alienation within the historical-social structure of capitalism. As discussed, he profoundly analyzed the capitalist economic structure and incisively pointed out that the roots of alienation are deeply embedded in the soil of capitalist private property and its wage-labor relations. Consumption alienation is a new form of alienation under consumer society, but ultimately it is a result of the self-valorization of capitalist logic. As Baudrillard stated in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972): "As soon as we consume, we are not engaging in an isolated act (this 'isolation' is merely the consumer's illusion, carefully maintained by all the

ideological discourse about consumption); we enter into a comprehensive system of coded value production and exchange." Capital, utilizing digital technologies like big data and artificial intelligence, creates a "digital panopticon" – an extension of Bentham's (1785) "Panopticon" into the digital age, differing in that the former relied on physical space surveillance, while the latter achieves precise prediction and manipulation of consumption behavior through data tracking, causing individuals to actively submit to sign discipline under the illusion of "being understood by algorithms" (Baudrillard, *For a Critique...*, 1972) – continuously strengthening its all-round control over people's lives. By mastering and manipulating human emotions, feelings, and desires, it exerts deeper technological intervention on consumption activities, reconstructing human consumption consciousness to achieve the ultimate goal of capital valorization. In this process, capital strips humans of their subjectivity, attempting to become an "inhuman subject" external to humanity. In essence, it constantly deepens the process of "substance as subject," creating history according to its own logic with self-valorization as its goal, objectifying humans into its appendages. Therefore, Marxist alienation theory remains applicable. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." Revolutionary practice is the core of his thought. In his view, the key to liberation lies in eliminating the social foundation that breeds alienation through real, transformative practice – especially revolutionary practice that transforms production relations and abolishes private property. Only by breaking the chains of capitalist rule can the path be opened for the birth of the "free association of producers."

Within the grand narrative of historical dialectics, Marx highly extolled human subjectivity. His pursuit was for "real individuals" (*xian shi de ren*), in concrete historical practice, to escape the object state of being enslaved by things (commodities, capital), truly becoming masters of themselves and their society, ultimately achieving "human all-round development" (*ren de quan mian fa zhan*) and the complete return of the lost "historical subjectivity" (*li shi zhu ti xing*).

Zen Thought: The Wisdom of "Dependent Origination and Emptiness" for Breaking Attachments and Inner Transcendence

Zen thought points directly to the human mind, offering a path of internal awakening distinct from Marxism's external transformation. Its sharpness of wisdom is first embodied in the fundamental refutation of deluded attachments. The *Diamond Sutra*, Chapter 32, states:

"All conditioned phenomena
Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows,
Like dew and like lightning;
Contemplate them thus."

The view of "dependent origination and emptiness" (*yuan qi xing kong*) is like a vajra sword, thoroughly dismantling the substantial basis of "attachment to self" (*wo zhi*) and "attachment to dharmas" (*fa zhi*). "Whatever has form is illusory; if you see all forms as formless, then you see the Tathāgata." The "self" we firmly cling to is merely a provisional phenomenon arising from the dependent origination of the five aggregates (*skandhas*: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness). The external things ("dharmas") we greedily chase are like "flowers in a mirror or the moon reflected in water" – momentarily arising and ceasing, devoid of inherent nature. This contemplation directly confronts the core illusion manufactured by consumerism – viewing commodity signs as constant, unchanging entities capable of bringing ultimate satisfaction (attachment to dharmas, *fa wo zhi*), and equating possession with confirmation of self-worth (attachment to self, *ren wo zhi*). Yinshun's (1988) tracing of the evolution of Chan's "breaking attachments" (*po zhi*) theory in *History of Chinese Chan Buddhism*, combined with Lü Cheng's (1979) scholarly exposition of its connotation in *A Brief Account of the Development of Chinese Buddhist Thought*, jointly reveal the vitality of the "breaking attachments" theory in the modern context, providing deep theoretical support for individuals to free themselves from mental alienation.

After breaking attachments, truth can manifest. Zen is not merely pure theoretical speculation; it particularly emphasizes attaining awakening through concrete cultivation practices (*xiu xing shi*

