Supported by Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences
(本刊获中华社会科学基金资助)

Frontiers of
History in China

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Frontiers of History in China

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FORUM

Steven Heine

Introduction: Fourth-Wave Studies of Chan/Zen Buddhist Discourse

Historical Contexts of Gongan Discourse

This special issue of the Frontiers of History in China features four essays that examine various historical materials and perspectives regarding heretofore little or misleadingly tracked aspects of the theory and practice of Chan Buddhist gongan, which are pithy, paradoxical dialogues used to create a transformational spiritual experience. The main themes involve clarifying the development of the huatou approach in Chan meditation that concentrates on a critical phrase extracted from gongan dialogues that were first created during the twelfth century at the dawn of the Southern Song dynasty, as well as the theme of renewal and reform in this method of meditation in the early seventeenth century near the end of the Ming dynasty.

The twelfth as well as the early seventeenth centuries represented two crucial turning points, over four hundred years apart, when Chan discourse intensively interacted with other intellectual and cultural trends, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. One such trend was the emphasis on elaborate rhetoric used within the Chan monastic community and which was based on interactions with the literary elite, in addition to engaging the Pure Land school's promotion of the practice of nianfo or recitation of the Buddha's name, a technique aimed at lay followers who did not have the time or mentality required for meditation. The foremost Chan Buddhist teachers from the two eras, Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) and Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1615), both of the Linji school, sought in their respective ways to establish the identity and integrity of their lineage's teachings either through criticism of or syncretism with—or, more likely, some combination, whether unconscious or not—of competing viewpoints functioning both within and outside of the Chan tradition.

The rivalries among Chan factions, as well as between the Chan and Pure Land schools, initially took place in a highly competitive religious environment...
that was strictly supervised by the government, which threatened punishment, including banishment, for religious leaders and poets, who often participated in political cliques and who were accused of disloyalty or insubordination. The *huatou* method for using *gongan* was developed in the 1130s by Dahui, who suffered long periods of exile to the malarial south when he fell out of favor with imperial authorities and who sought to spread Chan teaching among the literati in both the capital in Hangzhou and the southern provinces, including Fujian and Guangdong where he resided for prolonged stays. *Huatou* and *gongan* were discussed extensively by Chan leaders throughout the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, but were significantly reevaluated and appropriated by Zhuhong, based on interface with Pure Land theology and the teachings of the Buddhist Vinaya in addition to Confucian thought.

The four essays collected here survey fundamental issues involving the role of language used in *gongan* discourse in relation to the attainment of spiritual realization that is said to have been “independent of words and letters,” as well as the function of Chan meditation on *gongan* cases in connection with literary pursuits and other aspects of monastic training including their interface with *nianfo* recitation utilized in Pure Land. Some of the historical and conceptual issues treated in the essays cover the relation between scholar-officials and monastics, the question of whether the Pure Land is “real” or a state-of-mind attained through contemplation, and the matter of whether the highly compressed *nianfo* technique is compatible with training methods used for abbreviated *gongan*.

**Fourth Wave of Chan Studies**

The four essays are notable for presenting diverse yet interlinked methodological standpoints and are representative of what I refer to as the “fourth wave” of Chan/Zen studies. This wave is delineated by various stages of academic research on *gongan*/*koan* discourse that have unfolded over the past half a century. The several waves collectively signify a gradual progression away from studies that reveal a subtle (or sometimes trumpeted) bias derived from either embracing or rebuffing partisan affiliations and sectarian claims, and instead move toward developing a neutral and holistic methodological framework based on interdisciplinary historical studies for depicting major developments in Chan discourse without leaning toward any one doctrine.

The first wave was marked by the postwar explosion of interest in Chan/Zen, a time when serious works on *gongan* were first being produced in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and there were initial attempts at putting forward accurate translations and portrayals of doctrinal history. Some Asian commentators, including Hu Shih, Garma C. C. Chang, and D. T. Suzuki, were able to translate, publish, and lecture in English, and at the same time Western interpreters like Ruth Fuller Sasaki and Heinrich Dumoulin had the ability to deal with obscure Chinese and Japanese source materials. This academic effort responded to widespread interest on the part of practitioners studying the teachings of Asian masters who migrated to America, such as Sheng Yen, Seung Sahn, and Shunryū Suzuki, as well as artists and intellectuals in the West, such as composer John Cage and poet Gary Snyder, who studied and wished to infuse Chan/Zen teachings into their work based on intense and growing personal interest. The scholarship of Philip Yampolsky, particularly his translation in 1967 of the seminal text, the *Platform Sutra* by sixth Patriarch Huineng, based on the Dunhuang manuscripts and influenced by the eminent Japanese historian of Chan, Yanagida Seizan, had a tremendous impact on the transition to the next stage.

The second wave of Chan/Zen studies that took place in the 1980s was dominated by the publications of the Kuroda Institute and included the monumental work of Robert Buswell, who examined developments in Chinese Chan that led up to and set the stage for the formation of the Korean Seon school’s Jogye Order founded by Jinul in the early thirteenth century. The latter’s teachings were, in turn, greatly influenced by Dahui and the *huatou* method. Although some of the materials in the first wave remain useful today, the second wave of scholarship was in general much more academically astute and thorough in translating and analyzing texts in light of determining their appropriate place in the history of Buddhist writings. However, in some cases, the second-wave textual and historical approach had an affinity with a specific interpretative school, thus perhaps skewing the presentation and linking its approach to the first wave. In other words, the main drawback of the first two waves was that, in trying to be faithful to the Chan tradition their works sometimes resulted in defaulting to the self-presentation of sectarian views in a way that delimited possibilities for neutrality and objectivity. By challenging traditional sectarian orthodoxy, the research by John McRae on the Northern school of Chan published in the late 1980s marked a transition to the next stage of scholarship.

The third wave began in the 1990s by combining a postmodern deconstruction of forms of essentialism embedded in the interpretation of classical texts with wide-ranging social criticism of the role of Chan/Zen in relation to the state, particularly WWII Japanese super-nationalism and imperialism, as well as the suppression of marginalized social groups such as the outcaste community (*burakumin*) in Japan. In diverse ways, Bernard Faure and Brian Victoria, among others, demonstrated that a twentieth-century nationalist agenda on the part of some thinkers led to the subversion of Zen’s religious ideals, including the exploitation of the sayings and anecdotes of *gongan* discourse for the sake of militarist rhetoric. The primary shortcoming of the third wave is that it
represented the flip side of the first two stages in that subjective truth-claims based on religious experience got eclipsed by a devil’s advocate type of debunking. In addition, third-wave studies were not necessarily able to establish a direct connection between the origins of gongan discourse in Song China and its apparent misuses in modern Japan.

The tension between the first two waves that implicitly accepted and in some cases actively advocated for particular beliefs, on the one hand, and the third wave, on the other, which sought to undermine traditional claims, has given way to fourth-wave studies that have been developing for more than a decade. This stage includes a number of prominent Chan/Zen scholars, such as William Bodiford, Griffith Foulk, and Albert Welter, in addition to previous works by several contributors to this special issue, who seek to achieve a constructive methodological compromise through a balanced and even-handed weighing of sectarian rhetoric with current historical criticism. The fourth wave features a mature handling of complex textual materials in a seasoned and reasonable fashion as part of a critical investigation that does not pass judgment in a way that might either diminish or overvalue the significance of the Chan tradition, while resisting the view of gongan discourse as timeless truth immune to historical variability and verifiability.

**Background and Summary of Essays**

The gongan is an extremely concise yet multifaceted literary form that was derived from the encounter dialogues (jìyuǎn wēndá) of Tang-dynasty masters. The dialogues, as recorded in a variety of Northern Song Chan writings in the transmission of the lamp and recorded sayings genres, were examples of reflective repartees used to expose the roots of ignorance and overcome the conceptual attachments of unenlightened disciples. During the eleventh and the early part of the twelfth century, there was a trend to encompass these core dialogues with elaborate commentaries that used complex rhetorical devices borrowed largely from secular writings of the era, such as allusion, paradox, and wordplay. This trend culminated in the publication of the Biyanlu (Blue cliff record), a collection compiled in 1125 with prose, verse, and capping-phrase comments supplied by Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135) on 100 gongan cases originally selected by Xuedou Zhijian (980–1054) a century before. The literary approach of Yuanwu had enormous appeal among the emerging class of scholar-officials, who aspired for an experience of self-examination and self-realization that gongan discourse promised.

According to some accounts, within a decade after Yuanwu’s text was completed, his main disciple Dahui burned the xylographs of the collection; thus the Biyanlu remained out of circulation until it was restored in the early fourteenth century. Dahui apparently felt that the literary approach represented a distraction from meditation for both monastic and literati followers in a society which felt that the northern territories had been lost to Jin invaders in part because of the preoccupation and idle indulgence in bookish pursuits by many intellectuals who should have been more alert to the military threat. With the huatou (variously translated as “key-phrase” or “punch-line”) method, Dahui created a new style of gongan discourse that dispensed with elaborate rhetoric altogether. The huatou approach to meditative practice, formed in part through a rivalry with the Pure Land school’s advocacy of nianfo (ritual recitation of the Buddha’s name), quickly became the mainstream ritual technique that continued to influence Chan training for many centuries, especially in the dominant Linji school, as well as Zen in Japan and Korea.

The essays analyze the motivation behind Dahui’s extraordinary act of destruction and its implications for understanding his relation to Yuanwu in terms of the experience of wrestling with a feeling of profound doubt or uncertainty while seeking to attain enlightenment. Additional topics include exploring the larger connections or disconnections of the huatou method with Pure Land teaching, and the legacy of Dahui’s approach for interpreting the religious outlook of Zhuhong, who led a revival of Chan in the late Ming by reacting to and in some cases restoring or replacing various inherited elements of Song Chan gongan discourse.

The first essay by Steven Heine, “Unintended Baggage? Rethinking Yuanwu Keqin’s View of the Role of Language in Chan Gongan Discourse,” shows how Yuanwu, the compiler of the first major collection of gongan as the culmination of Northern Song Chan’s elaborate literary trends, actually took a guarded approach toward language by neither strictly affirming nor denying its applicability to meditation. Yuanwu has been interpreted either, at one extreme, as a fierce opponent of Dahui, who was famed for his eloquent rhetorical style, or, at the other end of the spectrum, as a precursor to his disciple-cum-critic’s huatou method by supporting a movement toward the abbreviation and minimalism of gongan discourse. In examining this controversy in contemporary scholarship, Heine argues that some crucial passages in Yuanwu’s prose writings about gongan have been unclearly translated or interpreted in recent studies. It is crucial to see that even at the start of his collection, Yuanwu emphasizes the innate limitations of discourse while at the same time showing how literary prose and verse can be useful for explaining religious experience.

Next, in “The Huatou Revolution, Pure Land Practices, and Dahui’s Chan Discourse on the Moment of Death,” Miriam L. Levering deals with the interface between the huatou method and nianfo practice regarding the moment-of-death experience, a valuable and understudied topic. In the gongan discourse of Chan thinkers Yuanwu and Dahui at the end of the Northern Song and the beginning of
the Southern Song, notions like anticipating “the approach of death” (linzhong) and facing “the last day of your life” began to appear in Chan writings that were greatly influenced by the attraction of the Pure Land school’s path of other-power, or reliance on the salvific power of Buddha, for lay followers. Based on an intensive analysis of Dahui’s letters written to lay followers, Levering demonstrates that in developing the tenet of “the real practice for the moment of death,” the meditative approach of Chan masters integrated the notion of confronting death into their gongan approach by teaching a Chan way to prepare for that encounter.

The third essay by Morten Schütter, “‘Who Is Reciting the Name of the Buddha?’ as Gongan in Chinese Chan Buddhism,” further investigates the shortcut huatou method used in post-Song developments of gongan discourse in relation to Pure Land practice. He points out that Chan’s ambivalent relationship with language and literature is starkly seen in its practice of huatou, which typically takes the form of a brief enigmatic question. Examples include “why did [the legendary founder of Chan] Bodhidharma come from the West?” and the phrase, “who is reciting the name of the Buddha?,” a reference to the widespread practice of chanting homage to the Buddha Amitabha in hope of being reborn into his paradise. Scholars have long struggled with understanding this type of Pure Land-influenced huatou, and several have dismissed it as an example of the degeneration of Chan in later centuries. Schütter shows that Chan masters of the Ming dynasty such as Zhuhong were deeply engaged in a project to overcome the duality between language and oral practice, on the one hand, and the notion of a wordless transmission, on the other.

Finally, in “Do Not Say That You Have Forgotten King and Father: Yunqi Zhuhong’s Chan Realism,” as a counterpoint to some of the conclusions in the above-mentioned essays, Matthew Wilhite, based on a critique of aspects of Chan discourse, seeks to demonstrate that Zhuhong, who wrote texts commenting on traditional Chan dialogues and sought to integrate these with nianfo practice, for the most part eschewed gongan rhetoric in favor of a more pragmatic approach to language in the teaching of Chan realism that is geared to making ethical choices and eliminating any antinomian tendencies. By acknowledging the value of provisional truth in a way that was influenced by the teachings of Buddhist Vinaya and Confucian ethics, Zhuhong rejected the antinomianism prevalent in previous Chan practices and embraced the acceptance of larger social laws, ideas, and mores for the cultivation of both the individual and the community. Through his emphasis on morality as necessary to the survival of Buddhism, Zhuhong separated himself from many Chan gongan developed in the Tang and commented on during the Song which rejected conventional logic and ethical practices.

For Wilhite, Zhuhong’s approach to Chan is marked by moral clarity along with a willingness to compromise, as well as a bypassing of the mainstream Chan trend of reliance on using rhetorical devices, whether expansionist, as in Yuanwu’s Biyanlu, or minimalist as in the case of Dahui’s huatou. However, when seen in connection with the other essays, it is clear that Zhuhong’s role is very complicated, as is the contested status of Yuanwu’s seemingly ambivalent approach, since he can also be interpreted as a Chan master with a great facility with interpreting gongan and syncretizing Chan discourse with nianfo practice.

Therefore, contributions to this special issue demonstrate that fourth-wave historical studies of Chan discourse are open-ended and flexible in investigating diverse forms of literary expression in sociopolitical settings. Competing viewpoints can thereby coexist in their respective settings so that each is examined through critical comparative studies. Manifold historical contexts and rhetorical voices, at once intersecting and conflicting, while also demonstrating continuities and discontinuities, are made to stand in proximity and can take part in constructive debate in light of the legacy of discord and disputation between traditional and modern Chan and non-Chan factions.
Unintended Baggage? Rethinking Yuanwu Keqin’s View of the Role of Language in Chan Gongan Discourse

Abstract  This essay argues that the distinctive literary voice of Yuanwu Keqin in Biyanlu is generally overlooked or blurred with the source materials. It seeks to understand Yuanwu’s view of Chan rhetoric seen in relation to Xuedou’s original verse comments. In one of Yuanwu’s prose remarks, he stakes out his view of the role of language in gongan discourse by valorizing the verse comments of Xuedou. But other passages stress that there is a difference between verse and prose commentary, or view both styles as positive. By engaging the views of other recent scholars, this essay demonstrates that it is crucial to see that from the start of his collection Yuanwu emphasizes the innate limitations of discourse, while at the same time shows how an appropriate use of rhetoric can be useful and necessary as a heuristic tool to guide disciples.

Keywords  Yuanwu Keqin, Song, Biyanlu, doubt, huatou, geteng

[He] hangs up the head of a sheep but sells the meat of a dog.
—Wumenguan, Case 6

Gongan Contexts and Contests

This essay examines the philosophy of language and literature in relation to Chan Buddhist awakening in the works of Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135), best known as editor/commentator of the Biyanlu (Blue cliff record); it does so in light of Chinese intellectual historical trends during the first half of the twelfth century. The Biyanlu is the most prominent of the classic collections of Chan gongan cases and was compiled from a series of sermons offered over more than a dozen years. Yuanwu’s comments on 100 case records were initially selected along with verse remarks (songgu) by Xuedou Chongxian (980–1052) as contained in the latter’s Baize songgu (One hundred verses) collection of 1038. Yuanwu’s comments were presented in sermons that took place between 1112 and 1125, primarily while he was staying in the “Blue Cliff” (Biyan) cloister and teaching at Lingquan Temple on Mount Jia in western Hunan province, as well as at several other temples.1

Celebrated because of its use of complex rhetorical devices, the Biyanlu represented a culmination of the trend toward emphasizing literary (wenzi) Chan, which characterized the ideology of the Chan school during the Northern Song. It was edited by disciples who wrote a preface and published the text three years later in 1128, at the dawn of the Southern Song. Yuanwu stresses that language represents a series of conceptual entanglements (geteng) that, when explored productively, ironically help lead to a greater understanding of the contradictory nature of spiritual awakening.

The transition from the Northern to the Southern Song marked a distinct change in which some Chan masters started reacting against an emphasis on rhetorical embellishment; they did so by casting their quest for the meaning of enlightenment as strictly a matter of minimalist expression. Shortly after the initial publication of the Biyanlu, harsh criticism was registered against reliance on literature, which seemed to go against the grain of the basic principle that Chan represented a “special transmission outside the scriptures” (jiaowai biechuan). This shift apparently led to the destruction of the Biyanlu in the 1130s by Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), Yuanwu’s foremost disciple yet seemingly greatest critic, who was supposedly responsible for burning the xylographs of the collection; as a result it remained out of circulation until it was reconstructed more than a century later.

Dahui developed an approach based on key-phrases known as huatou, whereby a succinct word or phrase is the focus of religious ritual. Key-phrases were extracted from case narratives, and they became an object of meditation transcending reason and rhetoric. Dahui claimed to be inspired by Yuanwu’s mentor, Wuju Fayan (1024–1104). Yet, Dahui’s textual production was voluminous, which shows that he was also involved in literary pursuits. The huatou approach he initiated led to the publication of a new collection of 48 cases in the Wumenguan (Gateless gate) of 1229, which highlighted the minimalist method. The latter method was based on the use of sparse words and phrases that captured the main philosophical ideas without further rhetorical elaboration and it became adopted as the mainstream in many circles in Southern Song China as well as Japan and Korea.

1 According to one of the extant prefaces, lectures were also given at Daolin and Zhaojue temples. See The Blue Cliff Record, Trans., Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, 3 vols.; and Inya Yoshitaka, et al., eds., Hekiganroku, 3 vols.
A hermeneutic question surrounding this whole matter is whether or not such a drastic change of attitude in regard to the reception of the Biyanlu was the result of "untended discursive baggage" based on Yuanwu's preoccupation with literary discourse. Did Dahui recognize that language could not convey but only distract from spiritual attainment and, therefore, was something that must be discarded? Could there have been an underlying sense of consistency and continuity between creator/mentor and destroyer/student, seen in the fact that Yuanwu was well aware of the limitations of his own accomplishment and would have approved of Dahui undertaking a destruction of the text as a last resort? Or, did the damaging act represent a fundamental misunderstanding on Dahui's part of the value of literary discourse for Xuedou and Yuanwu as well as Wuzu. Perhaps, the gap between two respected yet continually contested Chan Buddhist standpoints concerning the matter of the efficacy of rhetorical refinement was too wide.

Yuanwu at Historical-Conceptual Crossroads

In the Biyanlu, Yuanwu provides various sorts of extensive prose (niangu) and capping-phrase (zhoyou) commentaries on the Baize songgu (Verses on one hundred cases) by Xuedou. Xuedou culled 82 cases from hagiographical anecdotes, including the encounter dialogues (jiyuan wenda), of Tang dynasty masters contained in the Jingde chuandenglu (Jingde transmission of the lamp), which is the seminal transmission of the lamp record of 1004. The 18 remaining cases he extracted from the recorded sayings of the founder of his lineage, Yunmen (864–949) in the Yunmen guanglu (Extensive record of Yunmen). Using Xuedou's selections and poetic remarks as the base, Yuanwu offers an introductory statement that provides several rhetorical elements: (1) it "raises [a case]" (ju) in 80 instances; and for each gongan (2) and verse (3), the highly innovative hybrid (prose-poetic) capping-phrase annotations (4) and (5), in addition to interpretive prose comments (pingchang, also known as shizhong) on each case (6) and verse (7).