jian), such as mindfulness (*zheng nian*), silent illumination (*mo zhao*), and contemplating critical phrases (*can hua tou*). D.T. Suzuki (1938), in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, pointed out that the core of these practices is "directly pointing to the human mind" (*zhi zhi ren xin*) – Mindfulness is "awareness of the present state of body and mind," silent illumination is "contemplating the original nature in stillness," contemplating critical phrases is "breaking through conceptual clinging through questioning." All three point towards transcending "ego-attachment." Practitioners, in the present moment, thought after thought, directly perceive the true reality of "non-self" (*wu wo*) and the "emptiness" (*kong xing, śūnyatā*) of all dharmas, illuminating and dispelling all afflictions including materialistic delusions ("greed, hatred, delusion, arrogance, doubt" – *tan chen chi man yi*). Thereby, the inherently present, pure, and undefiled "original nature" (*zi xing*) – synonymous with "Buddha-nature" (*fo xing*), referring to the clear nature unobsured by deluded thoughts (*wang nian*) (*Platform Sutra, Prajñā Chapter*: "The self-nature contains all dharmas; that is greatness. All dharmas are in the nature of people.") – (inner subjectivity / Buddha-nature) is awakened. Its ultimate goal is to achieve a state of inner freedom, unturned by external circumstances (material temptations, social evaluation signs, gain and loss, honor and disgrace), characterized by ease and liberation. As the saying goes, "If the mind can transform things, it is identical to the Tathāgata" (*Platform Sutra, Chapter on Doubts and Questions*). The subject thereby attains transcendent autonomy and tranquility.

Through Zen contemplation, the subject can reflect on each present act of consumption, thereby breaking through the false sense of satisfaction brought by commodities/signs and the false self-confirmation brought by possessing commodities.

Dialogue and Complementarity: Transforming External Conditions and Clarifying the Inner Mind

Marxist alienation theory and Zen thought have fundamental differences. Marx developed his critique of alienation under specific historical conditions; the solution he proposed is to overthrow capitalist society through proletarian revolution, thereby achieving human liberation. In short, "Cast away illusions, prepare for struggle." Zen, based on viewing "ego-attachment" as the root of suffering, unfolds its practice, demanding the constant overcoming of "ego-attachment" to ultimately reach the "other shore of *nirvāṇa*" (*nie pan bi an*). It demands the elimination of all "discriminating mind" (*fen bie xin*), viewing all existence equally as temporary phenomena. This inevitably leads to the dissolution of specific historical conditions. Clearly, since Zen does not start from the economic base to critique class society, it inevitably tends towards a purely individual practice or preaching, unable to organize people historically to collectively create their own history, i.e., unable to achieve human species-liberation (*ren de lei jie fang*). Therefore, the applicable boundaries of Zen thought must be clearly defined, ensuring it does not touch the foundation of historical materialism – "dependent origination and emptiness" cannot be used to negate the objective reality of capitalist alienation; "mental awakening" cannot replace the historical necessity of social revolution.

One emphasizes historical practice, the other emphasizes mental awakening. While seemingly divergent paths, they form a profound and constructive space for dialogue in their ultimate concern for critiquing alienation and seeking true human liberation.

First, alienation theory and Zen thought are complementary in their objects of critique. Within the socio-economic structure of capitalism, alienation theory explores the process of capitalist logic alienating humans: from Marx's alienated labor, to Lukács's (1923) reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, to the alienated consumption explored by Baudrillard (1970) in *The Consumer Society* and Agger (1979) in *Western Marxism: An Introduction*, Marxist alienation theory and its development are rooted in the real conditions of capitalism. They critique the self-valorization of capitalist logic from different dimensions: the generalization of the division of labor, the generalization of commodity exchange, the comprehensive penetration of commodities/signs into consumer life. Zen thought, viewing "ego-attachment" (*wo zhi*) as the root of all suffering, holds that without "attachment to self" (*ren wo zhi*), there would be no afflictions, and *samsāra* would naturally cease; without "attachment to dharmas" (*fa wo zhi*), cognitive obstructions could be severed, breaking all illusions. Thus, alienation theory and Zen thought respectively reveal the dual roots of consumption alienation:

the self-valorization of capitalist logic (external, social structural) and the pervasive existence of "ego-attachment" (internal, individual mind-nature). These two roots constitute a dialectical relationship of historical conditionality and subjective agency: Historical conditions define the boundaries of alienation (e.g., the scope of capitalist rule); trans-historical consciousness (e.g., "dependent origination and emptiness") provides the perspective to break through these boundaries – humans must both face the reality of capitalist rule (historical conditionality) and awaken to its non-permanence (trans-historical consciousness), avoiding the extremes of "either total acceptance or nihilistic negation." Trans-historical consciousness influences historical conditions through individual action: When individuals, awakened to "dependent origination and emptiness," reject sign consumption, they reduce participation in capital valorization; when this awakening forms a group consensus (e.g., the "minimalism movement"), it forces capital to adjust its production logic (e.g., more enterprises turning to practical value production), embodying the transmission chain of "individual mind-nature change → social cultural change → historical condition change."