Yuanwu's interlinear remarks are homiletic; they convey and exhort the reader toward embracing a basic message that one must study carefully the source materials yet remain altogether detached from verbal expressions. He includes interpretive elements that are exegetical by giving some of the conceptual and cultural background for understanding the origins and contextual implications of Xuedou's cases with verse. Yuanwu's comments are also eisegetical, in exploring various Chan and non-Buddhist viewpoints that support and augment the primary standpoint regarding the role of language seen in relation to the goal of attaining spiritual realization. In several of the cases, Xuedou or another interlocutor such as Yunmen is able to interject capping-phrase comments into the case record. All of the different types of remarks feature an outlook based on irony and relativism that refrains from any commitment to a particular argument or outlook about the underlying meaning of the case, which must be left open-ended and variable to the individual's circumstances of training and level of religious awareness.

Xuedou was inspired by the gongan collections of Fenyang, who was probably the first Northern Song master to compile and comment at length in both verse and prose on a wide variety of cases, in addition to using replacement words (daiyu) through which an interpreter would substitute his own answers to the case. Fenyang helped to establish the Chan trend in using an enigmatic and deliberately disturbing manner of discourse. His verse comments using allusion, wordplay, and metaphor are designed to uncover and amplify hidden meanings embedded in the paradoxical dialogues found in transmission records. However, unlike Xuedou's form of poetry, which uses lyrical imagery to draw out the ironic and perplexing ramifications of the cases cited, Fenyang develops various formulas and formulations, such as the three mysteries (sanxuan) and three essentials (sanyao) derived mainly from the record of Linji Yixuan (d. 866) and other Tang-dynasty teachings in order to address the doctrinal significance of gongan cases. This is an approach that Yuanwu repudiated in favor of a more intricately crafted style of interlinear interpretation of Xuedou's poetry.

Because of the multilayered structure of its commentary, the Biyanlu has long been appreciated (but in some quarters condemned) for rhetorical embellishments that combined Xuedou's elegant and evocative poetry with Yuanwu's lucid and eloquent prose. The text reinforces the intimate relation between literary pursuits and spirituality, especially in the hands of talented monk-poets, but also lay followers who wrote, discussed, or otherwise appreciated comments on gongan cases. The Song scholar-officials (shidaifu),

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2 Xuedou was the fourth patriarch and reviver of the Yunmen school; he was enlightened by Zhimen (c. 940–1031).

3 Victor Sōgen Hori notes that "the use of the jakugo in texts like the Hekigan-roku represents a departure from traditional commentarial practices. The jakugo is a new type of commentary, short and terse, often vulgar, irreverent, and unlearned"; in Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice, 43.

4 Furthermore, the two sorts of prose comments reflect a somewhat different structure and aim, with remarks on cases being more investigative and explanatory in regard to how the case originally developed and has been recorded in Zen texts and those on verses more concerned with a kind of literary critical approach to Xuedou's literary skill and rhetorical acumen.

5 For example, in between the lines of case 97 Xuedou says, " Completely exposed!" or, "I have seen all the way through him!" (動絶了也).

6 Fenyang also draws upon the five ranks expounded by Caodong school founder, Dongshan Liangjie (807–69).
who frequently patronized the Chan school’s literary canon, needed to demonstrate their virtuosity in composing and/or cherishing poetry in order to succeed in an elite society that was increasingly cosmopolitan and merit-based, but also highly competitive. This is because religious movements were carefully overseen by imperial supervision. Intellectuals also turned to Chan poetry to offset inner feelings of anxiety and a sense of distrust, as well as to express underlying religious aspirations and naturalist leanings. Their writings offered a vigorous and often unapologetic and unambiguous defense of the use of language understood as a means of explicating Buddhist wisdom, instead of regarding rhetoric as an obstruction on the path to enlightenment.

For example, the preeminent Buddhist poet of the Northern Song and Chan sympathizer, Su Shi, who also served for nearly twenty years as mayor of Hangzhou in the years before it became the capital, remarked that he could determine a man’s character, not merely his learning, from his verse. Also, Juefan Huihong (1071–1128), a prominent chronicler of the literary Chan movement who was a monk in the Linji-Huanglong stream and became associated with both Yuanwu and Dahui over the years, supposedly said, “The subtleties of the mind cannot be transmitted in words, but can be seen in verbal expressions.” In further support of this notion, the Yunmen-stream scholar Dajue once remarked, “If jade is not polished, it cannot be fashioned into a vessel. If people do not study, then they will not know the path.”

We also must consider the influence of Confucianism on Chan discourse. Confucianism saw study and learning as crucial means of self-cultivation, requiring respect for language as a vehicle to convey the significance of subjective experience. Without the crucial role of language, especially the words of the sages Confucius and Mencius, humans would be little if any different from beasts. Words are not, as the Mahayana Buddhists claim, essentially empty. Rather, Song Confucians affirmed that words are real conveyors of true meaning—meanings with epistemological power sufficient to facilitate transformations of reality in cognitive and ethical ways.

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8 The friendship between Su Shi and the eminent Chan monk Foyin Liaoyuan (1032–98) was arguably the most celebrated example of the spiritual and artistic exchanges between scholar and monk of the era; their relationship, as chronicled by Juefan and celebrated in many other records, probably began in 1079. See An-yi Pan, Painting Faith: Li Gonglin and Northern Song Buddhism Culture, 114–15.

9 George Albert Keyworth, III, “Transmitting the Lamp of Learning in Classical Chan Buddhism: Juefan Huihong (1071–1128) and Literary Chan,” notes a text that refers to taking “writing and make it as beautiful and brilliantly shining.” 150. However, even Foyin was at times critical of a foolish dependence on words and letters.

10 Keyworth, “Transmitting the Lamp of Learning in Classical Chan Buddhism,” 165.

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Early in his career, Dahui studied intensively the Baize songgu and related texts while serving as the attendant of Shaocheng, an aged master who had once known Xuedou personally. Apparently, the teacher interviewed him on the cases in the collection without speaking a word, thereby forcing Dahui to work them out for himself under psychic pressure that possibly led to a strong sense of skepticism about language and of the inscrutability of gongan as a verbal complication. For nearly two decades of study with various masters, Dahui failed repeatedly to gain a full-fledged awakening experience, and later mentioned that he had achieved eighteen minor epiphanies without realizing the ultimate goal. It was recommended by the famed literatus who became Dahui’s frequent companion, Zhang Shangying, that Dahui should shift affiliation from the Huanglong stream to Yuanwu’s mentorship in the Yangqi stream of the Linji school. Dahui finally attained a complete awakening in 1125 from studying gongan cases under Yuanwu, but was never again favorable about his former school, whose leaders were generally excluded from the transmission records kept by Dahui’s followers.

Yuanwu retired in 1130 and returned to his native Sichuan province, where he spent the rest of his life until dying in 1135; but about four years after Yuanwu’s retirement, Dahui’s outlook began to change drastically during a time in which he was preaching to lay disciples while in exile in southeastern Fujian province. Although the above-mentioned account of Dahui’s burning the Biyanlu may well be apocryphal, it seems consistent with Dahui’s belief that the degree of learning required to study the text was deceiving followers into an attachment to words and letters, which are merely the product of intellectual erudition, rather than the intuitive, experiential understanding of Chan teaching. Since Yuanwu consistently warned against this pitfall, Dahui may have considered himself in line with or even somehow fulfilling the master’s teachings. His act recognized the difficulty of trying to interpret Xuedou’s Baize songgu, which in an ironic way needed to be killed in order to be saved.

By initiating a departure from the language games of prior gongan commentators, Dahui developed a new, abbreviated (or shortcut) approach of gongan-introspection (kanhua Chan), called the huatu method. This soon became dominant in almost all Zen schools throughout East Asia, including some Caodong-school lineages in China and Japan. Nevertheless, the study of the Biyanlu was revived in 1317 when extant versions were used by lay Buddhist Zhang Mingyuan to piece together the original. This perhaps somewhat corrupted edition has been perpetuated for hundreds of years through countless volumes of Chinese and Japanese commentaries, often alongside Dahui’s shortcut approach.
Yuanwu, Rhetorical Reviver or Detractor?

What was the status of Yuanwu, a Linji-Yangqi school scholiast who trained under master Wuzu and was prized for his literary production, relative to his predecessor Xuedou of the Yunmen school? All three just-mentioned masters were natives of Sichuan province, which produced many prominent Song literary figures, and this perhaps fostered a sense of regional solidarity. Did Yuanwu primarily promote, or did he distance himself from, the emphasis on language highlighted by Xuedou’s verse comments and to a lesser extent by Wuzu’s compositions? In his study of Juefan’s view of literary Chan, George Keyworth argues that having been a stark contrast with Dahui: “Yuanwu Keqin appears to have been among the most prodigious Chan masters to promulgate these [literary] methods of instruction [by bringing up precedent cases (jugu)] with his students. Along with Fenyang, Yuanwu Keqin was arguably the premier proponent of using dependence on language to teach his pupils.”

An important aspect of Yuanwu’s outlook is the way he assessed the value of Xuedou’s poetry. Generally, Yuanwu evaluated Xuedou’s verse in superlative terms but he also occasionally included mildly critical comments. While not primarily a poet himself (even though he was known to use the romantic imagery of Chinese love stories in his Chan verses as symbolic of enlightenment), Yuanwu’s remarks on the verses by Xuedou may be seen either as supporting and enhancing, or detracting from and diminishing, the literary significance of the poetry. It is also important to note that Yuanwu composed a commentary on Xuedou’s collection of prose remarks on 100 gongan cases—Yuanwu’s Jijielu (Record of prose comments).

Even though there are about one-and-a-half fascicles containing songgu in his 20-volume yulu (Recorded sayings), Yuanwu does not contribute his own verse comments to the Biyanlu, with the exception of a poem included in the commentary on the final case. In playful fashion, the concluding verse expresses Yuanwu’s ambivalence in regard to language, as well as mixed feelings about the efficacy of the overall project: “Filled with countless bushels, the boat effortlessly pulls away. Holding just one grain of rice, the jar overtakes the snake. When scattering comments on one hundred public cases (gongan), just how many people end up with sand in their eyes?”

A reversal of Keyworth’s view of Yuanwu as the epitome of literary Chan is posited by Christoph Anderl, who argues that Yuanwu is “one of the most important precursors of kanhua Chan,” thus suggesting that Yuanwu’s intention was to move away from the rhetorical approach of Xuedou. According to this reading, Yuanwu was primarily involved in setting the stage, even if unwittingly, for Dahui’s shortcut technique since he had little use for verse as an end in itself. In this regard, he once stated that: “(o)nly the enigmatic and often paradoxical statements seem to qualify as real ‘live phrases.’” Even more straightforwardly, Natasha Heller argues that Yuanwu “laid the groundwork for the huatou advocated by his student Dahui… [and Yuanwu] rejects the recitation of a text as well as intellectual probing.”

From the Anderl/Heller perspective, it seems that Yuanwu represents a necessary stage in the seemingly inexorable process of discursive abbreviation in Chan records, extending from (1) encounter dialogues included in transmission of the lamp records in the early eleventh century, to (2) gongan as cited in the Fenyang-Xuedou collections a few decades later, to (3) capping phrases appended to cases in the Biyanlu in the early 1100s, and finally to (4) the huatou as the culmination of the trend by Dahui reached by the middle of the twelfth century. Therefore, Yuanwu’s contribution of adding capping-phrases that are cryptic and seemingly indecipherable should be understood not as an expansion of gongan discourse in a new literary direction but rather as representing an incipient stage of contraction. This contraction worked by means of the huatou technique’s shedding of rhetorical baggage, whether or not this shedding would have been acknowledged by Yuanwu (if given a hypothetical opportunity to comment).

In support of the contraction thesis, it can be noted that Yuanwu’s view of numerous gongan cases is that they must not be wrongly understood as intellectual endeavors or interpreted for what is contained in words alone. Such a view recalls Dahui’s outlook that emphasized critical phrases extracted from their original dialogical context so as to become objects of contemplation. For example, in commenting on case 12, in which Dongsan Shouchu responds to a monk’s question—“What is Buddha?”—by saying inescrutably, “Three pounds of flax,” Yuanwu notes that “so many monks have misunderstood this case.” After rejecting several misconceptions, he continues by evoking a Zhuangzi-like view of the ultimate uselessness of language:

What is the reason for this? Words and speech are just vessels to convey the way. Far from realizing the intent of the ancients, people just search amid

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13 Keyworth, “Transmitting the Lamp of Learning in Classical Chan Buddhism,” 156.
14 Xuedou composed seven texts with prose comments on about 300 cases, and in most instances is parsimonious in that they are often limited to just one sentence. One of these texts composed later in his life became the basis of Yuanwu’s additional commentary in the Jijielu.
16 Christoph Anderl, “Chan Rhetoric: An Introduction,” 42.
18 T48:152c21.
words but what can be gained from this? Haven’t you seen how an ancient said, “Originally the path is wordless; with words we illustrate the path. Once you see the path, the words are immediately forgotten.” To get to this point, you must first go back to your own original fundamental state. Just this “three pounds of flax” is like the single track of the great road leading to (ancient capital of) Chang’an.19

While such a dismissal of misunderstandings generated by verbiage is surely reminiscent of Dahui, there is also much about Yuanwu’s commentary on this and other cases that is quite different from the hua-tou method. This is particularly true in regard to Yuanwu’s positive view of verses on the gongan written by both Wuzu and Xuedou. In fact, he says that Xuedou exhibits “thoroughly penetrating insight.”20

Therefore, the main question about Yuanwu’s relationship with Xuedou concerns what Yuanwu must have had in mind in composing his prose comments. Did he feel that the Xuedou verses were so precious as to deserve special treatment, as Keyworth indicates, or could he have been thinking that they were overly abstruse and in need of being brought down to earth in order to have an impact on fellow monks? In the latter case, might Yuanwu also have been concerned that his own contribution to literary Chan carried unintended baggage, as Anderl and Heller suggest? Furthermore, the main question in regard to Dahui is whether Yuanwu would have been repulsed by his former student’s far-reaching notion of the path is wordless; with words we illustrate the path. This is reminiscent of Dahui, there is also much about Yuanwu’s commentary on this and other cases that is quite different from the hua-tou method. This is particularly true in regard to Yuanwu’s positive view of verses on the gongan written by both Wuzu and Xuedou. In fact, he says that Xuedou exhibits “thoroughly penetrating insight.”20

Yuanwu comments in case 1 of the Biyanlu, which deals with Bodhidharma’s iconoclastic quip that there is “nothing sacred,” in response to the Emperor’s query about the results of good works, and “I don’t know,” when asked who stands before the ruler. Yuanwu states out his distinctive view of the role of language in gongan discourse by valorizing Xuedou’s verse comments:

Those who possess the True Eye see that by picking up this or considering that, and praising here or bashing there, [Xuedou] uses only four lines of verse to settle the whole gongan case. Generally, verse comments just take a meandering path to explicate Chan, whereas prose comments try to wrap up a gongan by remarking on the case’s overall meaning, and that is all. But here Xuedou pinches hard and does not let go.21

This is one of several important passages regarding Yuanwu’s life and thought. In it, a seemingly minor disagreement in translation highlights a wide gap in any understanding of the significance. Other renderings stress that the passage in question is intended to reflect a basic difference in quality between verse and prose styles of commentary, or they see both varieties of interpretation as either invariably positive or hopelessly unproductive. What is crucial, according to my reading, is that from the very start of the collection Yuanwu emphasizes the innate limitations of discourse as a possible detriment to awakening, while at the same time he shows, perhaps in somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion, how appropriate language in the hands of a powerfully expressive poet-mönk can become a constructive enhancement of enlightenment.

Somewhat differently from both Xuedou, the versifier of symbolic imagery, and Dahui, the skeptic of rhetoric as an end in itself, Yuanwu takes a guarded approach toward discourse by neither ratifying nor denying its applicability. However, Yuanwu also generously, albeit critically, explores diverse sorts of expression and their multifarious implications. The key element in the above translated passage is that Yuanwu at once dismisses poetic and prose commentary when they are unfortunately not carried out in an appropriate manner—he does not favor one over the other, as a recent scholar suggests22—but praises Xuedou’s

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21 T48:141a13–16. The original Chinese version reads: 若是具眼者看他一棒一喝一笑一歎，只用四句捕蛇一则公案，大凡頑 FGZ只是縈錦繡花，拾古大綱謬談結案而已。當與他一棒。
22 For example: “Generally speaking, verses on old cases just expound Chan in a roundabout way; the general purpose of making remarks on old cases is to bring resolution to those old cases;” see Yi-hsun Huang, “Chan Master Xuedou and His Remarks on Old Cases in the Record of Master Xuedou at Dongting: A Preliminary Study,” 87. Also, “He whose eye is opened, can see how Setchō [Xuedou] sometimes picks and sometimes gathers, sometimes praises and sometimes blames, and with only four lines he measures the kōan. Generally speaking, the “commendatory verse” (J. joko, C. sung-k’u) on a kōan demonstrates Zen in a roundabout manner, while its “critical comment” (J. nenko, C. nien-k’u) takes up the significant points and gives critical remarks. Setchō at the outset makes this challenging gesture,” in Daisetz T. Suzuki, Translator, “The Hekigan-roku (Pi-yen Lu),” 16.
verse as exceptional, although not without a certain amount of ambiguity underlying this assessment. Through this and related remarks, Yuanwu seeks to carve out a middle position between naïve affirmation and stubborn rejection of literary Chan.

**The Creation and Destruction of the Biyanlu**

Yuanwu was certainly one of the most significant leaders during the extraordinary flourishing of Song-dynasty Chan and its engagement with imperial authorities. At the same time, Chan interacted with well-educated and highly cultured scholar-officials, and of course operated within the thriving networks of monastic communities and lay disciples. The Chan school had to suffer through the era’s political turmoil, which created fierce competition with the often harsh Buddhist and Neo-Confucian criticisms of what appeared to outsiders as an endless array of its seemingly nonsensical discourse. Both Yuanwu and Dahui are notable for their respective religious quests to surmount such challenges and to give voice to confessional expressions of regret and remorse for shortcomings—both personal and social—during turbulent times. By the end of their careers, each was highly regarded by the imperium for displaying a firm commitment to Chan discipline and for demonstrating significant accomplishments in literary and pedagogical techniques.

Overall, Yuanwu led a very successful monastic career as a tenth-generation Linji-school master and abbot, who crossed various cultural and sectarian, as well as social and geographical, boundaries in pursuit of Chan spirituality; he was duly recognized by the Song court with patronage and titles. Born in Sichuan in 1063 to a family of Confucians, as a young man he trained to take the civil examinations but did not perform well. He then visited Miaoji Temple, near his home, and later he said that this gave him the feeling that he must have been a Buddhist monk in a previous lifetime. After wide-ranging travels and struggles to attain awakening, Yuanwu, already in his forties, finished studying and gained a powerful and enduring enlightenment experience under the renowned Wuzu, who had attained a realization at Dongchan Temple in Hubei province. Wuzu, at the start of their relationship, had dismissed Yuanwu—or in another version Yuanwu was dissatisfied with Wuzu’s teaching. Then Yuanwu underwent a sustained feverish sickness (rebìng) because of excessive meditation, as foreseen by Wuzu. This broke his pride and self-confidence, qualities that were driving him to succeed but were also impediments to reaching his spiritual goal.23

After his breakthrough, Yuanwu was soon invited to preach at a temple near Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. Zhang Shangying, then a chief councilor (but someone who repeatedly fell in and out of the court’s favor), had met Yuanwu in Hunan in the early 1110s and now invited him to lead the temple on Mount Jia. His lectures came to form the *Biyanlu*. Yuanwu received the purple robe from Emperor Huizong, who though politically weak at this time, was generally a strong patron of culture; he traveled to Hunan in part to see the master, and in 1114 Yuanwu was symbolically named Fuguo Chanshi, or Fruition of Buddha Chan Teacher. In 1125, Yuanwu was appointed by the court to be abbot of a great monastery, the Tianning Wanshou in the capital of Bianliang (Kaifeng), and in 1128 he was granted the moniker by which he is best known, Yuanwu Chanshi, or Perfectly Enlightened Chan Teacher.