Second, alienation theory and Zen thought are complementary in their problem orientation. As discussed, alienation theory explores the alienation of humans by capitalist logic, its aim being to explore the path to human liberation. Zen thought explores the harm of "ego-attachment," its intent being to achieve individual liberation. Therefore, the ultimate orientation of alienation theory is human species-liberation (*ren de lei jie fang*), while Zen thought takes individual human liberation as its goal. Admittedly, in history, the liberation of one or a few individuals often brought enslavement to the majority; Zen thought has long existed as a tool for rulers to oppress the ruled and thus has not truly brought human liberation. But it must be acknowledged that human liberation is a long historical process, undergoing three stages: (1) "In its first form it is only the generalization and completion of the relation of private property"; (2) "In its political character it is democratic or despotic; it is the abolition of the state, but at the same time still incomplete and under the influence of private property, i.e., of human self-alienation"; (3) "Communism is the positive supersession of private property as human self-alienation, and therefore the real appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e., human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous development" (Marx (1844) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*). The full realization of communism requires the highly developed productive forces of society, the great abundance of social products, the elimination of private ownership of the means of production to achieve social fairness and justice, the great elevation of people's spiritual realm, and a high degree of harmony between humans and nature, humans and society, humans and humans, and within humans themselves (body and mind). This requires sufficient historical conditions to achieve. Under the insufficient development of historical conditions in consumer society, modern people endure the dual alienation of consumption alienation and mental alienation. Although consumption alienation cannot be completely resolved, for the individual, overcoming mental alienation can still resolve the psychological enslavement and impact caused by consumption alienation. Therefore, alienation theory and Zen thought have a complementary relationship in problem orientation concerning future vs. present, humanity vs. individual, and society vs. psychology.

Finally, alienation theory and Zen thought are complementary in their paths to liberation. Based on exposing the external root of capitalist logic's self-valorization, Marxist alienation theory emphasizes revolution based on the development of productive forces and world intercourse to eliminate forced universal division of labor and capitalist private property, ultimately overcoming alienation and achieving communism: "This 'alienation' (to use a term which will be comprehensible to the philosophers) can, of course, only be abolished given two practical premises. For it to become an 'intolerable' power, i.e., a power against which men make a revolution, it must necessarily have rendered the great mass of humanity 'propertyless,' and produced, at the same time, the contradiction of an existing world of wealth and culture, both of which conditions presuppose a great increase in productive power, a high degree of its development.... Finally, from the conception of history we have sketched we obtain these further conclusions: ... (3) Each extension of intercourse would abolish

local communism. Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples 'all at once' and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with communism" (Marx & Engels (1845-1846) *The German Ideology*). Zen thought, targeting "ego-attachment," points to methods for realizing "selflessness" (*wo kong*). The *Platform Sutra, Chapter on Concentration and Wisdom*, states:

"The Way must be fluid and unobstructed; why block it? If the mind does not dwell on dharmas, the Way flows freely. If the mind dwells on dharmas, that is called self-bondage.... This Dharma-gate of mine, from ancient times, has first taken no-thought as its doctrine, no-form as its substance, and no-dwelling as its basis. No-form means to be apart from form while in form. No-thought means not to think even when involved in thought. No-dwelling is the original nature of man: in the midst of worldly good and evil, beauty and ugliness, even enmity and intimacy, when words are offensive or contentious, to regard them all as empty, without thought of retribution; in thought after thought, not to think of past states. If past, present, and future thoughts follow one another without cease, that is bondage. In all dharmas, in thought after thought not dwelling, then there is no bondage. This is taking no-dwelling as the basis."

The *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment, Chapter of Universal Eye Bodhisattva*, also states:

"This deluded mind, without the six dusts [sense objects], cannot exist. When the four great elements decompose, no dust can be found. Among them, the conditioned dusts each return to dispersion and extinction; ultimately, no conditioned mind can be seen.... When the illusory body of those sentient beings ceases, the illusory mind also ceases; when the illusory mind ceases, the illusory dusts also cease; when the illusory dusts cease, cessation itself also ceases; when cessation ceases, non-illusion does not cease. It is like polishing a mirror; when the grime is exhausted, brightness appears.... You should know that body and mind are both illusory grime; when the grime is eternally extinguished, the ten directions are pure.... When grime is exhausted and opposition eliminated, there is no opposing grime nor anyone who speaks of it."

That is to say, one should keep this mind flowing freely, not dwelling on specific things. Although acknowledging the existence of all things, only when this mind "in thought after thought does not dwell" will "ego-attachment" not arise. Ultimately, even the clinging to "in thought after thought not dwelling" should be abandoned. Only by extinguishing the illusory body and illusory mind can one truly perceive the "Middle Way" (*zhong dao, madhyamā-pratipad*) of provisional existence and inherent emptiness. After severing the erroneous notions of "ego-attachment," one can realize the Buddhist doctrines of "no-self in persons" (*ren wu wo, pudgala-nairātmya*) and "no-self in dharmas" (*fa wu wo, dharma-nairātmya*), attaining the original state of all dharmas: "emptiness of self" (*ren wo kong*) and "emptiness of dharmas" (*fa wo kong*). So-called "no-self in persons" means a person is formed by the provisional combination of the five aggregates, lacking a constant, independent, self-mastering subject-self. So-called "no-self in dharmas" means all dharmas arise from dependent origination, constantly changing, lacking a constant ruler. Only by realizing "emptiness of self" can one realize the true self of a person, the "true self" (*zhen wo*).

It is evident that alienation theory emphasizes transforming the external environment through collective, revolutionary social practice under specific historical conditions, while Zen thought emphasizes purifying the inner world through individual, continuous cultivation. Their combination points towards a more complete path to liberation – "inner clarity, outer governance" (*nei ming wai zhi*). It reveals to us: To thoroughly resolve alienation, we need both to transform the socio-economic structure that manufactures objectifying oppression and individual awakening to break the alienated logic internalized in the mind and shackling the spirit.

The Dual Path of Internal Cultivation and External Action to Resolve Alienation in the Consumer Era

Socialist Reform and Proletarian Revolution: Laying the Foundation through Transforming External Conditions

First, the proletariat must always occupy the high ground of culture and ideology. In Marx's view (1843, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*), "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical." Therefore, the primary task is to wield Marx's critical weapon to continuously reveal the operating mechanisms of capitalist logic, the manipulation codes of sign-value, and the strategies of advertising and media in manufacturing false desires. In Gramsci's view (*Prison Notebooks*, 1929-1935), to shatter the cultural and ideological barrier constructed by the bourgeoisie through cultural propaganda, the proletarian party must similarly establish cultural trenches of a proletarian character by occupying cultural institutions and outputting cultural concepts. This cultural struggle is the intellectual preparation for revolutionary practice: Only when the masses see through the falsity of sign consumption (cultural awakening) will the motivation for institutional change (revolutionary action) arise. As Gramsci stated (*Prison Notebooks*), "The seizure of cultural hegemony is the prerequisite for political seizure of power." From this perspective, the proletarian party should shape the cognitive systems and conceptual frameworks of the masses, not only making people aware of how capitalist logic alienates through commodities/signs but also establishing proletarian cultural concepts. This includes the "organic intellectual" practice emphasized in Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" theory: disseminating "capital critique" knowledge through education, media, etc., to cultivate the class consciousness of the masses. Specific operations are as follows:

- **Guide and Establish a Rational Consumption Demand View:** (1) Cultivate critical thinking in consumption subjects, enhancing their dialectical thinking and judgment capabilities when facing the beautiful appearance of consumer life created by commodities/signs, clarifying the hidden nature of capitalist logic's self-valorization that permeates daily life and manipulates people's will and behavior. (2) Guide consumption subjects to improve basic semiotic literacy and cognitive abilities, helping them escape the cognitive dilemma of their consumption will and behavior being manipulated by capitalist logic, enabling them to self-identify the manipulation of consumption desires and emotions by capitalist logic during consumption, strengthen self-protection awareness, reflect on their real consumption needs, and engage in healthy and reasonable consumption activities. (3) Foster a social cultural atmosphere of rational, moderate, and frugal consumption, highly valuing the ideological function of commodities/signs, and fully utilizing the symbolic meaning of commodities to comprehensively promote and propagate the concept of diligent and thrifty consumption, thereby dissolving the shaping of irrational consumption views by capitalist logic through commodities/signs.
- **Establish a Scientific and Reasonable Market Order:** First, set "traffic lights" for capitalist logic to prevent its savage growth. Specifically, it is necessary to set a "red light" of laws, regulations, and institutional frameworks for capitalist logic, delineating clear and transparent legal boundaries for capital operation. Simultaneously, set a "green light" for capital, introducing relevant policies to stimulate the positive effects of capital, guiding it to promote commodity consumption that serves people's well-being. Second, create a clean and upright consumer market, rectify monopolies, unfair competition, and other irregularities, and protect the legitimate rights and interests of consumers.