Although banished along with Dahui following the fall of the Northern Song, another imperial title, Zhenjue, or Truly Awakened, was bestowed upon Yuanwu posthumously. From his letters (shū), it is clear that, in addition to producing seventy-five monastic disciples in the Yangqi lineage, Yuanwu was well acquainted with and an inspiration for many of the era’s leading scholar-officials, several of whom wrote prefaces for his *Record* published in 1134; this group included the grandson of Su Shi. While still very much affected by the sociopolitical turmoil of the era, Yuanwu concluded his career as a Chan master who fostered alliances between the emperor and court literati, on one hand, and, on the other, the local elite in various locations, especially in the former capital and Hunan province. He also helped in a number of ways his fellow residents of Sichuan, where he spent the final stage of his life. Having spread the Yangqi stream well beyond its original domain in the southwest of China to northern, southeastern and central regions, all Rinzai sect lineages in Japan are ultimately descended from Yuanwu. However, it is interesting to note that unlike Xuedou, who stayed for his final thirty-one years in Zhejiang province before it housed the capital, and Dahui, who ended his career near the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou, Yuanwu did not reside in that increasingly prestigious provincial area, although he may have spent time wandering there with a friend, Fojian Huiqin, during the course of his illness.

Modern commentators are in general accord regarding the rhetorical value of the *Biyanlu*, which “as a rich compendium of Ch’an teachings, lore, poetry, and wit... reflecting Yuan-wu’s exuberant and colloquial style (however inscrutable it may appear initially), represents a peak in the literature of Ch’an.”24 Heinrich Dumoulin refers to the text as “one of the foremost examples of religious world literature,” although he also notes that this text is intricately composed and “not easy” to decipher.25 In the introduction to their translation, Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary suggest that the “literary expressiveness is so rich that it can hardly fail

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23 T47:956c7–9; T51:643a11–15.
to make an impression," and emphasize that Hakuin—a strong supporter of Dahui's huatou technique and a fierce critic of alternative approaches to practice—lectured on the collection for more than thirty years (from the late 1720s until near the end of his life), and said that he continually gained new insights from it.26

But what is the primary aim of Yuanwu's writing? Can the answer be deduced without giving way to the problematic tendency in much of modern scholarship that conflates things by viewing his approach retrospectively in terms of its appropriation by Dahui? According to Yuanwu's own remarks in the Xinyao (Essentials of mind), his approach to explicating Xuedou's verse comments is quite distinct from the formulations expressed in Fenyang's commentaries on cases. At the very beginning of the passage Yuanwu evokes Fenyang's use of various doctrinal formulas and their possibly deleterious impact on Chan. It is a clear distinction, not a feigned one, resulting in a spontaneous intuitive insight that argues:

The teachings were often expressed through the three mysteries; the three essentials, the four taxonomies; the four levels of guest and host; the bejeweled sword of the Vajra King; a crouching lion; the shout that does not act as a shout; the probing pole and the reed shade; distinguishing guest and host in a single shout; and illumination and function occurring at the same time. Scholars who would just bundle together their notes about all of these kinds of explanations [and think they had gotten the point] can hardly fathom that "there is no such sword in the royal storehouse." They take out their notebooks and look them over thoroughly, but all they can do with this is just to blink their eyes. Surely, they look only at the surface evidence for proof or just to verify superficially that they are right, and then they find some skewed angle from which to project their partial viewpoint [as if it were comprehensive].27

What, more specifically, is Yuanwu's view of Xuedou? According to Ding-hwa Hsieh, Yuanwu's prose comments on Xuedou's verses are partially a tribute and in some measure reparative, in that the former "tried hard to elevate the value and function of Hsueh Tou's literary composition in the context of Ch'an kung-an instruction and praxis."28 Hsieh argues that Yuanwu could not help but show the flaws of Xuedou, claiming that his aim was to "exculpate Hsueh Tou from the charge of making Ch'an merely a literary activity... which appeared bookish and static," rather than "personal and intuitive," doing so in order to restore the "supremacy of Ch'an Buddhism... in its unique pedagogical methods."29 Andy Ferguson adds that once the process of editing by Yuanwu's disciples was completed, "The resulting text, called the Blue Cliff Record, has served as a preeminent volume of kôans for subsequent generations of Zen students. Gaining wide polarity during Foguo's lifetime, the Blue Cliff Record received both praise and condemnation. To some it represented the highest standard of Zen literature. To others it represented a subversion of Zen's tradition of pointing directly at mind and shunning the study of written words as a vehicle for liberation."30

This critical view is supported by A. V. Grimstone's "Introduction" to Katsuki Sekida's translation of the Biyanlu in Two Zen Classics. For Grimstone, "Engo's aim in adding to Setchô's text was to try to render it more approachable and intelligible. Full of paradoxical expressions and all manner of allusions, it employs a condensed, often involved style, while treating of matters of great subtlety and difficulty."31 However, Grimstone argues that accessibility to Xuedou's verse was not fully achieved because the whole effort "tempted students to try to understand Zen conceptually, by the exercise of the intellect alone, instead of on the basis of their own immediate experience. For this reason, Daie... destroyed the original edition of Engo's text."

In order to probe the issue of whether the Biyanlu somehow deserved to be eliminated, even in the view of its supporters (or possibly, even its creator!), let us consider the locus classicus for the legend of Dahui's destruction of the Biyanlu, which seems to support the analysis of Keyworth to the effect that the approaches of Yuanwu and his main disciple represent polar opposite positions. According to a passage in the Chanlin baoxun, a text from around 1180 regarding an obscure Linji-Huanglong stream monk's (Xinwen Tanben) reflections on the Chan school's overreliance on textual studies, it is said that after Fenyang, Xuedou and Yuanwu offered comments on gongan cases there seemed to be no turning back. Therefore, the path of a special transmission outside the scriptures, as expressed in the unencumbered source dialogues of Tang-dynasty masters, could not be reclaimed:

Some young students of our latter days treasured the ancients' words. From dawn until dusk they recited them and cultivated them as the highest learning. There were none who were awakened to their limitations. What a

26 Cleary and Cleary, The Blue Cliff Record, xxiii. See also Zengaku daijiten, 1109-11.
29 Ibid., 79.
31 A. V. Grimstone's "Introduction" to Katsuki Sekida's translation Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku, 18.
Yuanwu Vis-à-vis Dahui

There are two interconnected issues involved in assessing Yuanwu’s thought in relation to Dahui; and they also apply to the thesis that he was a precursor rather than an opponent of the huatou method. The first issue is whether the treatment of gongan in the Biyanlu foreshadowed the formation of the shortcut technique, or if it represented a distinct approach; and the second deals with the role of doubt in Yuanwu’s writing about the spiritual experience of working though old cases, and the extent to which this may or may not have influenced or just strongly resembles Dahui. My response to both issues is that there is considerable evidence of a linkage, so that the idea of Yuanwu’s anticipation of

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33 T48:1036b18–c3.
34 Dumoulin, Zen Buddhism, 249.

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Rethinking Yuanwu Keqin’s View of the Role of Language in Chan Gongan Discourse

Dahui, whether or not it was intentional, is by no means an altogether unlikely implication. In the final analysis, however, it is overshadowed by contrary evidence that demonstrates significant divergence between the two thinkers.

Does Yuanwu Support the Huatou?

One example, mentioned above, which may back the notion of Yuanwu as an incipient huatou-ologist, as it were, is case 12 on Dongshan’s “Three Pounds of Flax,” especially some of the passages in the Biyanlu’s prose commentary. In that section, Yuanwu claims that many people misunderstood this case:

It really is hard to chew on, since there is no place for you to sink your teeth into. That is because it is bland and flavorless. The ancients had quite a few answers to the question, “What is Buddha?” One said, “The one in the shrine”; another said, “The thirty-two auspicious marks”; and another said, “A bamboo rod on a mountain forest of staffs.” In contrast to these, Dongshan said, “Three pounds of flax.” He could not be stopped from cutting off the tongues of the ancients. 35

Yuanwu proclaims the superiority of Dongshan’s expression, apparently because it does not attempt to answer the question either with a direct reference to the qualities of Buddha, as in the first two responses, or with indirect imagery, as in the third example (namely, the bamboo rod). Dongshan’s response cuts off conceptualization at its roots. In a later passage, Yuanwu says that, “Dongshan does not reply lightly to this monk; he is like a bell when struck, like a valley embracing an echo. Great or small, he responds accordingly, never daring to make a careless impression.” 36

If we would stop reading there, the approach taken by Yuanwu might appear quite similar to the huatou method because it concentrates on a critical catchphrase extracted from conceptual contexts, although here and elsewhere he often prefers the term “turning word of the ancients,” 37 and meanwhile uses the term huatou in the generic sense of dialogue or story but not in any technical sense to be associated with Dahui. Furthermore, most of the rest of the discussion revolves around various misapprehensions of the case, which Yuanwu indicates can only be cleared up through careful consideration of Xuedou’s and others’ verse comments. This emphasis on literary exposition constitutes a significant departure from Dahui. Yuanwu delineates four kinds of wrong views:

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35 T48:152c21–25. “Turning word” refers to a phrase that instantly transforms the spirituality of the reader by triggering an experience of awakening.
37 T48:153b29.
According to Yuanwu, "these interpretations are all irrelevant. If you seek from Dongshan's words in this way, you can search until Maitreya Buddha is born down here and still never see it even in a dream."³⁹ Yuanwu then cites "a verse from my late teacher Wuzu," "The cheap-selling board-carrying fellow,"⁴⁰ "Weighs out three pounds of flax./ With a hundred thousand years' worth of unsold goods./ He has no place to put it all."⁴¹ Here he comments that this verse can "do away with your defiled feelings and thoughts, or judgments based on gain and loss, and when these are completely purified once and for all, you will spontaneously understand."⁴²

**What about Doubt?**

Perhaps similarly to Dahui's notions about doubt, Yuanwu sometimes cites Wuzu's saying: "Not doubting words and phrases is your great ailment," and in the commentary on case 12's verse he notes that "Xuedou's grandmotherly kindness necessitates that he smash your sensation of doubt."⁴³ Of course, the notion of doubt has a rich history in Chan as used in the record of Linji and other Tang sources as well as post-Dahui thinkers in China, Korea and Japan, such as Dufeng Benshan,⁴⁴ Boshan, and Weilin Daopei,⁴⁵ among many others. Furthermore, Neo-Confucian thinkers in the twelfth century such as Zhu Xi emphasized the importance of doubt. But because there are different shades of meaning, it is important to look beyond surface similarities in order to avoid conflating ideas.

One contention I dispute is that Yuanwu's approach, which regards doubt "as the primary obstacle that Ch'an practitioners should make an effort to overcome,"⁴⁶ approximates yet falls short of his main disciple's focus on the constructive quality of uncertainty, leading certain scholars to say that "the task of... giving 'doubt' a specific soteriological role had to wait for his disciple Ta-hui Tsung-kao."⁴⁷ This evaluation appears to judge Yuanwu by the standard of the presupposed superiority of Dahui's approach. However, it is misleading to believe that Yuanwu intends but does not quite achieve placing an emphasis on doubt in terms of representing an unproductive dead-end that, when taken to its logical conclusion, triggers awakening. Rather, the contrast is that Dahui views doubt as a kind of iconic experience that leads to a single breakthrough, whereas Yuanwu sees it as an ironic pivot or turning point in an ongoing constructive engagement with the tangled vines (geteng) of language and thought that can provisionally lead to transcendence.

For Dahui, the experience of doubt forces awareness of a gongan as not rationally understandable, no matter how hard one tries. This fosters bewilderment, anxiety, consternation and desperation in one's feelings, since it might appear that there is no possibility for a return to conventional thinking. Doubt usefully creates the impression that "someone's head is on fire," "a rat is trapped in a corner," or according to a couple of prominent Wumenguan cases, there is "Leaping from a 100-Foot Pole" to demonstrate one's true self and a "Man up a Tree" who hangs over a precipice and who will lose his life if he answers an impossible question or his integrity if he does not. Dahui also uses the analogy of wrongly naming or not naming a bamboo comb as an example of intensifying the sensation of doubt to its extreme breaking point:

"Calling this a bamboo comb creates friction and not calling this a bamboo comb is defiance. Not expressing through words and not expressing without words; not expressing through thinking and not expressing through speculating; and not expressing by getting up and walking away: Everything is left unexpressed. If you want to snatch the bamboo comb, I will let you go ahead and snatch it. My calling this raising a fist creates friction and not calling this raising a fist is defiance. Can you snatch this away? If you tell me to put my fist down, then I will put my fist down. Calling this revealing creates friction and not calling this revealing is

³⁹ T48:152c26–153a1.
⁴⁰ The "board-carrying fellow" is a Chan epithet for someone who is trapped by their own sense of tunnel vision, and here functions as disingenuous insult-cum-praise for Dongshan.
⁴⁴ He is known for saying, "Great doubt, great enlightenment; small doubt, small enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment;" also used by Weilin.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 91.
defiance. Can you snatch this away? Calling this the mountains, rivers and the great earth creates friction, and not calling this the mountains, rivers and the great earth is defiance. Can you snatch this away? 48

As indicated by the imagery of facing an extreme existential crisis evoked in this passage, which recalls the severe illness of both Yuanwu and Dahui before their experiences of awakening, doubt represents a supreme opportunity. Much as, to cite another analogy, a snowflake melts immediately upon coming into contact with a red-hot stove, doubt creates a dead-end or bottoming out that offers a remarkable instant of symbolic demise harboring the possibility for renewal. Through this experience, Dahui advocates what is commonly referred to in Zen circles today by the Japanese term *kenshō* (*jianxing*), or spontaneously “seeing into one’s true nature” in a way that kills off all afflictions and attachments. This instantaneous breakthrough is also evoked by the *Wumen guan*’s brief prose comment on case 8, in which the predecessor of the Yangqi stream, Yue’an, hypothetically deconstructs the structure of a cart. Wumen remarks, “If anyone can directly clarify this topic, his eye will be like a shooting star and his activity like a flash of lightning.” 49

Thus, the prose commentary of the *Biyanlu* views uncertainty as a feeling that is neither strictly positive nor strictly negative, but rather takes a ludic and inconclusive approach to the matter of language in relation to the power of doubt as an ongoing process of polishing expression without expecting a final resolution. This does not mean there is never a culminating point to Chan training—both Yuanwu and Dahui experienced intense breakthroughs in the formative stages of their careers—but for Yuanwu language is likened to tangled vines, which makes Yuanwu something like such Japanese *gongan* interpreters as Sōtō-sect Dōgen and Rinzai-sect Daitō, who wrote his own capping phrases on the *Blue Cliff Record* and related collections even though he did not travel to China. Ongoing discourse is enhanced and perpetuated through sustained post-realization cultivation. This recalls Dōgen’s view that “only the picture of a rice-cake” satisfies hunger, an inversion of the original Chan saying which implies that an attachment to the illusion of any symbol like the painted refreshment must be terminated.

The *Biyanlu*’s introductory comment to case 12 makes the point that doubt, rather than an emotion propelling a trainee beyond the realm of discourse, is a perpetual condition that one lives and continually reckons with before, during, and after enlightenment:

48 T47:879c11–23. This passage is cited with significant revisions from Chūn-Fang Yū, “Ta-hui Taung-kao and Kung-an Ch’ān,” 227.

There is a sword that kills people, and a sword that brings people to life: this is the standard way of high antiquity and the essential pivot for today as well. If you discuss killing, you don’t harm a single hair; if you discuss giving life, you lose your own self. Therefore it is said, “The thousand sages have not transmitted the path above; students are fooled by appearances like monkeys grasping at reflections.” Tell me, since the path is not transmitted, why are there so many tangled *gongan*? Let one who possesses the True Eye try to explain it: Look! 50

Here, the term for tangled vines or entanglements in the penultimate sentence can be translated as “complications,” which captures the quality of the *gongan* as a literary device that triggers continual contemplation. Sometimes the *gongan* leads to truth and at other times to error, but in a roundabout way it points toward understanding. The term tangled vines, which is often used as a synonym for *gongan*, consists of two characters—one is the destructive vine known in English as kudzu as a loan word from the Japanese and the other is the wisteria which is redeemed by its beautiful flowers that are cultivated. This outlook recalls early Chinese Buddhist thinker Jizang’s view that the aim of Buddhism is “deconstructing what is misleading and revealing what is corrective.” 51 Yuanwu’s ironic tone reflects an ambivalent and non-committal approach toward both language and doubt that lacks—deliberately so, in my reading—the iconic conclusiveness of Dahui’s shortcut method.

**Conclusion: Yuanwu in His Own Write**

The ideological discrepancies and/or linkages between Yuanwu and his predecessor Xuedou, as well as between him and his successor Dahui, must be seen in terms of the intellectual-historical context of the transition from the high period of literati influence on Chan during the Northern Song to Southern Song times, when there were anti-literary feelings and when Buddhist and other movements competed for lay followers. The *Biyanlu* comes at the time of the culmination of the first trend and the onset of the following one. It seems that Yuanwu has one foot in each trend, and that is why there is a rather bewildering set of views, which see him variably as supporting or refuting each of the preceding and succeeding standpoints.

The second trend of anti-literary Chan encompassing the *huatou* method has a long trajectory extending for many centuries, but if we limit the examination to

50 T48:152e14–18.
51 Alan Fox, “Self-reflection in the Sanlun Tradition: Madhyamika as the ‘Deconstructive Conscience’ of Buddhism.”
the Song, then the Wumenguan can be seen as a bookend to the developmental process. As Ding-hwa Hsieh points out, Xuedou (and to a large extent Yuanwu), in addition to Juefan and other scholar-officials and poet-monks in the Northern Song, valued the ability of poetry to express spontaneous insight into the nature of Chan realization. A century after Yuanwu’s commentary on Xuedou, Wumen of the Huanglong stream also recognized the value of verse and incorporated folksong devices of alliteration and repetition to generate an affinity with his audience. Therefore, Yuanwu was located at the historical and conceptual crossroads between, as precursors, Xuedou who composed the Baize songgu in 1038 and Wuzu who instructed Yuanwu at the beginning of the twelfth century and, as successors, Dahui who originated the huatou method in 1134 and Wumen who composed the Wumenguan in 1229.

However, even though the term huatou is never mentioned, the Wumenguan seems to go a step further by transforming poetry into a tool for expressing the merits of the huatou method instead of evoking imagery and wordplay as ends in themselves: “Compared to Xuedou,” Hsieh argues, “Wumen seems to use poetry more as a pedagogical tool to help Chan practitioners find the crucial word or phrase of a Chan gong’an than as a literary device to display his personal understanding of the gong’an’s import.” With the Wumenguan, then, the process of transition from Xuedou to Dahui has been completed and yet the trend toward abbreviation has also come full circle in that the role of verse commentary is highlighted in this text. Although his support for the huatou can readily be seen in the verse on “Cypress Tree in the Courtyard,” “Words do not express things; Speech does not convey activity. Believing in words, one is lost; Obstructed by phrases, one is deluded.” Wumen’s persistent use of irony should not be discounted; for example, in regard to one who leaps off the proverbial 100-foot pole he comments, “He is only a blind man leading the blind.”

Where does Yuanwu and his relation to Dahui stand when considering Yuanwu’s connections with Xuedou at the beginning of the gongan tradition and with Wumen at the end of the initial arc of poetic-prose commentaries on cases? I would answer that question in three ways.

First, Yuanwu’s complex and nuanced approach vis-à-vis both Xuedou and Dahui (both being difficult to categorize), should not be seen in black-and-white terms as for or against any particular viewpoint. There are multiple gradations in the ideological relationships that need to be analyzed as fully as possible. Here are possible interpretations, which suggest that Yuanwu:

53 T48:297c10–11.
54 T48:298c19.

Second, Yuanwu seems to have strived for and, in my estimation, was able to strike a distinctive middle ground regarding the benefits and pitfalls of Chan rhetoric. His is a standpoint that resists being pigeon-holed based on sectarian biases or presumptive opinions often derived from subsequent appropriators of the Song giants, the latter having tended to infuse contemporary scholar-practitioner interpretative stances with either support or refutation of an either/or polarity, while overlooking subtle areas of linkage and disjunction. In other words, Yuanwu preceded and surely helped to shape, but did not necessarily represent, a precursor to Dahui in the sense that he would have been a supporter of the huatou method. Instead, the emphasis of the prose and capping-phrase commentary in the Biyanlu is on instructing monastic disciples regarding the multiple levels of meaning that were embedded in Xuedou’s selected cases, whereas Dahui offered a prescriptive approach that required lay followers to participate in the gongan-introspection style of meditation.

Therefore, the approach taken in the Biyanlu needs to be understood in the context of other kinds of texts of this era, each of which expresses a different outlook:

- Fully supported Xuedou’s verse and added prose comments as another compassionate “granny”
- Began to move away from Xuedou through his emphasis on interlinear commentary
- Cautioned against “indulging... in writing elusive poetry or elegant prose”55
- Took a critical stance that set in motion Dahui’s approach
- Was ultimately a precursor much more consistent with Dahui than not
- Remained overshadowed by Dahui’s shortcut standpoint
- Gave way to the Wumenguan, which expressed the true function of Chan poetry.

55 Hsieh, “Yuan-wu K’o-ch’ in’s (1063–1135) Teaching of Ch’an Kung-an Practice,” 76.
In terms of the outline, I place Yuanwu’s approach in the ruminative category. This is because the tangled vines of conceptualization are cast aside yet not fully cut off. Yuanwu’s approach evokes the way the kudzu was used in poetry and cultural lore to suggest fertility because of its seeds as well as the “ties that bind” in that the fiber was used to make sandals for wedding ceremonies and came to imply post-nuptial conjugal relations, in addition to the new entwinements of the bride and her in-laws. 56

Despite these positive associations, in literary criticism geteng can be a negative designation suggesting a mistrust of language as unclear or muddy, or it can be a clouded and troubled mind lost in delusion and despair because of hankering after shadows and apparitions and a failure to see reality as it is. Dahui uses the term in the critical sense of suggesting the futility of trying to weed out underlying disquiet concealed by a lack of attentiveness. Furthermore, the bride and her in-laws. 5 6 provides clear evidence through witness, verification or proof that links Yuanwu with Dahui—they see language as a poison to counteract rhetoric may at any time degenerate into mechanical cliché or lead to bickering about distorted views.

The third element of my conclusion arises from the above discussion of the other two. It holds that after all is said and done there remains common ground that links Yuanwu with Dahui—they see language as a poison to counteract poison, or delusion that buries delusion. For both, it is necessary to keep thinking about distorted views.

When someone asked about the time or season, the ancients at once gave a question and a reply that was so timely and so seasonal that it put to rest any and all concerns. Pursuing words and following after phrases is not relevant. If in the midst of words you can penetrate through words, if in the midst of meaning you can penetrate through the meaning, or if in the midst of an encounter you can penetrate through the encounter, and if you can let go and let yourself live freely—only then will you be able understand


Finally, Keyworth notes that irrespective of discrepancies among them, “Without the erudition of Chan masters like Fenyang, Xuedou, Yuanwu Keqin, Dahui Zonggao, later generations of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Chan, Seon, and Zen masters would not have known their forefathers’ sometimes impious, yet always pithy, sayings and actions from which to extract Chan meditation practices.” 58 How well all of the approaches of these figures, whether seemingly scholastic or minimalistic, recall the immortal injunction of Zhuangzi regarding language and awakening: “Nets are employed to catch fish; but when the fish are caught the nets are forgotten. Traps are set to catch hares, but when the hares are caught the traps are forgotten. Words are employed to convey ideas; but when the ideas are expressed the words are forgotten. I wish to meet someone who has forgotten words, so that I might have a word with this person!”

Glossary

| Baize songgu 百則頌古 | gongan 公案 |
| Biyanlu 碧岩錄 (full title: 佛果圓悟
禅師碧岩錄) | Huanglong 黃龍 |
| Boshan 博山 | huatou 話頭 |
| Caodingshao 曹洞 | jianxing 見性 |
| Chan 禪 | jiaowai biechuan 教外別傳 |
| Chanlin baoxun 禪林寶訓 | Jijielu 擊節錄 |
| Dahui Pujue Chanshi niangpu 大慧普覺禪師年譜 | jingde chuandenglu 景德傳燈錄 |
| Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 | jiyuan wenda 機緣問答 |
| daiyu 代語 | ju 舉 |
| Dajue Huailian 大覺懷彌 | Juefan Huihong 覺范慧洪 |
| dasi 大死 | jigu 舉古 |
| Dongshan Liangji 洞山良價 | Lingquan 霖泉 |
| Dufeng Benshan 毒峰本善 | Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 |
| Fenyang Shanzhao 涯陽普照 | Mingjue 明覺 |
| Fojian Huiqin 佛巖慧勤 | Jiushan 窮山 |
| Foyin Liaooyuan 佛印了元 | niangu 括古 |
| geteng 葛藤 | pingchang 評唱 |
| geteng 葛藤 | rebing 熱病 |
| geteng 葛藤 | sanxuan 三玄 |

57 T48:162a12–23.
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The Huatou Revolution, Pure Land Practices, and Dahui’s Chan Discourse on the Moment of Death

Abstract Song-dynasty Chan depended for its place in society and its financial resources on lay patrons. Educated gentleman-officials (shidafu) were the wealthiest and most powerful of men. From the time of Dahui Zonggao in the Southern Song, Linji teachers shifted from elaborate comments on gongan in periodic sermons to a new method of gongan inspection termed “critical phrase” (kan huatou). Scholars have argued that Dahui’s invention of huatou practice was primarily related to internal Chan rivalries for elite patrons. I argue that Dahui’s motive was also connected to a rivalry with Pure Land Buddhism over the making of appeals to lay followers among scholar-officials. Dahui was aware and tried to communicate the usefulness of huatou in addressing the elite laity’s doubts about birth and death, and in particular their anxieties about facing the decisive moment of death. Therefore, he developed a gongan discourse that is related to anticipation of dying by harnessing the power of doubt to create an experience of spiritual awakening.

Keywords Dahui Zonggao, Song, doubt, huatou, nianfo, moment of death

Song dynasty Chan, like all of Chinese Buddhism, depended for its place in society and its financial resources on wealthy patrons. Furthermore, in the Song dynasty most monasteries were incorporated into the state, and thus the appointment of abbots depended on the recommendation of state officials to the court. Every monastery relied upon the favor of members of the educated gentleman-official (shidafu) class, the wealthiest and most powerful of men.

Scholars have pointed out that the outpouring of Chan literature that occurred during the Song dynasty, not only the Northern but also the Southern Song, and the incorporation of some Chan literary works into the Song editions of the Buddhist canon, reflects the taste of the shidafu class. Discourse records, “transmission of the flame histories,” poetic and prose commentaries on selected gongan, letters and personal instructions by Chan masters to monastics and shidafu students, and collections of sermons by Chan masters all circulated among literati.

Gentlemen-officials, who studied history, classics, government policy, essay writing, and poetry in order to pass government bureaucracy entrance examinations, were themselves accomplished students of poetry. They were familiar with the idea that truth can be presented through enigmatic encounters and dialogues, for this was present in classics like the Analects of Confucius and the Zhuangzi. In his description of the Chan lineage’s success, Yuan dynasty Chan master Zhongfeng Mingben noted the literary qualities of Chan works: “Eloquent are their words, crafty are their techniques; lofty is their style, pleasing are their rhymes, majestic are their commands, and great is their school.” For those who read Chan literature, instead of confronting the “hammer and tongs” of a Chan master they could safely decipher the dialogues at home in their libraries.

Scholars now agree that an addition or transition in the practice methods of the prevalent Linji school of Chan occurred between the leadership of Yuanwu Keqin and Dahui Zonggao. From Dahui’s time, Linji teachers shifted from elaborate comments on gongan in regular sermons to monastic students and lay followers combined with written commentaries on gongan, to a new “keyword” or “critical phrase” method of gongan inspection that used only a few words.

Using the gongan commentaries in verse by Xuedou Chongxian3 as his basic text, Yuanwu Keqin produced an intriguing collection of enigmatic exchanges with both prose and poetic commentary, the Biyan (Blue cliff record). Yet, even though Yuanwu and Dahui wrote poetic and prose commentaries on gongan, the records of both masters contain criticisms of the scholar-officials’ standard practice of attempting to penetrate the truths cherished by Chan masters through studying such texts. Dahui’s long discursions on the faults of shidafu as Chan...
students are anticipated in Yuanwu’s discourses.

Abbots like Yuanwu and Dahui presided over large bodies of monks who would practice Chan for twenty or thirty years. Their practice could be influenced and tested by verbal expressions. As Yuanwu often said, “Words cannot express it but words must be used to teach it.” Robert Sharf has pointed out that much of the constant rehearsal of encounter dialogues and the production of commentaries on Chan sayings and *gongan* in large Chan monasteries must have been for the sake of training future Chan teachers in the Chan use of words. In Chan master Yuanwu’s *Xinyao* (Essentials of the mind), what is emphasized in his instructions to monks is a kind of mindfulness meditation focused on the present moment in which one (perhaps using *samadhi* power and growing insight into emptiness) discards delusions and attachments. As one is practicing this, he or she routinely listens to the teacher’s sermons in which *gongan* are raised and hints are offered. Moreover, the teacher raises a different *gongan* with a monastic student when he enters the teacher’s room, in order to test and trigger deeper awakening. Yuanwu assured his monastic students that deep awakening will come to them if they practice in this way uninterruptedly for twenty or thirty years.

Dahui taught his monastic students in much the same way, but in addition he invented a new method of practice that does not rely on insights triggered by poetry or the contemplation of cleverly disguised Buddhist theory. In what follows, I argue that Dahui’s invention, and his excitement about it, are related to its usefulness in addressing elite lay men and women’s anxieties and doubts about the fate that awaited them on the other side of the grave. Where did people go after death? And would their record of selfish and unselfish deeds bring them a good rebirth?

Doubt and the Huatou

One problem that Dahui identified with the practice of almost all lay students and some monastics was that doubt was unfocused and remained undefeated. One might remain a student forever without actually experiencing awakening as an event or without freeing oneself from a deluded mind’s attachment to and entanglement with the realm of illusion, i.e., *samsara*.

Although teachers such as Yuanwu and Linji always spoke of doubt as a hindrance, Dahui devoted his energy to explaining the need for doubt in *gongan* meditation. He may have had a precursor: passages in Yuanwu’s dharma-brother Foyan Qingyuan’s discourse record also suggest that most meditative *gongan* study succeeds because of doubt. Qingyuan tells the story of his teacher Wuzu Fayan’s early studies with Fushan Fayuan, with whom he stayed for a year. Fayuan “instructed him to contemplate” (*lingkan*) the following case: “The Tathagata has esoteric teachings; Kasyapa does not conceal the treasury.” With this *gongan* unresolved, Fayuan sent Wuzu to Baiyun Shouduan. One day when Shouduan was giving a talk, Wuzu experienced a great awakening. Qingyuan shares with us Wuzu’s thoughts at that moment: “The Tathagata has esoteric teachings; Kasyapa does not conceal the treasury. Of course! Of course!” Wuzu further recalls other puzzling phrases he had encountered in his previous studies, which he now understands as well. Qingyuan concludes the story by asking, “was that not deep doubt?”

There is nothing unusual about the story about Wuzu, but Qingyuan’s concluding question is unusual. Qingyuan elsewhere spells out his insight clearly:

> If you wish to understand this matter clearly, then you must give rise to doubt and investigate thoroughly. If you are deeply puzzled about this matter, then that is the precursor to prajna-knowledge. Why is this? The business of the wandering monk is only to put an end to the feeling of uncertainty (*yi*, doubt). If you do not give rise to doubt, then how will you put an end to the feeling of uncertainty?

In Qingyuan’s view, *gongan* may trigger insight without any new arousal of doubt, but only if faith and doubt are present. A *gongan* given to a student to ponder over a period of time definitely arouses and focuses doubt.

The problem that Dahui faced so squarely was that not all *gongan* study as practiced in his day focused enough doubt or effectively removed entanglements with words. Dahui’s method compresses and intensifies the monastic process of raising doubt through *gongan* into the practice of focusing one’s attention on

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4 Robert H. Sharf, “How to Think with Chan *Gongan*.”
5 *Foguo Keqin Chanshi xinyao* (Chan master Foguo Keqin’s essentials of mind), XZJ 120. Note that all citations from the Taishō (T) and *Xu Zangjing* (X) collections are from CBETA.org. Also *Xu Zangjing* (XZJ) is the Tokyo edition.
6 Dahui once pointed out to Yuanwu that because Yuanwu always used the same *gongan*, the students could prepare in advance, defeating the exercise.

7 Levering, “Ch’an Enlightenment for Laymen: The Teachings of Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1089–1163),” and Ding-hwa Evelyn Hsieh, “Yuan-wu’s Teaching of Ch’an Kung-an Practice.”
9 X1315.xxxii.68.211c9-10.
observing the “key” or “critical” phrase (kan huatou) of a Chan “case” (gongan). This method emphasizes doubt while avoiding intellectual and emotional entanglements.

Dahui invented a non-discursive method of practice that does not rely on command of poetic skills or insights triggered by poetry, wrestling with Buddhist theory, or even words. One has to have some familiarity with the case. One then has to focus on the central question of the case, expressed in the “keyword,” to arouse doubt. But one does not respond with verbal thought or imagination to the words contained in the “critical phrase.” All “affective thinking,” that is, verbal thought and imagination, must cease before awakening can happen.

This invention by Dahui, a serious attempt to imagine different functions for language, either required or inspired serious philosophical engagement on Dahui’s part, as can be seen in Dahui’s explanations in both his Letters (shu) and Individual Instructions (fayu). His philosophical insights are reflected in his practice instructions to students, which are designed to wall off any entanglement with words or meaning as one continues to concentrate on inspecting the huatou. Dahui explains the process as follows:

Here just observe the huatou. A monk asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have buddha-nature or does it lack it?” Zhaozhou said, “It lacks it (wu).” When you observe it, do not use extensive evaluation, do not try to explicate it, do not seek for understanding, do not take it up when you open your mouth, do not make meaning when you raise it, do not fall into vacuity, do not hold onto your mind waiting for enlightenment, do not catch a hold of it when your teacher speaks, and do not lodge in a shell of no concerns. But keep hold of it at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. “Does a dog have buddha-nature or not?” Hold onto this “it lacks it” until it gets ripe, where verbal discussion and mental evaluation cannot reach. The square inch of your mind will be in a muddle. When it is as if you have clamped your teeth around a tasteless piece of iron and your will does not retreat—when it is like this, then that is good news!¹¹

As Natasha Heller points out, the procedure for using the huatou is largely explained here by negation: One is not to evaluate or subject the huatou to interpretation, or to figure it out through exchanges with one’s teacher in the teacher’s room. Dahui’s instructions tie the practice to the removal of illusion/delusion with no possible generation of attachment to a new delusion:

The practice of observing the word is significant in that it does not eschew language and does not claim that language is always an obstruction. Rather, it indicates that one must approach words in a certain way. As Zhongfeng Mingben says, “You should know that the teaching of great illusion is under your feet; you do not need to move in the least. Only wait for your emotions to dissipate and your views to be extinguished, and you will tread on it as you walk.”¹²

Here Zhongfeng Mingben is in definite accord with his predecessor Dahui.

Did Dahui Burn the Blyanlu? and If So, Why?

Although the contemporary evidence for Dahui’s act is slight, the facts are that the Blyanlu disappeared from use for more than a century, and that Dahui is the only person mentioned in connection with its disappearance. Scholars are inclined to accept that Dahui burned the woodblocks that made wide circulation of the Blyanlu possible.¹³ But why? Why single out the Blyanlu among the many Chan published works that distracted literati and monastics from breaking through the delusion of samsara? Dahui had himself demonstrated understanding of old cases by writing poetic commentaries.¹⁴ He also understood the value of making a collection of cases for his own study and use, as he did in creating his Zhengfayanzang (J. Shobogenzo), Treasury of the True Dharma Eye.

My hypothesis is that Dahui saw that Yuanwu’s prose commentaries gave too many cases away, making it difficult for students to give rise to doubt. It is possible to acquire familiarity with Chan language and Chan metaphors for various Mahayana Buddhist concepts in a way that allows one to “get the point” of Chan cases without actually being freed from affective thinking. Perhaps to Dahui it seemed that many readers had, thanks to Yuanwu, intellectually understood Xuedou’s hundred cases too well.

What needs to be better understood is Dahui’s motives for creating a new verbal practice form. Why did he do it? In his book When Zen Became Zen, Morten Schlüter points out that Dahui started using the huatou as a means of instruction during the same year that he lived close to the large monastery whose


¹⁴ Between 1131-33 Dahui compiled gongan and wrote verses for a songgu collection in collaboration with one of his dharma heirs, Wan’an Daoyan (1094-1164), while Dahui was living at or near the site of Yummen Wenyan’s old retreat. Each case is a verse by “Donglin” and then one by “Yummen.” This collection is in the Discourse Records of Ancient Worthies, Z1315.xlvii, as the Verses on Old Cases by the Abbot of Donglin and [the Monk] Residing at Yummen’s Retreat (Donglin heshang Yummen anzhu songgu). Wagner, “Practice and Emptiness,” 74–75.
abbot was Zhenxie Qingliao, a key player in the dramatic revival of the Caodong Chan lineage during the late Northern and early Southern Song dynasty. The Caodong revival began in the lifetime of Furong Daokai, and continued as his dharma-heirs gained positions at major monasteries. This revival clearly depended on finding lay shidafu patrons. Schlüter argues that Dahui saw the rise of the Caodong lineage teachers as a threat to the dominance of the Linji lineage, and that Dahui for that reason went on the attack against its practice method while simultaneously trying out the method of inspecting the huatou.

There is no historical evidence in Dahui’s records to support Schlüter’s proposal. The compilers of Dahui’s records for inclusion in the Song dynasty official Buddhist canons would omit evidence of such worldly motivations. Another motive for Dahui’s energetic teaching of kan huatou practice can be advanced. This motive, which I want to expand on here, is a competition that certainly existed in the Song dynasty between “orthodox” Chan practices based on the goal of completely breaking through the deluded mind of affective thinking, on the one hand, and Pure Land practices that, on the other, offered an intermediate goal of rebirth in the Pure Land due to one’s preservation of Amitabha samadhi at the moment of death.

**Kan Huatou and Dahui’s Discourse about the Moment of Death**

In the Pure Land scriptural tradition, single-minded devotion to Amitabha Buddha would enable the pious to be reborn in his Buddha-land, known as the Pure Land. In the Song dynasty there was not an independent Pure Land school with separate patriarchs, lineages, monasteries, and so forth. Monks in any school could trust in Amitabha Buddha and his vows and undertake Pure Land practices in addition to others. Monks could organize societies of Pure Land practitioners, as could lay people. Ritual practices varied within the general rubric of nianfo samadhi, i.e., visualizing Amitabha Buddha or becoming mindful of him by reciting his name. Performance of these practices on one’s deathbed was particularly important, for maintaining one’s concentration on Amitabha in the final moments could result in rebirth in his land despite many misdeeds. Nianfo could result in visionary encounters with Amitabha Buddha, as well as visions of golden lotuses, marvelous fragrances, lights, and enchanted music, all drawn from imagery found in Pure Land scriptures. Such miracles confirmed the promise that the efforts of practitioners would result in their rebirth in the Pure Land. These practices saw considerable revision and revitalization in the Song dynasty as part of the reemergence and expansion of Pure Land devotion and organization, seen especially in South China. Lay people participated extensively in this movement, either individually or in groups. Clergy of various Buddhist traditions, including Chan, responded by composing new texts and liturgies that replaced those lost in the late Tang period. These new texts included liturgies for laity. Among the most important figures in this movement were the Chan cleric Changlu Zongze, author of the *Rules of Purity for the Chan Monastery* (*Chanyuan qinggui*), compiled in 1103, and also many Pure Land texts. Another important figure was the Tiantai cleric Ciyun Zunshi. Zunshi also wrote many Pure Land ritual and meditational manuals, including one for laity that included a regular practice of “ten moments of mindfulness of Amitabha,” which entailed a tenfold verbal recitation of Amitabha’s name. According to Daniel Stevenson, Zunshi “designed this simple formula both as a minimum daily quota of Pure Land practice and a dress rehearsal for the deathbed.” This ritual for laity was prefaced by prayers for a clear and peaceful mind at death, accompanied by all the auspicious signs of immediate rebirth in Amitabha’s Pure Land, and included the basic ritual elements of ritual purification, worship, confession, and vow.