Second, it is essential to promote proletarian revolution. "If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by the force of circumstances, to organise itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution, it makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own

supremacy as a class" (Marx & Engels (1848) *The Communist Manifesto*). Therefore, proletarian revolution is the fundamental path to completely eliminate class rule and achieve comprehensive human liberation. This essentially requires the unfolding of collective action. In consumer society, to ensure the realization of its self-valorization, while comprehensively permeating human life with the sign meaning of commodities, capitalist logic also builds solid barriers among consumers through sign discipline. While guiding personalized consumption, it also promotes consumer identification with the legitimacy of "standing alone." Thus, commodities/signs separate each individual into isolated atoms, ensuring people cannot unite to oppose the self-valorization of capitalist logic. That is to say, "social consciousness often lags behind the evolution of objective circumstances." Under these conditions, to achieve proletarian revolution, "there should be in society a class that is numerous, influential enough in production to undertake the task of reforming society, and willing to reform society." The broad masses must be re-united to safeguard people's subjectivity in consumption activities; simultaneously, utilize capitalist logic to stimulate the high-speed development of productive forces, facilitating the objective conditions for proletarian revolution. Furthermore, before the conditions for proletarian revolution mature, extensive collective action and social movements must be carried out. Efforts should be actively promoted to formulate policies and social practices aimed at transforming unreasonable production relations and limiting the excessive power of capital. Demands such as striving for reasonable working hours and work-life balance, establishing universal basic income, and effectively reducing the increasingly severe social wealth gap – these measures all point towards structural changes to eliminate the deep soil of consumption alienation. Only by directly confronting and resolving the problems of unbalanced and insufficient development of productive forces and the contradictions within production relations can fundamental liberation be achieved.

Individual Consciousness Awakening and Mind-Nature Cultivation: Breaking Barriers with Inner Clarity

External transformation, without the support of internal awakening, easily becomes rootless. Although alienation theory provides a complete theoretical and practical basis for critiquing consumption alienation and achieving comprehensive human liberation, it cannot truly resolve the problem of mental alienation people face in consumer society. Because the root of mental alienation lies not in capitalist logic but in "ego-attachment" (*wo zhi*). This means that although people already know that capitalist logic alienates humans for self-valorization, they still fall into two extremes: First, due to the long-term discipline of capitalist logic and the current inability to eradicate consumption alienation, they consider colluding with capitalist logic to achieve immediate pleasure as a helpless act; otherwise, self-affirmation cannot be achieved or the emptiness of possessiveness cannot be filled. Second, given the high identification with capitalist logic alienating humans and the inherent contradiction in the current inability to eradicate consumption alienation, they fall into biased criticism of the real world, thereby losing the present experience of a good life. Here, Zen thought provides valuable guidance for individuals to safeguard subjectivity amidst the flood of consumption.

First, practice mindful consumption (*zheng nian xiao fei*). Mindful consumption can be practiced through the "Three-Step Awareness Method"⁵:

- **Before consumption:** Pause and ask: "Is this a survival necessity or a sign temptation?"
- **During consumption:** Focus on feeling the practical function of the commodity (e.g., the comfort of clothes, not the brand), and be aware of fluctuations in possessiveness within the mind.
- **After consumption:** Reflect on the duration of "use-value satisfaction" versus "sign satisfaction," to distinguish real needs from illusory desires (*Mahasatipatthana Sutta*, "Contemplating dharma in dharma"). In live-stream shopping scenarios, this awareness needs to be deepened to address

⁵ Author's design, integrating mindfulness training from the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* (contemplation of phenomena in phenomena) with consumer psychology insights on impulse regulation (e.g., Baudrillard's critique of sign manipulation in digital consumption contexts).

the immediacy and incitement of digital consumption: Before consumption, facing the host's stimulating rhetoric like "limited-time flash sale" or "miss out and it's gone," pause for 30 seconds to observe the breath, contemplating the constructed nature of "scarcity" with the *Diamond Sutra*'s "Dwelling nowhere, let the mind arise," questioning "Is this commodity a life necessity?" and "If not purchased, will it affect basic survival?" During consumption, when the live-stream room's lighting, sound effects, and group panic-buying comments form a "sign field," maintain awareness of bodily sensations – such as trembling fingertips due to impulse, accelerated heartbeat, etc. Simultaneously, anchor attention to the use-value of the commodity (e.g., the ingredients of skincare products, not the "celebrity endorsement" label), not being swept away by the collective emotion of "ten thousand people frantically buying." Within 24 hours after consumption, record the gap between the "pleasure of the possession moment" and the "utility of actual use." If discovering "bought only due to the live-stream atmosphere," contemplate the temporariness of this impulse with "impermanence of all dharmas" (*zhu fa wu chang*), avoiding falling into a new cycle of "self-blame → compensatory consumption."

The *Samyuktāgama Sūtra*, Chapter 37, states:

"What is right mindfulness? It is when a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body internally, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world; he dwells contemplating the body in the body externally... internally and externally... He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings internally... externally... internally and externally... He dwells contemplating mind in mind internally... externally... internally and externally... He dwells contemplating dharma in dharma internally... externally... internally and externally, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. This is called right mindfulness for a bhikkhu."