Many shidafu and their female relatives participated in these practices. Devotees displayed the fruits of their piety in their unshaken mindfulness of Amitabha and his Buddha-land at the moment of death. How popular were these practices among shidafu? Many more collections of “exemplary deaths” through Pure Land devotion and practice were produced in the Song than in other periods, compiled of course by shidafu. Those compiled in the Song were conspicuously longer, with more exemplary individual cases. Here are the dates

15 For an introduction to Pure Land practices germane to this discussion, see Daniel B. Stevenson, “Pure Land Worship and Meditation in China,” and “Deathbed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful.”

16 I have availed myself here of Mark Halperin’s useful summary in his “Domesticity and the Dharma: Portraits of Buddhist Laywomen in Song China,” 50–100, esp. 86–90.


18 On Changlu Zongze, see Yi-fu, *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Chanyuan Qinggui.*

19 The ten recitations (shinian) of Amitabha’s name draw from passages in Pure Land scriptures. See Jacqueline L. Stone, “By the Power of One’s Last Nembutsu: Deathbed Practices in Early Medieval Japan,” 81. For more on Zunshi and his liturgies on behalf of the laity, see Stevenson, “Protocols of Power.”

20 For Stevenson’s comment that this short but frequently performed ritual was a rehearsal for the moment of death, see Stevenson, “Protocols of Power,” 362.

21 See Stevenson, “Deathbed Testimonials,” 593–602. An excellent review of the development of this literature, and of what little is known about lay Pure Land practice in the Song, is provided by Robert H. Sharf in “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China.”
of Chinese collections of accounts of auspicious deaths followed by signs of assured rebirth in the Pure Land (jingtu wangsheng zhuang):

Pre-Song dynasty texts:
2. In 785, probably expanded in the Five dynasties period: *Accounts of Auspicious Responses Accompanying Birth in the Western Pure Land* (Wangsheng xifang jingtu ruiying zhuang), T.2070.

Song dynasty texts:
6. 1155: *Newly Edited Compilation of Precious Pearls of Ancient and Modern Rebirth in the Pure Land* (Xinbian gujin wangsheng jingtu baozhu ji) compiled by Lu Shishou.
9. 1269: *Record of the Establishment of the Teaching Concerning the Pure Land* (jingtu lijiao zhi). This was actually a collection of biographies compiled by Zhipan. T.2035. Included in the Fozu tongji.

Yuan dynasty texts:
10. Date and compiler unknown. *Han Family Classified Biographies of Persons Reborn in the Pure Land* (Hanjia leifu wangsheng zhuang).
11. 1381: *Various Poems about People of Supreme Goodness* (Zhu shang shanrenyong) compiled by Daoyuan.22

Despite the fact that he disliked them, a shidafu testified to the popularity of these practices among his class. Ye Shi wrote an epitaph (*muzhiming*) for one Madame Lou, a member of a prominent clan of that name and niece of a high official. Madame Lou devotedly followed Buddhist ways, often sitting in meditation and eating only half a bowl of coarse fare. After falling very ill, she refused to take any medicine. She bathed, changed her clothes, and bid her mother-in-law farewell, saying she had nothing to do with the luxurious superficiality of this world. Soon she died. Her daughters in their grief stamped their feet, shook the bed, slapped her shoulders, and bit her arms. During the commotion Madame Lou came back to life. She opened her eyes and said, “You don’t understand the world. Let go of me.” She then assumed a cross-legged posture and began chanting the Buddha Amitabha’s name, passing away the next day with a vision of Amitabha Buddha.23 At the end of his epitaph Ye Shi denounced Buddhism, lamenting how intelligent, energetic literati had fallen prey to its bizarre notions. When death arrived, however, few could maintain their composure.24

Barend Ter Haar, in a survey of Buddhist aspects of lay religious life in the lower Yangzi river valley from 1100 until 1340 that draws on a wide range of sources, reports that a burning concern for many people was the moment of death (*linzhong*). Ter Haar mentions that the Yuan monk Pudu wrote about how devout believers were often extremely afraid of the moment of death, but they would put off preparing for it. They counted on the efficacy of ten recitations of Amitabha Buddha’s name at the moment of death, but they would wait until almost their last breath “before they started the ten recitations to sound the bell, just like closing the door after the thief has gone.”25

Even though Dahui Zonggao lived in a world flooded with Pure Land compilations, he did not himself believe in the effectiveness of Pure Land practice at the moment of death, as this practice presupposes a “real” Pure Land in the West.26 Dahui held the doctrinal position that the Pure Land is only in the mind (*weixin jingtu*), which also can be stated as “when the mind is pure, the land is pure.” This doctrinal position has a long history in China, but in the Chan context came to the fore again during the Five dynasties in the writings of Yongming Yanshou, and was held by Chan teachers who adopted Pure Land practices alongside Chan ones, such as Changlu Zongze.

Those who held the doctrinal position that “the Pure Land is only in the mind and Amitabha Buddha is your own Nature” fell into one of three categories with

22 I have supplemented a list provided by Christoph Kleine in his “Portraits of Pious Women in East Asian Buddhist Hagiography: A Study of Accounts of Women who Attained Birth in Amida’s Pure Land.”

26 On this point I am indebted to Dr. Jeong Young-Sik’s 2006 doctoral dissertation at Tokyo University, “Daie Soko to Kankoku kōdan Zen no tenkai,” 60–65.
respect to the “real” existence of the Western Pure Land. First, some denied the "real” existence of the Western Pure Land, saying that only naïve people believed in it. Second, others believed that as an upaya, those of middling or inferior roots should be taught that Amitabha’s Pure Land exists in the West. Third, some of those who held the “mind only Pure Land” position recognized that it also existed in the West on the phenomenal or provisional level, just as the chair you are sitting on has no permanent or “ultimately real” existence, but has a temporary existence in the realm of things. Judging by his writings Dahui very clearly belonged to the first category, as the 18th century Zen master Hakuin Ekaku later insisted. 27

Occasionally Dahui seemed to act as though he belonged to the second category, which may be evidence that the Pure Land beliefs and practices of shidafu put him under some pressure. After Dahui returned from exile he was a highly esteemed abbot, given special favor by the court. In many recorded instances he was asked by prominent shidafu to conduct funereal merit-making services for recently deceased relatives. In a few instances those educated gentlemen-officials wanted Dahui to publically recognize in the service the Pure Land piety of the deceased and the auspicious signs of rebirth in the Western Pure Land that occurred on her or his deathbed. Dahui accommodated those laymen, saying also that if heavens exist, then good people will enter them. 28

There is another sign of the extent to which Pure Land beliefs not only permeated the shidafu world of lay patrons but also put pressure on Dahui. In 1160 Dahui wrote a postface for a deservedly famous Pure Land rebirth tale collection, The [Layman] Longshu’s Pure Land Anthology (see above) compiled by Wang Rixiu. Even though in his postface Dahui made his “Pure Land in mind only” position quite clear and did not endorse the “reality” of a Pure Land of Amitabha in the West, or approve of the goal of being born there, he still offered his support to the project. 29

With this evidence in mind, I suggest that Dahui’s repeated insistence in his letters to elite laymen that kan huatou practice offers sufficient protection at the moment of death opens up the possibility that creating and promoting a more effective use of words in the quest for “awakening (J. satori) as an event” might have been a response to a rising concern of lay patrons about the moment of death. Dahui’s letters and individual instructions make clear that together with his repeated criticisms of Caodong’s “silent illumination” practice, Dahui simultaneously expanded and repeatedly deployed a discourse about effectiveness of huatou practice in preparing for the moment of death. Since Dahui was a Buddhist teacher and not just a worldly businessman, he no doubt desired to do something effective about the fact that in his world lay people and some monastics came to the moment of death without the ability to maintain the mindfulness that would enable them to negotiate that dangerous passage. But competition for lay practitioners may well have played a role. Dahui’s discourse on the huatou and death, particularly the discourse aimed at lay recipients of his letters, took place at a time when gentry-officials were being attracted to Pure Land practices sponsored in part by the Tiantai school.

Dahui was not the first Chan master, and his letters and other records were not the first pieces of widely circulated Chan literature that brought up the importance of the moment of death. The Yunmen guanglu (Extended record of Yunmen), compiled in the Northern Song dynasty, puts these words in Yunmen’s mouth:

> Teachers who not even in a dream have ever seen the significance of [the teaching] of our original teacher’s lineage—for what purpose do they consume the alms of the faithful? On the last day of their lives, every one of them will have to reimburse those [almsholders]. 30

The phrase translated here “on the last day of their lives” literally reads: “on the 30th day of the last month” (layue sanshiri). This is the day on which by Chinese custom all debts have to be paid. According to Chan teachers, in a similar manner on the day of one’s death, indeed at the moment of death, all one’s karmic debts must be paid through the judgment rendered in the assignment of one’s next birth. Since, without awakening, one can spend eternity wandering in samsara, translated into Chinese as “birth and death (shengsi),” experiencing merited suffering and causing oneself new suffering, according to Chan teachers, means that “samsara is something one must fear.” Right now one has a human birth, which is the best condition for attaining release from samsara. Who knows when one will have one again?

One’s circumstances and sufferings in one’s next birth may be more painful than in this one. Of the six rebirth destinations, three are considerably more

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27 Dahui and others raised up the teaching style of steepness. They never spoke of rebirth in the Pure Land.” Philip Yampolsky, trans., The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings, 147. Also, 172: “This is because at the very understanding that any place in the ten directions was the Pure Land of the treasure trees, and that anybody at all was possessed of the complete body of the pure, golden Amida Buddha.”

28 See Dahui’s pushuo (general sermon) requested by District Governor Sun, Dahui Pu jue Chanshi pushuo in, Nikhon kotei daizokyo, 1, 31, 5, juan 4, 477c; and Dahui’s pushuo for Chief Minister Tang Situi beginning at 468b. I have written about the pushuo sermon requested by Tang Situi in Levering, “Ta-hui and Lay Buddhists.”

29 T47.1970.283b. Here, I disagree with Sharf about the meaning of Dahui’s postface. I read it as praising Wang Rixiu’s desire to help others, not as praising the collection’s contents. Dahui makes this clear by stressing at the end the goal of finding the Pure Land in one’s own mind and Amitabha in one’s own body; see Sharf, “On Pure Land Buddhism,” 291.

30 Yunmen guanglu, T47.552e18–22.
painful than the best human births: the many Buddhist hells; the realm of hungry ghosts, where one insatiably suffers terrible hunger pangs; and the insect and animal realm, where intelligence is limited and one is frequently either killing or being killed. Humans experience somewhat longer life spans and much suffering mixed with fleeting pleasures; only the superior intelligence of humans that makes possible the cultivation of wisdom makes this a positive rather than negative destination. The life of asuras, like that of the Greek Titans, is considered “a favorable birth,” but is actually not much better—a long life span and pleasures, but constant conflict. Only the realm of the gods and goddesses has definite positive advantages: a much longer lifespan and many pleasures. Death in a state of ignorance about one’s next birth leads to fear of rebirth in the hells to suffer untold torments and be unable to cultivate the wisdom, which one’s karmic seeds are conveyed to the next life. Albert Einstein said, “The approach of the end of your life is, in a way, your first true test.” Although This Matter [what Chan insight discovers and the subject of such insight embodies] does not lie in words and phrases, yet if you want to test someone’s ordinary disposition and clever tricks, it is necessary to make them evident by using words in this way. If on the last day of your life [i.e., the thirtieth day of the last month of the year] you can exert the power you have obtained, and master the situation by holding on firmly, so that even when a myriad visions [of your past deeds] appear in profusion, you can look upon them without being moved, then this can be called accomplishment without accomplishment, effortless power/strength (li). 34

Yuanwu’s Xinyao is mostly composed of instructions to individual monastics, male and female. In those he writes that his style of Linji Chan practice is “Chan for the Nirvana Hall,” that is, for the monk or nun who is close to death, and who therefore resides in a special hall prepared for those who are dying. His style of Chan will prepare the monastic for the moment of death. He attributes the phrase “Chan for the Nirvana Hall” to his teacher Wuzu Fayan. He also urges his monastic students to awaken (wu) and then continue with their cultivation of all kinds of good actions. If the monk or nun does so, he or she will be able to avoid rebirth in any of the three undesirable realms:

Yuanwu points out that Chan practice and Chan awakening bring one needed strength at the moment of death, the strength to remain mindful at a moment at which all one’s past good and evil deeds appear before one and the mind is ordinarily both weak and confused. Yuanwu writes:

You must awaken to this mind first, and afterward cultivate all forms of good… We must search out our faults and cultivate practice; this is like the eyes and the feet depending on each other. If you are able to refrain from doing any evil and refine your practice of the many forms of good, even if you only uphold the elementary forms of discipline and virtue, you will be able to avoid sinking down to the [rebirth destinations] of animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings. This is even more the case if you first awaken to the indestructible essence of the wondrous, illuminated true mind and after that cultivate practice to the best of your ability and carry out all forms of virtuous conduct.

Let no one be deluded about cause and effect. You must realize that the causal basis of the hells and the heavens is all formed by your own inherent mind. You must keep this mind balanced and in equanimity, without deluded ideas of self and others, without arbitrary loves and hates, without grasping and rejecting, without notions of gain and loss. Go on gradually nurturing

31 Juefan Huihong, Linjianlu, X87n1624.270b18–20.
32 Yanguan Qi’an (?–842) was a student of Mazu.
33 In the story Yanguan is testing the Chan insight of his attendant, who is one of his most advanced students, by calling for his fan. When the attendant replies that the fan is broken, Yanguan says, “If the fan is broken, then bring me the rhinoceros.”
34 This is from Case 91 in the Biyanlu, T48n2003.215c13–17. The translation is from Thomas Cleary, trans., The Blue Cliff Record, 584, with a few changes.
this for a long time, perhaps twenty or thirty years. Whether you encounter favorable or adverse conditions, do not retreat or regress—then when you come to the juncture between life and death [the last moment of your life], you will naturally be set free and not be afraid.36

Dahui’s Letters to Lay Followers

Dahui was the dharma-heir of Yuanwu, from whom he may have picked up this rhetoric of promise and exhortation. But it is far more prominent in Dahui’s writings than in Yuanwu’s. Dahui’s letters, which were collected and circulated separately soon after his death, and which thereafter entered Song dynasty Buddhist canons as part of his Recorded Sayings (yulu) in 30 fascicles, make clear how uncertainty about one’s fate at the moment of death and huatou practice should connect in the mind of the layman.37 From the extant letters that Dahui’s students wrote to him and those he sent to them we can see the power that the fear of dying as a deluded, self-centered being had on members of the elite in his day. A common sentiment expressed in letters to Dahui is that the writer is now retired or relatively free from time-consuming worldly affairs. Looking back, he can see that he has wasted his life thus far in pursuit of wealth, fame, status, and security for his family. He is now aware that none of these efforts fall outside the realm of the self-centered pursuit of illusory satisfactions. Deluded about life’s goals, he has not pursued Buddhist practice wholeheartedly enough to become an awakened buddha. Perhaps his behavior has not been such as to avoid an unfavorable rebirth. He now wants to make a final effort to master himself and break through the deluded mind of life and death (samsara), and asks for Dahui’s guidance.

The very first letter in Dahui’s Letters sent to Zeng Kai (zi Tianyou), falls into this category.38 So does Letter 24, an answer by Dahui to Judicial Commissioner Zhang (zi Yangshu) that quotes Zhang’s letter to Dahui. Also similar is Letter 10, an answer to Fu Zhirou (zi Jishen). In all of these letters Dahui instructs the layman to use a huatou to break through to awakening, which equals freedom from samsara. In his first letter to Zeng Kai, Dahui urges this layman who has in the past studied with Yuanwu, and who, now old, wants to take up serious

Dahui’s Chan Discourse on the Moment of Death

practice again after years of intermittent neglect as follows:

Only push your investigation to the limit, and at all times in the midst of surpassing stillness, at all costs do not forget these two huatou: [Yunmen’s] “Mt. Sumeru” and [Zhaozhou’s] “Drop all attachments.” Only grasp the reality that comes from the bottom of your own feet and work on. You must not be fearful about what has already passed in your life, nor do you need to think about those things. Thought and fear obstruct the Way. Only make a great vow before all the buddhas. Vow that your mind [your intention] will be firm, and that you will never retreat or lose this intention, that you will depend on the protection of all the buddhas, and that when you meet a good teacher [kalyanamitra], at the utterance of a single word you will suddenly forget life and death, be enlightened to and authenticate the peerless true Awakening, and continue the life of the wisdom of the buddhas, so that you may repay the unsurpassed favor of all the buddhas. If you make such a vow and persevere like this, then there is no reason why in time you should not be enlightened.39

In Letter 2, his answer to Zeng Kai’s second letter, Dahui repeats that Chan practice promises awakening and buddhahood. Zeng, even though he is a lay student and not a monk, should not be satisfied with any other goal:

If you are a man with bones and sinews, as soon as you hear [a gongan] mentioned, you will immediately take up the treasure sword of the Diamond King and with one blow cut off the four entangling paths of conflicting words—thus the road of births and deaths is cut off, the road of spiritual and worldly is cut off, the road of comparative calculation and discriminating thought is cut off, and the road of gain and loss and right and wrong is cut off too. Where that man stands on his feet, he is pure and naked, totally free. There is nothing to grab onto. Wouldn’t this be delightful? Isn’t this happiness? If you can have sufficient faith in this practice to attain penetration into true reality, you will be a person who attains a great freedom from life and death.40

In his answer to Zeng Kai’s sixth letter, Dahui brings up the dreaded moment at which Yama sends his servants to drag the newly dead down into the hells for judgment:

I have read your letter several times in detail. I can see that your mind is like

36 Ibid.
37 Dahui Pujue Chanshi shu (Letters of the Chan Teacher Dahui Pujue), today is still a fundamental text of Chan, Son, and Zen. Hakuin Ekaku lectured on it. Woodblocks for an 1166 edition were carved after Dahui’s death at the Miaoxi-an at Mt. Jing. No Song dynasty text is extant. A reliable text is found in T 47.1998, juan 25–30, and in Araki Kengo, Daie sho.
38 Zeng served as Vice Minister of Rites. His biography is found in the Songshi (Song dynasty history), fascicle 382. An entry on Zeng Kai is also found in the Song Yuan Xue’an (Philosophical record of Song and Yuan scholars), juan 26.
39 Araki, Daie sho, 7.
40 Ibid., 15–16.
iron or stone, that you have established a firm resolution and that you are completely unperturbed. If you continue to study like this, you will be a good match for King Yama at the time of your death (layue sanshiri). 41

Someone who has awakened and sees his true nature as buddhahood is sure not to end up in the hells. Given the seriousness of Zeng’s practice and commitment, Dahui sees him as on a path to awakening. In Letter 6, Dahui contrasts what Zeng is doing now with a popular alternative somewhat reminiscent of Zunshi’s ritual for lay Pure Land practice:

There are some who say that to set aside all external matters, sit in silence and embody the ultimate is to waste time; it is better to read a few chapters of Buddhist sutras, recite a buddha’s name a few times, bow a few more times to the buddhas, and confess and repent the faults one has committed in one’s ordinary life, in order to avoid when you die having to suffer from the iron rod in King Yama’s hand. This is something stupid people do. 42

Toward the end of his sixth letter to Zeng, Dahui reassures him that even if he does not awaken during this lifetime, his huatou practice will ensure that he will not fall into one of the three unfavorable rebirth destinations:

If from moment to moment you do not retreat from your first aspiration to seek awakening, and take your own mind that attaches itself to all the different mental afflictions of the world, and turn it around so that it firmly rests on prajna, then, even if in this lifetime you are unable to reach a thoroughgoing liberation, still, when you reach the end of your life, you definitely will not be dragged off by the karmic fruit of evil deeds, and end up being reborn in an evil form of rebirth. 43

Throughout this sequence of letters, Dahui advocates kan huatou practice for Zeng Kai. But Dahui’s fifth letter to Zeng Kai reveals that in Dahui’s opinion Zeng Kai has reached a point in his practice where the method of reaching insight that he has practiced through holding the huatou can be used with more discursive texts:

If you had not set your mind on prajna and continued mindfully in prajna from thought to thought without any interruption, you would not be able to comprehend clearly all the various expedient methods of the past patriarchs and buddhas. You have already grasped the handle [to awakening]. Simply practice as you are doing. When you read sutras and teachings and all of the discourse records (yulu) of the ancients with their various verbal distinctions, also simply practice as you are doing. With respect to stories/phrases (hua) like “Mount Sumeru,” “put it down,” “a dog lacks buddha nature,” “the bamboo whisk,” the story/phrase “with one gulp swallowing completely the waters of the West river,” the story/phrase “the cypress tree in the garden,” also just practice as you are doing. You must not give rise to some other interpretations, otherwise seek principles, or otherwise do calculations. You are able to practice like this from moment to moment in the midst of the stream [of activities]. If you were now to accomplish nothing on the path, then the Buddha’s Dharma would be seen to have no miraculous power. 44

Another category of letter is one in which the person to whom Dahui is writing is practicing, but not effectively or with great energy and determination. Here, Dahui uses the approach of the moment of death to light a fire under the recipient to motivate him to hold on to a huatou. Although Dahui discourages any preoccupation with one’s failings in the past, he does encourage the eagerness of a student to devote himself to practice. He also supports and fosters his perception of the moment of death as a momentous final exam on the success of his practice, an exam that will determine his fate. This is Dahui’s strategy, particularly if the letter’s recipient is not young.

Dahui responds to letters from laymen who need to become serious about their practice with reminders that death is coming. For example, in Letter 30, in answer to Bureau Director Lü (zi Longli), Dahui writes:

I received two letters from your elder brother Lü Juren (1048–1145) [whose given name is Lü Benzong], saying that he was very busy with his practice concerning this Task. He should hasten. He is already sixty years old and retired from government service. What is the point of waiting any longer? If he doesn’t hurry up, how can he deal with things on the last day of his life (layue sanshiri)? I heard that you were also busy with practice these days, but the only thing you should be busy with is the matter of the last day of your life. [A monk asked Yunmen,] “What is the Buddha?” [Yunmen replied:] “A dried stick of shit.” If you don’t penetrate into this [huatou], what difference will there be between the way you are now and the way you

41 Ibid., 30.
42 Ibid., 31.
43 Ibid.
44 Araki uses “huatou” for all these instances of “hua.” There are passages in Dahui’s records in which “hua” or even “huatou” may best be read as “story” or “gongan.”
45 Araki, Daie sho, 27.
will be on the day of your death? 46

In Letter 19 Dahui writes to Liu Ziyu (zi Yanxiu) about his brother, Liu Zihui (zi Yanchong), famous as the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi's early tutor:

Yanchong in fact doesn't have various vexing confusions, it is only that he has been deeply affected by the poison [ous teachings of the false (Caodong) teachers], so all he does is wander around confusedly on the outside edges of the truth, talking about motion and stillness, words and silence, gain and loss.... He (Yanchong) has not yet cut through the gongan of birth and death (samsara) that is impenetrable by thought. How can he settle [his accounts] and depart at the moment of death? It will be impossible, when he is losing the light of his eyes just before its complete disappearance, for him to say to the King of Hell, "I will see you later, when I regain clear consciousness and composure." However free and fluent his words are or however hard his mind is, even if it is like sticks and stones, they will be useless for getting him through that moment. The only thing that will help for him is to break through and destroy the deluded mind of life and death. 47

Here again Dahui advocates using a huatou. In Letter 30 from Dahui to Lu Longli, Lu Juren's brother, which is partially quoted above, Dahui lays out the connection between the sensation of doubt and the huatou. He emphasizes the importance of concentrating the many doubts into one doubt raised by the huatou. By breaking through the concentrated sensation of doubt, all doubts will be resolved; when all doubts disappear, that is awakening, the end of the affective thinking. Dahui writes:

[Shidafu] having wasted their lives in this world, when they cast off their bodies do not know where they will find themselves next, whether in a heaven or a hell. They do not know that "this being" continues to flow into different realms as a result of its karma; nevertheless there is nothing that they don't know about the business of others, whether significant or insignificant. 48... If you don't destroy the sensation of doubt, samsara will afflict you over and over. 49

Lu Juren has written Dahui asking the following:

Dahui then writes:

If you practice according to my words, even though you can't thoroughly awaken [i.e., do not reach awakening as an event], you will be able to distinguish between correct and distorted, you will not be hindered by the troop of devils, and will plant seeds of wisdom deeply. Even if you cannot finish the task in this lifetime, in the next life you will certainly receive the complete functioning of wisdom without wasting your effort while being not afflicted by unwholesome karma, and will be able to turn your karma on your dying day (linming zhongshi). 51

46 Ibid., 128.
47 Ibid., 47.
48 Ibid., 129.
49 Ibid., 130.
50 Ibid., 131-32.
51 Araki, Dale sho, 141-42.
Conclusion

Examples could be further multiplied, but by now Dahui’s message is clear. If the prospect of death and rebirth already motivated the layman, he recommended a huatou as a powerful and relatively speedy method of breaking out of samsara’s delusions so as to be free of King Yama’s judgment. If a layman were already motivated to inspect a huatou, but his focus were not yet strong enough, it could be strengthened by asking him to focus doubt by contemplating the moment of death and rebirth. The practice taught by Yuanwu might take a monk or nun thirty years to complete, as he often said. The needs of elderly laymen could be met by huatou practice. Even if these lay people did not experience awakening as an event, they could expect rebirth in one of the three favorable realms and make a real start on deepening prajna in a way that would make Buddhist practice attainable and relatively easy in the next birth.

It is possible to imagine that Dahui delighted in designing and testing a new use of words to add to standard gongan practice. His innovative verbal tool had many advantages, particularly for lay practice. It could be done anywhere, anytime, in the midst of daily activities commonly required in lay life. It had a great power to concentrate doubt. It had great power to enable people to reach a key point—the feeling of ease that he calls “saving strength”—and beginning at that point to “gain power” from the practice. It offered a form of practice that might overcome the drifting away of lay patrons of the Linji school toward Caodong teachers. Finally, it offered an effective alternative to the Pure Land approach to a critical node in samsaric experience feared by laymen. The Pure Land approach, the cultivation of nianfosamadhi, required faith and single-minded practice of an uncomplicated method. So did huatou practice; but huatou practice also harnessed the power of uncertainty and doubt. In that respect it might be expected that it suited the capacities of scholars.

Glossary

Baiyun Shouduan 白雲守端
Biyanlu 碧岩錄
Caodong 曹洞
Chan 禪
Changlu Zongze 長蘆宗赜
Chanyuan qinggui 禪苑清規
Ciyun Zunshi 慈雲尊式
Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲
Dahui Pujue Chanshi shu 大慧普覺禪師書
Dahui Pujue Chanshi yulu 大慧普覺禪師語錄
Dahui Pujue Chanshi pushuo 大慧普覺禪師普說
Dahui Pujue Chanshi fayu 大慧普覺禪師法語

Donglin Hesheng 東林和尚
Donglin hesheng Yunmen anzhu songgu 東林和尚雲門庵主頌古
fayu 法語
Foguo Keqin Chanshi xinyan 佛果克勤禪師心演
Foyan Qingsuan 佛眼清遠
Fozu tongji 佛祖統紀
Fu Zhirou 富直柔 (zi Jishen 季申)
Furong Daokai 芳蓉道楷
Fushan Fayan 漢山法演 (also known as Yuanjian 圓鑒)
gongan 公案
Gu zinsu yulu 古尊宿語錄
Huanglong 黃龍
hua 話
huatou 話頭
Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu 印度學佛敎研究
Jiacai 達才
Jingtu lun 潤土論 (by Jiacai 達才)
Jingtu wangsheng zhuang 淨土往生傳
Jeong Young-Sik 鄭榮植
Juefan Huihong 覺范慧洪
kan huatou 看話頭
layue sanshiri 嵐月三十日
Lebang wenlei 樂邦文類
li 力
lingkan 令看
Linji Yixuan 臨濟顯玄
Linjian lu 林間錄
linzhong 臨終
linming zhisheng 臨命之終
linming zhongshi 臨命終時
Liu Ziyu 劉子羽 (zi Yanxiu 彦修)
Liu Zihui 劉子暉 (zi Yanchong 彦沖)

Longshou jingu wen 廬舒淨土文
Lü Benzong 吕本中 (zi Juren 居仁)
Miaoxi an 妙喜庵
muzhiming 茗註銘
nianfo 念佛
pudu 普度
shengsi 生死
shidafu 士大夫
shinian 十念
Shuzhou Longmen Foyan heshang pushuo yulu 舒州龍門佛眼和尚普說語錄
Tiantai 天台
Wan’an Daoyan 止庵道顥
Wang Gu 王古
Wang Rixiu 王日休
Wangsheng xifang jingtu ruiying zhuan 往生西方淨土瑞應傳
weixin jingtu 唯心淨土
wu 無 (lacks)
wu 悟 (awakening)
Wuzu Fayan 五祖法演
Xuedou Chongxian 雪竇重顯
Xuedou Xian heshang Mingjue dashi songguji 雪竇顯和尚明覺大師偈
Xiu Xiu jingtu wangsheng zhuang 新修淨土往生傳
Yangguan Qi’an 雲官齊安
Ye Shi 葉適
yi 疑
Yongming Yanshou 永明延壽
Yuanwu Keqin 隨悟克勤
Yuanwu Keqina Chanshi xinyao 園悟克勤禪師心要
yulu 語錄
Yunmen 雲門
Morten Schütter

"Who Is Reciting the Name of the Buddha?" as Gongan in Chinese Chan Buddhism

Abstract  Chan Buddhism's ambivalent relationship with language and literature is perhaps most starkly seen in its practice of gongan meditation. This practice was first instituted by the famous Linji master Dahui and involves an intense meditational focus on the "punch line" (huatou) of what is typically a story about an ancient Chan master or an enigmatic question like "why did [the legendary founder of Chan] Bodhidharma come from the West?" In the Ming dynasty, a new gongan became widely used in Chan meditation: the phrase "who is reciting the name of the Buddha?" This was a reference to the widespread practice of chanting homage to the Buddha Amitābha in hope of getting reborn into his paradise. In using this new gongan, Chan seemingly embraced oral practice in an unprecedented move and appeared to combine the other-power of Amitābha worship with the self-power of Chan meditation. Scholars have struggled to understand this development, and several have dismissed it as an example of the degeneration of Chan and its later pandering to lay people. I argue that the development of this gongan can best be seen as an attempt to reframe the practice of Buddha-recitation in a Chan meditative framework; and further explore the rationale for the practice as given by the influential Buddhist thinker Yunqī Zhuhong, who was a staunch advocate of Buddha-recitation.

Keywords  Dahui Zonggao, Song, huatou, nianfo, Yunqī Zhuhong

There are many huatou, such as "the myriad things return to one, where does the one return to?" or "before your parents gave birth to you, what was your original face?" and so on, but "who is reciting the name of the Buddha?" is the most commonly used.1

—Chan master Xuyun (1840–1959)

1 Cen Xuešt, ed., Xuyun heshang fahui, 166.

"Who Is Reciting the Name of the Buddha?" as Gongan in Chinese Chan Buddhism

Kanhua meditation,2 long a signature meditation practice in Chinese Chan Buddhism, involves an intense focus on a huatou, the central part of a gongan, which is an enigmatic dialogue or question often associated with a venerated ancient Chan master. Many different gongan have been used in kanhua meditation since it began to be practiced in the twelfth century, but for the last four centuries or so the most popular gongan for use in kanhua meditation has been "who is reciting the name of the Buddha?" (nianfo de shi shui or its variants).3 This gongan is a reference to the practice of chanting homage to the name of the Buddha Amitābha (Ch.: Emituofo) in the hope of being reborn into Amitābha's paradiisical Pure Land, a practice known in China as nianfo—and the gongan is, therefore, known as the nianfo gongan.

Observers have tended to see the popularity of the nianfo gongan as evidence of degeneration within the Chan school with the impingement of a simplistic practice that relies on the power of Amitābha for salvation on the self-reliant and self-enlightening practice of Chan meditation. When the Chinese founder of the Obaku school of Zen, the Chan master Yinyuan Longqi (1592–1673), first introduced the nianfo gongan and other Pure Land practices to the Zen milieu in Japan, the other Zen schools found this to be an unacceptable contamination, a view that still exists today.4 Moderns scholars have had very little to say about the nianfo gongan, and if addressed at all it is often dismissed as something Chan masters reserved for their lay disciples.5 The history and development of the nianfo gongan are therefore topics that are little understood.

Given its importance in modern Chinese Buddhism it seems the nianfo gongan deserves much more attention than it has been given. In this essay, I begin an examination of the origins of the nianfo gongan and its development. I argue that the initial development can best be seen as an attempt to reframe the practice of nianfo in a Chan meditative framework, rather than an incursion of nianfo practice into Chan. I then explore the rationale for the nianfo gongan given by the influential Buddhist thinker Yunqī Zhuhong (1535–1615), who felt that nianfo had to take precedence over Chan practice.

2 In English also known as keyword meditation, the punch-line method, koan introspection, etc.
3 Most elaborately, zhe nianfode bijing shi shui, but also nianfodi shi shui, nianfozhe shi shui, and nianfo shi shui.
4 See Helen Baroni, Obaku Zen: The Emergence of the Third Sect of Zen in Tokugawa Japan, 111–18.
5 In English, aspects of the nianfo gongan is discussed in Chün-fang Yü, The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis. More recently, a study of the origins of the nianfo gongan is found in Shi Yinqian, “Chanzong ‘nianfozhe shi shui’ qiyuan kao.”
Pure Land Buddhism and Chan

The practice of nianfo has been ubiquitous in Chinese Buddhism for most of its history. Nianfo is a translation of the Sanskrit term buddhanamāra that can mean “Buddha recollection,” “Buddha contemplation,” “recitation of the name(s) of the Buddha,” or “Buddha invocation.” The term nianfo holds all these meanings, but in China the most important aspect of nianfo was Buddha invocation, i.e., chanting homage to a Buddha. Moreover, in China this practice was almost exclusively directed towards the Buddha Amitābha, in the hope of salvation. This corresponded, and that it struggled to find ways to harmonize the idea of salvation with Pure Land practice within much of the Chan tradition, and that it never really seemed to have been able to do so. It is much the most important aspect of nianfo was Buddha invocation, i.e., chanting homage to a Buddha. Moreover, in China this practice was almost exclusively directed towards the Buddha Amitābha, in the hope of being reborn into Amitābha’s paradisecical Pure Land (chanting the phrase “namo Amitavo,” “homage to Amitābha”). Once in the Pure Land the practitioner is destined for full Buddhahood and will never be reborn in other realms. Nianfo has traditionally blended easily with a range of practices and doctrinal ideas in Chinese Buddhism, and had (and still has) a broad appeal to both monastics and lay people. It thus cannot be associated with any particular Buddhist school, nor can it be identified as an independent school by itself, although together with other related practices it is often referred to as “Pure Land Buddhism.”

Given the almost universal appeal of nianfo practice in China, it is not surprising to find that it was incorporated into much of the Chinese Chan tradition, right from its inception. Scholars of Chan have been slow, and perhaps reluctant, to recognize this, but recent research has shown the pervasiveness of nianfo throughout the history of the Chan school. However, I suggest that there was an underlying discomfort with Pure Land practice within much of the Chan tradition, and that it struggled to find ways to harmonize the idea of salvation through the adoration of a Buddha with the fundamental Chan notion of an inherent Buddhahood that only needs to be actualized.

This kind of struggle was not new. It seems that as far back as we can discern a certain tension existed within Mahāyāna Buddhism between a literal understanding of rebirth in an actual Pure Land, and a “transcendent” understanding of a Pure Land as being a state of mind. Canonically, we find the first position expressed, e.g., in the longer Sukhāvati-vyūha (Foshuo wuliangshou jing), while an expression of the latter can be found in the first fascicle of the Vimalakirti-nirdesā Sutra (Weimojie suoshuo jing). In China, this distinction came to be referred to as the difference between “western-direction Pure Land” (xifang jingtu) and “mind-only Pure Land” (weixin jingtu). Virtually all discussion of nianfo that can be found in the sermons and writings of Chan masters from the Tang (618–907), Song (960–1279), Yuan (1279–1368), and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties take a “mind-only Pure Land” approach. But, whereas sources attributed to the early Chan masters of the Tang are often quite dismissive of Pure Land practice and most Song masters rarely refer to it, Chan masters of the Yuan and Ming dynasties seem to enthusiastically embrace nianfo almost universally.

Kanhua Chan

The development of kanhua Chan meditation was a major event in Chan Buddhist history which came to shape Chan forever after; not only in China, but in Korea and Japan as well. The practice is especially associated with the Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), and there is much evidence to suggest that kanhua Chan did, in fact, begin with Dahui, even though he was strongly inspired by his master Yuanwu Keqin (1063–1135) and others in the Linji Chan tradition before him. Due to Dahui’s success, kanhua Chan became widely used in the centuries after his death, even within the Caodong tradition of Chan that Dahui had strongly criticized for failing to engage in a meditation practice that would lead to enlightenment. Dahui’s favorite gongan story for use in kanhua Chan meditation was a very simple one involving the Tang-dynasty Chan master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897). Thus Dahui instructs: “Just observe the huatou. A monk asked—who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” as gongan in Chinese Chan Buddhism

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7 For a discussion, see Robert H. Sharf, “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China.” The Chanyuan qinggui, an important Chan monastic manual from 1103, indicates that nianfo was performed in Chan monasteries at a number of different occasions, see Kagemishima Genryū, Satō Tatsugen, and Kosaka Kiyo, eds., Yakuchī Zenzen shingi, and the translated text in Yifa, The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China: An Annotated Translation and Study of the “Chanyuan Qinggui.”
8 T12, no. 360. Note that all citations from the Taishō (T), Xu Zangjing (X), and J (Dai Nihon zokyu) collections are from CBETA.org; Z refers to the Japanese edition of the Xu Zangjing or Zoku Zokyu.
9 T14, no. 475.
10 This expression seems first to have been used by the Huayan scholar Li Tongxuan (635–730), see T36, no. 1739, 759, c22.
11 A famous example is found in the Platform Sutra, see Philip B. Yampolsky, The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, 156–59 (sec. 35, Chinese text, 19).
12 Morten Schlüter, How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Sung-Dynasty China, 107–16
13 I have previously argued that kanhua Chan, at least in part, must be understood as an answer or anti-dote to the “silent illumination” (mozha) meditation that was advocated in the Caodong tradition at the time, most prominently by Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157). This again, I believe, must be placed in the context of competition among Chan lineages for patronage from the educated lay elite, the literati (shidaij). See How Zen Became Zen, 104–43.
Zhaozhou: ‘Does even a dog have Buddha-nature?’ Zhaozhou answered, ‘No!’

Whether you are walking, sitting, standing, or lying down at all times hold up this [‘no’ in your mind]. Then all of a sudden it will all come gushing out and birth to.

Zhaozhou: ‘Does even a dog have Buddha-nature?’ Zhaozhou answered, ‘No!’

Monk and Zhaozhou is a gongan, while the word ‘no/wu’ is a huatou. Dahui refers to the practice as “observing the huatou” (kan huatou), later abbreviated to simply kanhua.