The *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* also states:

"What are the four foundations of mindfulness? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings... He dwells contemplating mind in mind... He dwells contemplating dharma in dharma, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world."

It can be seen that observing the arising and ceasing of one's own body, emotions, consciousness, and all dharmas, one returns to the essence of life and achieves an awakened existence. Integrating "mindfulness" into consumption behavior requires maintaining awareness before consumption, calmly distinguishing the "need" stemming from life's true necessities from the "want" induced by capital and society, preserving what life requires while abandoning what ego-attachment reaches for. During consumption, one should be focused on the present, attentively experiencing the practical sensations brought by the commodity's function, texture, and use-value, observing changes in one's body, mind, and intentions during the process, overcoming anxiety and fear caused by commodities/signs, and often harboring a sense of contentment. After consumption is completed, reflect on whether the satisfaction brought by this consumption behavior truly originated from the utility of the object or merely from the fleeting vanity brought by possessing the sign.

Second, diligently cultivate the wisdom of breaking attachments (*po zhi guan hui*). The *Platform Sutra, Chapter on Seated Meditation*, states:

"What is meant by Chan and samadhi? Being outwardly separate from form is Chan; inwardly unconfused is samadhi. If outwardly you become attached to form, inwardly the mind becomes confused. If outwardly you are separate from form, inwardly the mind is unconfused. The original nature is pure and quiescent of itself. Only because of seeing situations and thinking about situations does confusion arise. If you see all situations and the mind is not confused, that is true samadhi. Good friends, outwardly separate from form is Chan; inwardly unconfused is samadhi. Outer Chan and inner samadhi is Chan-samadhi.... In thought after thought, see your own original nature pure and clean. Cultivate yourself, practice yourself, and accomplish the Buddha Way yourself."

Therefore, in consumer society, people should resolve attachment to material desires. On one hand, sever the desire to possess external things, because all external things are only temporarily existent; possession is not eternal. Exhausting mental energy to maintain possession is itself a kind of suffering. On the other hand, change the erroneous logic that possessing external things can bring "self-identity," because such logic only brings bondage to the mind. Once adhering to such logic, the mind's fulfillment requires constant consumption to satisfy, and its self-sufficiency will be obscured. Specifically, one should observe the various conditional causes (*yin yuan*) for the arising, persistence, and dissipation of ego-attachment (e.g., advertising stimuli, peer pressure, inner emptiness), and discern the deep psychological needs hidden behind possessiveness (e.g., lack of security, blurred self-identity). The classic Zen text *She Dacheng Lun* (*Compendium of the Mahayana*, Volume 1), points out that ego-attachment arises from "external temptation" (*wai jing you huo*) and "internal ignorance" (*nei zai wu ming*). This resonates with modern psychological research – Maslow (1943) in *Motivation and Personality* mentioned that possessiveness often stems from insecurity; Erikson (1968) in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, discussing identity crisis, pointed out that individuals in periods of social role confusion are prone to constructing identity boundaries through external signs (e.g., consumption choices) to fill the vagueness of self-identity. Together, they reveal the deep roots of ego-attachment. Deeply recognize the impermanence and illusoriness of commodity sign-value (dharma-attachment), and discern the absurdity of equating matter with the self (ego-attachment). Furthermore, one should redirect the time, energy, and resources saved towards activities that bring more lasting and profound satisfaction: nourishing the spiritual world (reading, art, contemplation), cultivating sincere interpersonal relationships, and experiencing the magnificence and harmony of nature.

Third, establish a sense of interconnectedness with all beings (*gong zai gan*). On one hand, the vow to universally liberate all sentient beings (*pu du zhong sheng*) can provide a guide for oneself. While actively practicing a voluntary simple life, reducing material possession and sign chasing, one should also cultivate "compassionate mind" (*ci bei xin*) through benefiting others. Only then can narrow ego-centrism be transcended, achieving true *prajñā* wisdom. On the other hand, individual awakening needs to be nourished and consolidated within a community. Therefore, it is necessary to actively create an atmosphere within communities, associations, or like-minded groups that encourages reflection on consumerism, sharing insights and practical experiences, and mutual support and encouragement. Extend individual mind-nature cultivation into a collective value shift and lifestyle transformation, forming group strength to resist the erosion of consumerism.

Practical Exploration of Dialogue and Integration: "Awakened Actors" and "Compassionate Economy"

The dialogue between alienation theory and Zen thought must ultimately land on creative practices that promote human liberation and individual freedom. Among them, alienation theory takes comprehensive human liberation as its ideal; Zen thought takes individual freedom as its goal. The dialectical relationship between human liberation and individual freedom is that human liberation is a long historical process. Before its realization, individuals should explore methods of freedom. But individual freedom is limited freedom; it cannot hinder the realization of human liberation. That is to say, in the process of seeking human liberation, individuals in each historical stage should not be neglected. Perhaps such individuals cannot complete the history of human liberation or enjoy the freedom of human liberation, but as subjects of history, they also have the right to seek freedom in their own history. However, this right should not become a stumbling block hindering human liberation. This means the freedom rights of the few should not be built upon sacrificing the rights of the many; otherwise, the historical fate of the few ruling the many cannot be escaped. Therefore, it is necessary to use alienation theory as the weapon for seeking human liberation and Zen thought as the method for realizing individual freedom, with alienation theory guiding the practice of Zen thought.

First, combining alienation theory with Zen thought is conducive to cultivating awakened actors (*jue wu de xing dong zhe*). This requires profoundly integrating Zen's spirit of clear, unattached

awakening (*cheng ming wu zhu de jue wu jing shen*) with the socialist reform and proletarian revolutionary practice demanded by alienation theory. Thus, actors can both use the critique of alienation theory to clearly grasp the various forms in which capitalist logic alienates humanity, maintaining a firm direction for transforming external conditions; and utilize Zen methods (*chan ding fang fa*) to maintain inner composure, resolve, and clear awareness when facing setbacks, criticism, and even risks of alienation (e.g., the expansion of instrumental rationality) in action, not being moved by external circumstances, nor losing the original aspiration due to hardship. The "inner unconfusedness" (*nei bu luan*) of Zen concentration can help actors maintain clarity in complex struggles: For example, when facing the temptation or suppression of capital, use the resolve (*ding li*) of "outwardly separate from form" (*wai li xiang*) to adhere to revolutionary goals, avoiding falling into utilitarianism or nihilism. Specifically regarding consumer society, the masses can become aware of the comprehensive discipline imposed by commodities/signs on people, thereby uniting, strengthening the determination to eradicate alienation, and becoming more enthusiastic about striving to eliminate it; every individual can remain firm in their resolve and maintain inner clarity when facing the counterattack of capitalist logic and the temptation of commodities/signs. Thus, whether in groups or as individuals, people can firmly uphold revolutionary ideals and not be disciplined by capitalist logic.

Second, combining alienation theory with Zen thought is conducive to achieving a compassionate economic form (*ci bei de jing ji*). "Compassionate economy" is an economic model centered on "shared benefit and ecological sustainability." Its essential difference from capitalist logic's "profit above all" lies in: Production aims to meet real needs, distribution emphasizes fairness, and consumption advocates simplicity. This aligns with the economic ethic of "benefiting both self and others" advocated by Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching: Right Livelihood on the Eightfold Path*. This requires absorbing the essence of the "Right Livelihood" (*zheng ming*) economic ethic: Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) believed, "To practice Right Livelihood, you have to find a way to earn your living without transgressing your ideal of compassion." "Right Livelihood" means engaging in proper occupations; generally speaking, any livelihood not violating law or moral standards is proper. From the perspective of Dharma, lay practitioners should not only have proper occupations but also engage in pure occupations not contradicting karma (*yin guo*). "We must be mindful of the long-term and short-term consequences of the way we earn our living." The profound critique of alienation theory should be combined with Zen's "Right Livelihood" thought to actively explore and develop people-centered economic models (*ren ben jing ji*) centered on the core principles of shared benefit, ecological sustainability, and care for community well-being. For example: Ecological agriculture emphasizing producer welfare and consumer health (e.g., Japan's "Natural Farming" practice⁶); Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) emphasizing community mutual aid and localization (e.g., Spain's Mondragon cooperatives⁷); Social enterprises pursuing maximum social value rather than maximum legal profit (e.g., Bangladesh's Grameen Bank⁸) – all can be seen as

⁶ Japanese Natural Farming, also known as "No-Tillage Cultivation" or "Do-Nothing Farming", is an ecological agricultural method founded by the late Japanese farmer and philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka. Its core principle is to yield to nature and minimize human intervention, emphasizing the avoidance of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and tilling, relying instead on the power of nature to nurture crops.

⁷ Mondragon Corporation (Spanish: *La Corporación Mondragón*), recognized as the world's most successful worker cooperative, is headquartered in Spain's Basque Country. Founded in 1956 during the region's economic hardship under Franco's dictatorship post-Spanish Civil War, Catholic priest José María Arizmendiarrieta established the Fagor cooperative (originally named Ulgor) with five young engineers, initially focused on household appliance manufacturing. Arizmendiarrieta's vision pioneered an economic model contrasting traditional capitalism: workers function as both laborers and owners, practicing collective ownership, democratic decision-making, and profit-sharing. This framework emerged from a commitment to social equity and economic democracy, aiming to leverage collective action for worker welfare and community development.