Zhaozhou’s refusal to grant that dogs have the Buddha-nature is puzzling because it is a core notion in Chan Buddhism, and indeed in almost all of Chinese Buddhism, that the true nature of all sentient beings without exception is precisely that of a Buddha. By employing this and other bewildering gongan it appears that Dahui aimed for kanhua Chan practice to bring the practitioner to a point where no thinking or conceptualizing of any kind is possible. In the following passage, Dahui explains a bit more:

A monk asked Zhaozhou: “Does even a dog have Buddha-nature?” Zhaozhou answered: “No!” When you observe it do not ponder it widely, do not try to understand every word, do not try to analyze it, do not consider it to be at the place where you open your mouth [about to say it out loud], do not reason that is at the place [in your mind] where you hold it up, do not fall into a vacuous state, do not hold on to “mind” and await enlightenment, do not try to experience it through the words of your teacher, and do not get stuck in a shell of unconcern. Just at all times, whether walking or standing, sitting or lying down, hold on to this [no/wu]. “Does even a dog have Buddha-nature or not (wu)?” If you hold on to this “no/wu” to a point where it becomes ripe, when no discussion or consideration can reach it and you are as caught in a place of one square inch; and when it has no flavor as if you were chewing on a raw iron cudgel and you get so close to it you cannot pull back—when you are able to be like this, then that really is good news!16

To Dahui, a parallel, and perhaps essential, function of concentrating on the huatou is that it focuses a person’s doubts.17 Doubts are detrimental to enlightenment, but the unenlightened mind will always have doubts. However, when one is immersed in kanhua Chan practice, all doubts about other things will be forgotten in the face of the one immense doubt generated by the huatou. According to Dahui, once doubt is centered on the huatou it will become like a huge growing ball. Eventually this ball of doubt will shatter and all other doubts disappear with it. This would be the moment of enlightenment. Thus Dahui says: “Great doubt will necessarily be followed by great enlightenment.”18 It is clear that Dahui was concerned about doubt and how to use kanhua Chan to harness it and expedite enlightenment.

However, in most of the passages where Dahui discusses kanhua Chan there is no mention of doubt, and it does not seem quite clear whether Dahui understood doubt to be an absolutely necessary ingredient of kanhua Chan. Nevertheless, in the kanhua Chan practice of the Yuan and Ming, doubt came to take on a paramount role as a crucial element of kanhua Chan without which there could be no enlightenment. The now famous saying “great doubt, great enlightenment; small doubt, small enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment” (dayi dawu, xiaoyi xiaowu, buyi buwu) appears again and again in Chan sources after the Song, but it is not found earlier than the very late Song.19 It is important to realize the centrality of doubt in later kanhua Chan in any discussion of post-Song Chan practice.

In any case, language is obviously essential to Dahui’s kanhua Chan. It would seem, at least initially, that it is the puzzling paradox of the huatou, like the “no” in the dog gongan, that drives the practitioner. In the happy event of an experience of awakening, the answer that had to be presented to the practitioner’s master was almost always expressed in words, very often in the form of a poem. As Steven Heine and others have shown, it was necessary for Chan students to have command of a large body of literature, both Buddhist and secular, in order to successfully accede to the lineage of their master. Kanhua Chan practice is therefore in certain crucial ways intensely literary.

The use of gongan stories in Chan instruction much precede kanhua Chan, and Chan masters were very much aware of the seeming contradiction between the slogan of Chan being a “special transmission outside the scriptures” and their extensive use of language and literature. Thus, even since Dahui’s master, Yuanwu Keqin, Chan masters have sometimes made a distinction between “live words” and “dead words” when talking about gongan.20 These terms are not

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14 This exchange is first found in Zhaozhou’s recorded sayings, of uncertain date, included in the collection Gu zusu yulu, X68, no. 1315, 81, a4–5 // Z 2:23, 157, c8–9 // R118, 314, a8–9.
16 Ibid., T47, no. 1998A, 901, c27, 902, a6.
19 This expression is first found in the recorded sayings of Xueyan Zuqin (d. 1287), Xueyan Zuqin Chanshi yulu, X70, no. 1397, 606, b22–23 // Z 2:27, 257, a7–8 // R122, 513, a7–8.
20 See Ding-hwa Evelyn Hsieh, “Yuan-wu K’o-ch’in’s (1063–1135) Teaching of Ch’an Kung-an Practice: A Transition from the Literary Study of Ch’ an Kung-an to the Practical K’ an-hua ch’ an.”
really explained anywhere, but obviously are associated with what was seen to be good and bad ways of understanding and interacting with gongan literature. Yuanwu also is reported to have said: “Hear clearly the words outside the voice; do not seek for anything within the meaning.” We may take this to point to an attempt of using language to transcend language; to use words to express that which cannot be expressed in words, which therefore must be understood in a way that is completely different from how we ordinarily understand language. Kanhua Chan can perhaps be seen as formalizing the process of interacting with words in a way that transcends language.

The Development of the Nianfo Gongan

No doubt largely due to Dahui’s enormous influence, kanhua Chan became the standard Chan meditation practice after the Song. Chan masters in the Yuan and Ming dynasties can be seen as faithful followers of Dahui’s kanhua method and they often invoke his authority when discussing the subject. Like most other Song Chan masters, Dahui has very little to say about nianfo, although he does make it clear that one should understand that it is one’s own nature that is Amitābha. However, a shift seems to have taken place in Chan approaches to nianfo practice sometime in the late Song or early Yuan. From this time onwards, Chan masters become much more overtly enthusiastic about Pure Land practices than Dahui or any of his contemporaries. Most Chan sources from the Yuan and Ming contain extended discussions of nianfo and Chan, and they universally conclude that the two are equally valid practices and that both can lead to enlightenment. This suggests that Chan masters after the Song no longer could ignore Pure Land practice in their sermons and writings, or at least that such material came to be seen as important to preserve and publish.

At the same time as discussions of nianfo practice came to be more visible in Chan discourse there seems to have been an increasing need for Chan masters to interpret this practice in a Chan framework. There is persistent tradition in later Chan literature of ascribing what was clearly understood as an early attempt to recast nianfo practice in a Chan meditative framework to Zhenxie Qingliao (1088–1151) of the Caodong Chan tradition. It is first found in the Jingtu huowen from 1349 by Tianru Weize (d. after 1354) where Qingliao is quoted as saying:

If you understand the one mind then there is no other dharma. Just take the four characters “E-mi-tuo-fo” and just like that go recite them twenty-four hours a day. If you can comprehend that the mind that does the reciting fundamentally has no recitation, no non-recitation, no both-have-and-do-not-have recitation, and no neither-have-nor-not-have recitation, then that which recites is thus and that which is recited is also like that.

This passage depicts an intense and prolonged focus on Amitābha’s name, with the use of a Nāgarjuna-style tetralemma to cut off any conceptualizing. It asks the practitioner to turn her attention to her own mind and see the inherent emptiness of the practice of nianfo. The approach expressed here likely came to be seen as a step towards the development of the nianfo gongan as used in kanhua meditation. This is evident in a later edition of the Jingtu huowen, prepared by the illustrious Ming-dynasty master Yunqi Zhuhong, where the passage appears embellished in several ways:

If you understand the one mind then there is no other dharma. Just take the four characters “E-mi-tuo-fo” and make them a huatou, and twenty-four hours a day just like that exhort yourself. Do not recite with the mind, do not recite with no-mind, do not recite with both mind and no-mind, and do not recite with neither not-mind nor not-no-mind. Then you will cut off the realms of before and after and not a single thought will arise.

Here the sentiment in the passage is brought much closer to something that resembles kanhua Chan meditation, and the use of term huatou further suggests the similarity in approach. It should be noted that “huatou” can simply mean a topic on which to focus and it seems clear that Zhuhong is not suggesting that Qingliao is advocating regular kanhua Chan meditation in this passage, as the lack of mention of doubt also indicates. Qingliao was one of the main targets of Dahui’s attacks on heretical masters who taught silent illumination (mozhao), and it seems somewhat surprising that he should be credited with being the first Chan master who applied a technique inspired by Dahui’s kanhua Chan to Buddha invocation. None of the extant sermons and writings by Qingliao suggests that he was particularly interested in Pure Land practice, and he certainly nowhere advocates kanhua meditation. The earliest version of the Jingtu huowen was compiled several hundred years after the time of Qingliao, and we cannot know when this passage first began to be attributed to him. But it is not impossible that Qingliao could have advocated a contemplation of the act

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22 See Ishii Shōdo, “Daie zen ni okeru zen to nembutsu no mondai.”

23 It is possible that Song Chan masters addressed Pure Land practice more widely, but these teachings were not deemed necessary to include in their published collections.


of reciting the name of Amitābha. In any case, the passage became a popular one and it is quoted and further elaborated upon in a number of Ming and Qing works.

Interestingly, Zhuhong elsewhere ascribes a passage to the original author of the Jingtuo huowen, Tianru Weize, that is quite similar to the one Weize ascribes to Qingliao:

In response to a question [Weize] said: Just take the four characters "E-mi-tuo-fo" and make them a huatou, and twenty-four hours a day just like that exhort yourself. When you get to the point where you don’t give rise to a single thought you have already reached Buddhahood, without going through any of the [Bodhisattva] stages. 27

In Weize’s extant recorded sayings a passage indeed seems to advocate an intense focus on the name of Amitābha in nianfo practice. Here Weize says: “Those who practice nianfo should only rely on the huatou of the four characters E-mi-tuo-fo.” 28 We can probably safely conclude that by the time of Weize at least some Chan masters advocated the practice focusing intensely on the name of Amitābha in a manner that was reminiscent of kanhua meditation. By advocating that nianfo practitioners should investigate the mind that does the Buddha-recitation and let themselves be completely absorbed into it, Chan seems to have taken a crucial step in integrating nianfo practice into a Chan meditation-style framework.

The most famous Chan master of the Yuan dynasty, Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323), who was the teacher of Tianru Weize, discusses Pure Land and its compatibility with Chan practice in a number of places in his recorded sayings. Thus, in a letter to a lay supporter, Mingben states: “Chan is just the Chan of Pure Land and Pure Land is just the Pure Land of Chan.” 29 Elsewhere, in response to a question, Mingben says: “Pure Land is mind and Chan is also mind. They are of one substance although in name they are two.” 30 Later he continues: “Furthermore, the practice of Chan is about comprehending birth and death, and nianfo and Pure Land practice is also about comprehending birth and death.

Although the sages have established a myriad of teachings all of them have comprehending birth and death as their ultimate goal.” 31

But in spite of his strong endorsement of the equality of Pure Land and Chan, Mingben at the same time seems conflicted about nianfo practice. In the passage quoted above he also presents a somewhat convoluted argument, maintaining that because Chan and Pure Land are of one substance you cannot practice both; doing so would imply a dualism between the two. It is only through one door that one can enter into the teachings deeply Mingben claims, no joint practice of Chan and Pure Land can be fruitful. 32

This position is reiterated by Tianru Weize who, although he often spoke in praise of nianfo, emphasized the importance of sticking with just one practice:

Chan practitioners should simply just do Chan practice. Nianfo practitioners should simply just practice nianfo. If you attempt to do both then neither one will have any result. There is an old simile that goes: “It is like stepping into two boats at once, both your legs will be unstable.” 33

Interestingly, in the letter to a lay supporter quoted earlier where he equates Chan and Pure Land, Mingben goes on to say:

You have long been intimate with the study of Pure Land, but also respect the direct way of Shaolin [Chan]. You just need to take the phrase “before my father and mother gave birth to me what was my original face?” and put it in your mind when you recite the Buddha’s name (nianfo), keeping it in mind from moment to moment without setting it aside, and being diligent about it without leaving it behind. [In this way] your efforts will mature, you will see things with ever greater clarity; the power of the Way will grow firm, and one day, when you forget subject and object, and cut off the flow of breath, you will suddenly awaken, and begin to understand that my words do not deceive you. 34

Mingben here seems to advocate an interesting combination of nianfo overlaid with kanhua practice, which seems not to have been articulated anywhere else. Mingben and Weize presents a position that accommodates and validates nianfo practice, while also trying to keep it distinct from Chan practice. At the same
time, their approach also seeks to reinscribe nianfo practice in a way that made it much closer to Chan kanhua meditation, even to the point of effectively overwriting nianfo with kanhua Chan. This was a position that both theoretically and practically must have been difficult to maintain, and it does not seem to have found widespread support.

At the time of Mingben and Weize, there were other Chan masters who did not see a need to focus on only “one door,” and who had no problem advocating the dual practice of Chan meditation and nianfo, while at the same time being influenced by the reframing of nianfo as a Chan-style meditative practice. Youtan Pudu (1255–1330), a well-known leader in the White Lotus movement, may have been especially influential in merging the two practices in a manner that can be seen as a direct precursor to the fully developed nianfo gongan. In his work on Pure Land practice, Pudu states:

For nianfo practitioners, if you wish to practice Chan and see your own true nature then just rely on this dharma. In a quiet room you must sit firmly in meditation, with the correct body posture. Sweep away all karmic entanglements, and cut off mental defilements. Look straight ahead with open eyes, externally do not attach to objects and internally do not become fixed in concentration. Tracing back the radiance, the internal and external both become still. Then, delicately, you raise the sounds of the recitation “namo Emituofo” several times [in your mind], tracing back the radiance and spontaneously contemplating “seeing you own nature.” What is it, ultimately, that becomes a Buddha? It is the Amida (Amitābha) of my original nature. Then again, you must penetrate and contemplate that which now being raised. This one recitation arises from where? If you can completely penetrate this one recitation, then you can also completely penetrate [the question of] who it is who is doing the analyzing.

This description of nianfo practice comes very close to kanhua Chan and what we might call mature nianfo gongan practice. Significantly, the several questions that the practitioner is instructed to pose to him/herself suggest an element of doubt, which as noted earlier was an indispensable part of kanhua Chan in the Yuan and Ming.

It is even possible that Pudu may have been the first master to advocate contemplating the actual phrase “who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” This is suggested by Zhuhong’s Huang Ming mingseng jilüe, a collection of various writings, sermons, and letters by ten famous Buddhist masters. In the entry on Konggu Jinglong (1387–1466), Konggu is cited as saying: “The venerable Youtan [Pudu] told people to raise [the question] ‘who is reciting the name of the Buddha?’ He also said: ‘it is the Amitābha of my original nature.’” Konggu goes on to criticize this kind of questioning as unnecessary and advocates simply doing regular nianfo through which one can achieve enlightenment. Nowhere else is Youtan Pudu associated with the actual gongan “who is reciting the name of the Buddha,” and it seems possible that Konggu simply uses it as a short hand for the kind of approach expressed in Pudu’s own writings as cited above. However, as we shall see it appears evident that the nianfo gongan was already in wide use by Konggu’s time.

The Mature Nianfo Gongan

The Chan master Zhiche Duanyun (b. 1309) is perhaps the earliest master who is associated with the mature nianfo gongan in extant sources. In his Chanzong jueyi ji, Zhuhong cites Zhiche in this way:

When you invoke the Buddha’s name, whether it is three, five, or seven times, silently ask yourself: “where does this one sound of the Buddha’s name come from?” Also ask: “who is this one reciting the name of the Buddha?” When there is doubt just go take charge of that doubt. If you cannot get close to the place from where the question comes, don’t cut off the feeling of doubt. Once again raise [the question]: “ultimately, who is this one reciting the name of the Buddha?”

There is one extant work by Zhiche, the Chanzong jueyi ji, and here we find no direct advocacy of the nianfo gongan in the way that Zhuhong reported it. But Zhiche’s work does in fact contain a passage that indicates that he considered reflection on nianfo in kanhua Chan meditation a common and uncontroversial practice:

Whether you investigate the word “no (wu),” or whether you investigate your original face, or whether you investigate reciting the name of the Buddha (canjiu nianfo), although the gongan are different, the investigation

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36 Redirecting attention to the mind’s activity back to its source. Robert Buswell has discussed this concept in several places, see, e.g., Robert E. Buswell, Jr., “Chinul’s Systematization of Chinese Meditative Techniques in Korean Sŏn Buddhism.”
38 X84, no. 1581, 363, b23–24 // Z 2B:17, 207, a11–12 // R144, 413, a11–12.
39 T48, no. 2024, 1102, b18–22.
of the doubt [they generate] is the same.40

It seems this must be a reference to the nianfo gongan and the passage is especially interesting because it is the earliest instance that seems to equate the nianfo gongan with any other gongan used in kanhua Chan. The manner in which Zhiche refers to this practice strongly suggests that he was not unique in employing it. It can probably be concluded that the practice of using the nianfo gongan in kanhua Chan must have been well established by the end of the Yuan dynasty.

Interestingly, there is no evidence of early Ming Chan masters using a nianfo gongan approach.41 Even Yunqi Zhuhong, who seems to have had an interest in finding early evidence of the practice, mentions no one from this period who engaged in it. However, with Chan masters Chushan Shaoqi and Dufeng Jishan [or Benshan] in the fifteenth century,42 the practice seems to have become very common.43 For example, Dufeng Jishan has this to say in a sermon:

When you contemplate “who is reciting the name of the Buddha,” you must push down on the word “who” and enter deeply into a feeling of doubt. Doubt this “who is reciting the name of the Buddha.” Therefore it is said: “Great doubt, great enlightenment; small doubt, small enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment.” Fine words indeed! If you begin to gain a mind of urgency then the feeling of doubt will be strong, and the huatou will naturally manifest before you.44

We only know about the teachings of Chushan Shaoqi from Zhuhong, who cites a letter Chushan wrote to an official:

You need not avoid daily noise and seek out a quiet place. Just sweep your breast clean of the ordinary knowledge and views that you have accumulated every day, and fill it with the phrase “Emitofo.” Try to become identified with it totally. Always generate the doubt: “Who is it, ultimately, who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” Dwell on this question constantly.... When you persist in this way without sliding backward, one day all of a sudden the ball of doubt will be smashed to smithereens and your worries of endless kalpas will dissolve away like ice.45

Although these masters often advocated using the nianfo gongan in kanhua Chan meditation, they also used a number of other gongan for the same purpose. Dufeng, for example, was very fond of the “dog gongan” that had been Dahui’s favorite.46 Zhiche Duanyun, who sometimes is thought to have been the first to use the nianfo gongan, seems to have especially favored the gongan, “the myriad things return to one, where does the one return to?”47

One would be tempted to conclude that at this point “who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” was understood as simply one gongan among many that could be used in kanhua Chan practice, and that was presumably selected according to the predilections and predispositions of the practitioner. It may be the case that some Chan masters especially advocated using the nianfo gongan in kanhua Chan practice to lay people, although several of the passages cited above seem to have been directed to monastics.

In any case, I would suggest that the nianfo gongan is in fact a special case: there is something qualitatively different about it that sets it apart from all other gongan used in kanhua Chan. Nianfo as a practice is based the actual recitation of the phrase Namo Emitofo, and as such it is clearly an oral practice even if it is also be recited silently in one’s mind. Kanhua practice in its traditional form, on the other hand, can be understood to be a literary practice but hardly an oral one. The use of the nianfo gongan thus clearly introduces an aspect of orality into kanhua Chan. In Zhiche’s sermon about the nianfo gongan above, Zhuhong cites him as instructing practitioners to call the Buddha’s name out loud (nianfo yisheng) and then investigate where the sound is coming from and who is doing the reciting. Similarly, Dufeng Jishan, in a section different from the one cited above, also instructs practitioners to invoke the Buddha several times:

Invoke the Buddha’s name three, five, or seven times and then retreat and turn back [on yourself] the question “who is reciting the name of the Buddha?”—“who is reciting the name of the Buddha?”—“ultimately, who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” Hüe!48

41 Yiü, The Renewal of Buddhism, 54, states that Chushi Fanqi (1296–1370) was the first to use the nianfo gongan in the Ming. However, this is based on a mix-up with the later master Chushan Shaoqi (1403–73).
42 Several different sets of dates can be found in the scholarly literature for Dufeng Jishan (d. 1482) and other Ming-dynasty Buddhist masters. I follow the dates suggested in Chen Yuan, Shishi yinian lu.
43 See Yiü, The Renewal of Buddhism, 54–56, for translations of passages from both these masters, although the passages by Chushan Shaoqi are wrongly ascribed to Chushi Fanqi.
45 X84, no. 1581, 370, a7–19 // Z 2B:17, 213, c7–d1 // R144, 426, a7–b1; following the translation in Yiü, The Renewal of Buddhism, 55 (passage here attributed to Chushi Fanqi).
46 For more discussion of this see his Tianzhen Dufeng Shan Chanshi yaoyu, J25, no. B159, 137, b15–16.
47 See Morten Schlüter, “Keyword Meditation in Chinese Zen.”
The notion that employing the *nianfo gongan* in *kanhua* Chan requires, at least initially, the recitation of it, seems to have become a standard one. Later in the Ming, the famous Hanshan Deqing (1546–1623) wrote:

Slowly bring up the one sound of the Buddha [recitation] and focus on observing from where this one sound of the Buddha ultimately arises. When you have recited it five or seven times, deluded thoughts will not appear [anymore]. Again you must go into a feeling of doubt, and examine who, ultimately, is reciting the name of the Buddha? 49

I think we have to conclude from this preliminary evidence that *kanhua* Chan meditation practice using the *nianfo gongan* in some ways is quite different from the practice done with other *gongan*, in that it arises out of an oral practice and that this element of orality is crucial to it. 50

**Yunqi Zhuhong and the Nianfo Gongan**

Yunqi Zhuhong, perhaps the most famous Buddhist master of the Ming, wrote much about the *nianfo gongan* and the relationship between Pure Land and Chan. His influence on the subsequent development of Buddhism in China was great, and his legacy is still very much discernable. Although it seems Zhuhong did not hold a formal Chan lineage, he has been generally embraced as a great Chan master by the later tradition. From his writings emerges an interesting rationale that may have profoundly influenced later Chinese conceptions of the relationships among Pure Land practice, Chan, and the *nianfo gongan*.