⁸ Grameen Bank (Bengali: গ্রামীণ বাংক), a microfinance institution and community development bank in Bangladesh, provides collateral-free microloans ("Grameen credit") primarily to impoverished rural women. This model leverages the high repayment rate (99.9%) and entrepreneurial motivation of female borrowers, enabling small-scale entrepreneurship that significantly improves household livelihoods. Founded by economist Muhammad Yunus in 1976 as a research project at the University of Chittagong, it became an independent bank in 1983. Its core philosophy asserts that the poor possess untapped skills that microloans can activate. The Bank won the World Habitat Award (1998) and, together with Yunus, the

preliminary attempts at "compassionate economy." It must be understood that occupations under a specific economic model are not merely individual matters; they are the collective karma (*gong ye*) of humanity. "The child of the butcher may benefit from my teaching, and my child, because he eats meat, must also bear part of the responsibility for the butcher's occupation." (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998) Therefore, the people must be called upon to build the common ecology of a compassionate economy. Only in this way can all beings be interconnected under conditions effectively curbing the self-valorization of capitalist logic, fostering a social atmosphere of altruism and collectivism.

Finally, combining alienation theory and Zen thought is conducive to achieving cultural integration and promoting life education. In shaping the education system and social cultural atmosphere, Marxist historical materialism, alienation theory, and Zen's wisdom of dependent origination, along with mind-nature cultivation techniques (*xin xing xiu yang gong fu*), should be organically integrated. Efforts should be made to cultivate modern citizens who can rationally analyze social contradictions, actively participate in social construction, and simultaneously maintain inner awareness, resolve, moral self-discipline, and spiritual transcendence. This integrated education aims to shape new people of the era with complete personality and a deep sense of social responsibility. Regarding consumer society, commodities/signs nourish not only people's pathological pursuit of commodity sign meanings but also distort their simple values. Combining alienation theory with Zen thought helps resist the erosion of various egoisms, enabling people to see through the schemes of capitalist logic, thereby discerning right from wrong, separating truth from falsehood, and using higher moral requirements to improve self-cultivation. Simultaneously, recognize that the meaning of life does not lie in achieving false self-satisfaction through the symbolic meaning of commodities, but in overcoming all attachments, realizing self-awareness amidst the worldly atmosphere (*ren jian yan huo qi*), and promoting the common progress of humanity.

Conclusions

The dual alienation of the consumer era – consumption alienation dominated by capitalist logic and mental alienation bred from "ego-attachment" (*wo zhi*) – manifests in new forms like sign cocoons, frictionless consumption, and the eternalization of virtual signs amidst the digital wave, profoundly intensifying the subjective predicament of individuals. Through interdisciplinary dialogue, this study reveals the complementarity of Marxist alienation theory and Zen thought in resolving dual alienation: The former, grounded in historical materialism, analyzes the social structural roots of consumption alienation (the self-valorization of capitalist logic), pointing towards breaking external shackles through social change (e.g., regulating capital operation, promoting proletarian revolution). The latter, centered on "dependent origination and emptiness" (*yuan qi xing kong*), sees through the internal roots of mental alienation (attachment to self and attachment to dharmas), providing an internal path to mental awakening through mindful consumption and wisdom gained by breaking attachments. Their synergy constructs a dual-resolution framework of "transforming external conditions ↔ clarifying the inner mind," offering theoretical resources and practical directions for addressing the alienation dilemma of the consumer era.

However, this study has three limitations: First, the cultural context limitation of theoretical dialogue. Zen thought is rooted in Eastern traditional culture; the interpretability and practical adaptability of its core concepts like "breaking attachments" (*po zhi*) and "dependent origination and emptiness" (*yuan qi xing kong*) in Western individualistic cultural contexts still require further exploration. Second, insufficient empirical support. The research is primarily based on theoretical deduction and case analysis, lacking quantitative surveys of the degree of dual alienation among different groups (e.g., consumers of different ages, classes), and effect tracking of practical paths like "mindful consumption." Future research could supplement empirical data to enhance persuasiveness. Third, idealistic tendencies in practical paths. The realization of concepts like "compassionate economy" and "awakened actors" needs to overcome multiple real-world obstacles

Nobel Peace Prize (2006) for pioneering microcredit to alleviate poverty.

in social structure, interest distribution, and cultural concepts. Their specific implementation mechanisms still need deeper design tailored to specific social contexts.

Despite these limitations, this study, through the interdisciplinary dialogue of Marxism and Zen, provides a new theoretical perspective for understanding and resolving consumption alienation – insisting both on the historical necessity of social structural change and the realistic possibility of individual mental awakening. This approach holds significant enlightening meaning for unraveling the spiritual predicament of contemporary people.

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