In some contexts Zhuhong seems much like Zhiche and other earlier Chan masters who advocated the use of the *nianfo gongan* as one of several *gongan* that could be used in *kanhua* Chan. Consider, e.g., this passage where Zhuhong is commenting on an (apocryphal) story about Tang master Huangbo Xiyun advocating the use of the dog *gongan* in *kanhua* Chan: 51

When later generations talk about *gongan*, this [dog *gongan*] is the one that is understood to be the beginning of *kanhua* Chan. However, there is no need to be so attached to the word “no/wu.” Whether it is the word “wu,” or “the myriad things,” or “Mt. Sumeru,” or “completely dead and cremated,” or investigating the recitation of the name of the Buddha, they all follow the standard of “guarding the one” and have enlightenment as the goal. The focus of the doubt is not the same, but as for enlightenment there is no difference. 52

Here Zhuhong seems to be endorsing several different *gongan* to use in *kanhua* Chan, among which the *nianfo gongan* is simply one. Elsewhere, in a letter to a lay follower, Zhuhong specifically equates the *nianfo gongan* with the *gongan* about the myriad things returning to one:

The ancient worthies taught people to contemplate the *huatou* and give rise to a feeling of doubt so that they would attain great enlightenment. They told people to contemplate *huatous* like the “no/wu” or the “myriad things”—there are lots of them. Now, if we examine and compare, then the *gongan* “the myriad things return to one, where does the one return to?” is extremely similar to the “who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” If you can cut down to the place where the “who” is coming from then you will not need to ask others “what does the one return to,” you will yourself understand clearly [having attained enlightenment].

It would seem from this that to Zhuhong various *gongan* were equally efficient in *kanhua* Chan practice. However, Zhuhong makes clear in numerous passages in his writings that, in fact, such is not the case. Thus, in the letter just quoted, Zhuhong also says:

There are many doors to entering the [Buddhist] path, but for going directly and easily to the essence nothing is like *nianfo*. The teaching of *nianfo* saves those with the most superior capabilities at the top and reaches down to the most stupid and dull. It is really the path that penetrates from the highest to the lowest. Do not let vulgar views [of *nianfo* as a practice only for the weak] shake you into doubt... [here follows the quotation above]... The ancients said that *nianfo* practitioners who want to practice Chan should not raise any other *huatous* [than that of the *nianfo gongan*]. Recite the name of the Buddha several times and then trace back the radiance and observe for

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49 Hanshan laoren mengyounj, X73, no. 1456, 495, a1–3 // Z 2:32, 138, b16–18 // R127, 275, b16–18. An unpublished paper by Halvor Eifring alerted me to this passage.
50 Interestingly, it seems this orality was eventually extended to other *gongan* which also would be called out aloud. For a discussion see Schlütter, “Keyword Meditation in Chinese Zen.”
51 The story about Huangbo is sometimes used to argue that *kanhua* Chan has a long history in China, but the story does not appear until after the Song dynasty. See Schlütter, How Zen Became Zen, 114.
52 For “guarding the one,” see Robert Sharf, Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism, 182–83.
53 Changguan cejin, T48, no. 2024, 1098, b6–9.
54 Yunqi fahui, J33, no. B277, 136, b14–17. See also the translation of this passage in J. C. Cleary, Pure Land, Pure Mind, 71.
yourself: who is reciting the name of the Buddha? If you can apply your
mind in this way, without forgetting and without relying on anything, after a
long time you will surely have an awakening.\textsuperscript{55}

In the full letter it becomes clear that Zhuhong chiefly mentions other gongan
to give legitimacy to the nianfo gongan. Being deeply committed to nianfo he is
concerned about the argument that nianfo is a teaching just for those of lesser
capabilities and that it would only be a distraction for a serious Chan practitioner.
Zhuhong wants to make it abundantly clear that this is a practice for everyone
regardless of their abilities. The nianfo gongan is the most suitable gongan for
kanhua meditation because of its association with nianfo practice. In fact, to
Zhuhong, nianfo is in and of itself a practice that can accomplish the same as
kanhua Chan practice:

It is best to simply hold on to the phrase “Emitoufo.” Recite it with all your
heart and all your might, don’t allow a shred of other thought. Then it is just
like the wu/no gongan. But there is no need to raise the wu/no or any other
huatou. Simply engage in nianfo. When you penetrate the nianfo you will
penetrate everything in the world.\textsuperscript{56}

Here Zhuhong is equating the practice of nianfo with kanhua Chan: one can
arrive at great insight and enlightenment through either practice. Therefore,
Zhuhong states, it is enough to simply practice nianfo—presumably because it is
easier. Even the nianfo gongan is unnecessary here. This is a quite startling claim,
and in many other passages Zhuong seems to contradict this when he talks about
the benefits of huatou practice with the nianfo gongan. But elsewhere Zhuhong
explains:

There is an old saying that Chan does not obstruct nianfo and nianfo does
not obstruct Chan. But some have said that one should not practice both.
However, there were also those who did practice Chan together with Pure
Land [naming a series of Buddhist masters]. They were all great masters in
the Chan school who carefully paid attention to Pure Land [practice] without obstructing their Chan [practice]. Therefore we know that although
Chan practitioners with each thought investigate their own original minds,
they are still not in any way hindered from taking vows and vow to be born
in the Land of Great Bliss when their current lives have ended. Why is that?
Even if you have an experience of enlightenment through practicing Chan,

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., J33, no. B277, 136, b12–19.

if you still cannot dwell in the eternal light of calm [wisdom] like all the
Buddhas, and also cannot be like the Arhats who have no further existences,
then when your current body is extinguished you surely will be born [again]
somewhere. Compared to being born into the human world and be close to
an illustrious teacher, is it not much better to be born in a lotus and be close
to Amitābha?\textsuperscript{57}

In essence, Zhuhong is arguing here that even if one has an enlightenment
experience it is still going to be a far cry from really becoming a Buddha or even
an arhat, and so virtually no one escapes rebirth. That being the case, even
serious Chan practitioners should seek rebirth in the Pure Land where they can
receive instruction directly from a Buddha. Elsewhere, Zhuhong affirms his conviction that complete enlightenment in this world is almost impossible:

Nowadays people often like speaking about reaching enlightenment and like
speaking about comprehending life and death. They do not know that in this
world realizing enlightenment is extremely difficult.... A sakṛdāgāmin (once-returner) must still die and be reborn once, how much more so an
ordinary person? The sentient beings in this world must generally all first be
born in the West [Pure Land] and only after that can they attain complete
enlightenment.\textsuperscript{58}

This might seem to undermine the whole rationale for Chan practice. If
complete enlightenment is not truly possible, and if virtually anyone can be
reborn in the Pure Land through nianfo, why bother with Chan meditation at all?
Zhuhong addresses this in a passage where he first admits that those who reject
Chan practice but diligently practice nianfo are still sure to be reborn in the Pure
Land:

But only wishing to preserve this [nianfo] and reject that [Chan practice] is
not right. Now, if those who practice nianfo see their own natures [through
Chan meditation] then that is really a matter of being born into the highest
class [in the Pure Land]. How could there be any worry about them not being
born there?\textsuperscript{59}

So the advantage of practicing Chan and gaining an enlightenment through

Zhuhong, that one will be born into the highest of the nine levels of birth in the Pure Land. This may seem like a small incentive since anyone born into the Pure Land will eventually gain the same benefits, but in Pure Land thought this is commonly considered a very significant difference since those born at the lower levels have to wait for eons before they come into the presence of Amitabha.\(^6^0\)

In Zhuhong’s writings, the Pure Land seems treated like a very real place and so it would appear that Zhuhong upholds a notion of a “western-direction Pure Land,” rather than the “mind-only Pure Land” of usual Chan understanding. However, Zhuhong denies this in a very interesting essay, entitled “It cannot be said that the Pure Land doesn’t exist”:

There are people who talk about mind-only Pure Land, and hold that there is no Pure Land of ultimate bliss outside the ten trillion worlds. The saying about mind-only is originally the words of the scriptures and is perfectly true, not false. But those who quote and rely on this have misunderstood its purport. Now, mind is the same as phenomena. There have never been any phenomena outside the mind. Phenomena are mind, and there is no mind outside of phenomena. Thus phenomena are completely just [a product of the mind]. So why would you firmly grasp mind but reject phenomena? If you dismiss phenomena when you speak of mind then you have not understood mind.... Let me try to ask you: if someone is about to die and hell appears to him, isn’t that mind? Of course it is mind. But does he fall into hell? Of course he falls [into hell]. Now, if he falls into hell then it is clear that it exists. Should the Pure Land be the only thing that is not like that? If your mind manifests hell, then you really fall into hell. If your mind manifests the Pure Land aren’t you really born into the Pure Land?\(^6^1\)

Zhuhong is drawing upon orthodox Yogācāra (weishi, “consciousness only”) teachings that had great currency in Chinese Buddhist thought. Yogācāra philosophy holds that the external world of sentient beings is produced by their karmic consciousness and that all human experience thus can be said to be a product of the mind. So Zhuhong argues that although everything in our phenomenal world is an expression of our minds, we nevertheless experience it as completely real; in fact, this is the reality we live in. Therefore the Pure Land is just as real as anything else in our experiential world, even though it is perfectly correct to say it is all mind-only. This understanding clearly underlies Zhuhong’s whole approach to Buddhist practice, and explains why he insists on Pure Land practice as the only viable path to liberation.

In spite of his rather pessimistic assessment of the prospects of Chan meditators, Zhuhong seems to have been a strong advocate of the \textit{nianfo gongan} throughout his career and he brings it up again and again. There may be several reasons for this. One clearly is that Zhuhong was rather defensive about \textit{nianfo}; he appears to have been arguing against contemporaries who saw it as a practice that was inferior to that of kanhua Chan, and by stressing the tradition of the \textit{nianfo gongan} Zhuhong could argue for the equality of the two (and ultimately assert the superiority of \textit{nianfo}). But Zhuhong also seems genuinely captivated by the power of kanhua Chan, and it is easy to imagine that a dedicated \textit{nianfo} practitioner engaging in Chan practice would find the question “who is reciting the name of the Buddha?” deeply meaningful.

\section*{Concluding Remarks}

The early history of the \textit{nianfo gongan} seems to be one of several attempts to bring \textit{nianfo} practice into harmony with Chan meditation practice, rather than \textit{nianfo} encroaching on Chan, as some scholars have thought. When the mature \textit{nianfo gongan} first was used in kanhua Chan it was understood to function just like any other gongan, such as Zhaozhou’s dog or the myriad-things-return-to-one. One sees the same focus on a single word which functions as the \textit{huatou}, and the all-important focus on doubt. Several Yuan- and Ming-dynasty Chan masters emphasized exactly this similarity and declared the different gongan used in kanhua Chan as functionally equivalent.

On the other hand, it seems clear that in some ways the \textit{nianfo gongan} was qualitatively different from other gongan. Most importantly, practicing kanhua meditation with the \textit{nianfo gongan} involved reciting the \textit{nianfo}. This introduced an element of orality to kanhua practice that seems completely new. There are indications that this element of orality came to influence kanhua meditation in general, so that recitation became used with other gongan as well.

It appears that the \textit{nianfo gongan} achieved a special status at some point in the Ming. No longer simply one gongan among many, it came to be understood by at least some Chan masters as the only truly effective one. The \textit{nianfo gongan} has continued to be seen as a \textit{huatou} of special importance in Chinese kanhua Chan to this day, as evidenced by the quotation by the famous master Xuyun that opened this essay. But why did the \textit{nianfo gongan} gain such dominance?

Partly, it may well have to do with Zhuhong’s rationale that complete enlightenment in this life is not realistically possible and so kanhua practice must be combined with \textit{nianfo} practice. What better way to do this than through the \textit{nianfo gongan}? Its very form assumes that the kanhua-meditation practitioner also practices \textit{nianfo}. Not everyone may have accepted Zhuhong’s argumentation that seemingly collapsed the distinction between a mind-only Pure Land and an

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\begin{itemize}
\item \(^6^0\) See the discussion in Charles B. Jones, “Foundations of Ethics and Practice in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism,” 1–20.
\end{itemize}
actual Western-direction Pure Land. But even for those who did consider enlightenment in this world to be a real possibility, the nianfo gongan could be seen as especially suitable for kanhua practice. Since many—probably most—Chan practitioners through the ages also have practiced nianfo, this gongan functioned to bring together what might in other ways be seen as two disparate kinds of practice, easing any potential tension between the two.

The combination of the oral practice of nianfo and the contemplative practice of kanhua Chan proved to be a powerful mix that has appealed to generations of Buddhist practitioners in China. Rather than seeing this as evidence of degeneration in the Chan tradition, we may understand it as an attempt to overcome the duality between the goal of rebirth in Pure Land versus enlightenment in this world. The actual Western-direction Pure Land. But even for those who did consider enlightenment in this world to be a real possibility, the nianfo gongan could be seen as especially suitable for kanhua practice. Since many—probably most—Chan practitioners through the ages also have practiced nianfo, this gongan functioned to bring together what might in other ways be seen as two disparate kinds of practice, easing any potential tension between the two.

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Acknowledgements This essay originated with a presentation I made at the Conference on Buddhist practitioners in China. Rather than seeing this as "syncretism" and evidence of degeneration in the Chan tradition, we may understand it as an attempt to overcome the duality between the goal of rebirth in Pure Land versus transcendental enlightenment, and the duality of language and oral practice versus wordless insight.

Glossary

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References


Matthew Wilhite

Do Not Say That You Have Forgotten King and Father: Yunqi Zhuhong’s Chan Realism

Abstract This essay examines the late Ming-dynasty Chan master Yunqi Zhuhong’s commentary on the Brahma Net Sutra (Fanwangjing), which it takes up in order to explore his discourse concerning both Chan realism and his ensuing rejection of mainstream Chan gongan rhetoric. The Brahma Net Sutra contains a list of major and minor precepts governing proper morality for monastic and lay Buddhists. Zhuhong’s interpretation of the Twenty-First Minor Precept, which prohibits revenge, offers insight into his sense of political realism regarding the relationship between gradual teachings, provisional truths, and ultimate truth. His interpretation of the Tenth Minor Precept, which prohibits storing weapons, demonstrates his moral realism in contrast to Chan’s traditional use of pedagogical violence. Zhuhong’s realistic discourse, influenced by the teachings of the Buddhist Vinaya as well as by engagement with Confucian ethics, presents an overlooked counter-narrative shift that contrasts with the emphasis on sudden enlightenment and antimonasticism in Chan gongan discourse typical of the Tang and Song dynasties.

Keywords Yunqi Zhuhong, Ming, Brahma Net Sutra, Chan realism, gongan

The Condition of Chan Buddhism in the Ming Dynasty

The Ming dynasty was once seen as a period of decline and stagnation for Buddhist institutions, doctrine, and morality. Therefore, studies of Chan gongan discourse generally focused on the charismatic masters of the Tang dynasty and the lineage-creation and routinization that took place during the Song dynasty. This absence of attention to the Ming was justified in that the literary genres that

1 The best example of this view is still Kenneth Ch’en; Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey. Ch’en spends a mere twenty-one pages on both the Ming and Qing dynasties, characterizing the periods with the chapter title, “Recession and Decline.”

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came to define Chan, such as the histories of lamp-transmission (dengshi), collected sayings (yu hu), and encounter dialogues (ji yuan wenda), all of which influenced the formation of gongan discourse, seemed to have died out during the Ming and reappeared only in the Qing dynasty. Put simply, the Ming has been at times overlooked by Chan scholars because the rhetorical devices and styles that came into existence during the Tang and were formalized during the Song were mostly absent during the Ming. However, a decline of mainstream rhetoric may sometimes reveal the vibrancy of counter-narratives, rather than general intellectual stagnation. It is just such a counter-narrative that this essay examines.

In 1587, the Buddhist monk Yunqi Zhuhong wrote the Fanwangjing xindipin pusajie yishu fayin, a treatise examining both the Brahma Net Sutra (Fanwangjing) and Zhiyi’s earlier Tiantai-school commentary on this scripture. The Brahma Net Sutra contains ten major and forty-eight minor “bodhisattva precepts” that continue to be upheld both by lay and monastic Buddhists in East Asia. In his commentary, Zhuhong rejected the emphasis on sudden enlightenment and ultimate truth that justified antinomian violence often found in gongan rhetoric, and instead he favored what I term “Chan realism,”—which is a novel emulsion of moral and political realism. By moral realism, I refer to the view that there are objective moral truths independent of human thought, culture, and perceptions. Political realism refers to the tradition that stretches from Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War through Hobbes’ Leviathan, and is most clearly expressed by Hans Morgenthaler as an interest in power as a tool to ensure the continued existence of a state or other institution and, thereby, to protect people from the horrors of anarchy. In Zhuhong’s work, we see a commitment both to absolute moral truth and to the continued existence of the Ming state as a protecting entity that could ensure the continued existence of the Buddhist community.

The Buddhist community’s understanding of Zhuhong and his relationship to Chan has long been ambivalent. The eldest son of a prominent family in Hangzhou, Zhuhong pursued a career in government bureaucracy until continued failures to move ahead in the state examination process combined with the deaths of his first wife, son, and both parents led to his taking ordination as a Buddhist monk at the age of 32 in 1566. During his life and after his death, Zhuhong was celebrated as a moral reformer and a leader of the late-Ming revival of Buddhism, activities such as liberating animals. However, in regards to the Chan community, his legacy has been less certain. Later Chan figures, such as Feiyin Tongrong in his Wudeng yantong (The strict transmission of the five Chan schools), relegated Zhuhong to the “lineage unknown” (sifa weixiang) portion of Chan history.

Zhuhong was, thus, kept within the sphere of Chan Buddhism while also being quarantined at its fringes. I posit that one reason for Zhuhong’s troubled relationship with the Chan establishment is his notion of Chan realism and his resulting rejection of gongan rhetoric along with the antinomianism, violence, and absurdist standpoint of mainstream Chan discourse. To demonstrate how Zhuhong’s realism contributed to the sometimes overlooked intellectual vibrancy of Ming Buddhism, I first outline the essential elements of mainstream Chan in relation to Zhuhong’s view of gongans and go on to explore his realism by examining his explanation of the Twenty-First Minor Precept from the Brahma Net Sutra and his political argument in favor of provisional truths and a gradualist approach to cultivating enlightenment. Then, I turn to Zhuhong’s explanation of the Tenth Minor Precept and his moral realist argument against Chan masters’ use of pedagogical violence.

For the sake of clarity, allow me to take a moment to clarify two important terms used above: provisional truth and gradualist approach. Provisional truth refers to the limited, context-dependent truth of the unenlightened rather than the ultimate truth perceived by those who are enlightened. Zhuhong often uses a related term, provisional teachings, to refer to moral systems, such as Confucianism, as well as simpler aspects of Buddhism that fall short of expressing ultimate truth. Though provisional truths are less than perfect, they are seen by some as necessary expedients to lead individuals towards ultimate truth. This approach of using provisional teachings/truths to lead an individual to ultimate truth is the gradualist approach, sometimes referred to as gradualist teachings, spoken of above. The gradualist approach contrasts with the belief, prevalent in mainstream Chan, that a sudden, complete experience of enlightenment is the proper path to enlightenment.

Gongans, Mainstream Chan, and Zhuhong

Mainstream Chan rhetoric is best known for its use of gongans, the strange and absurd anecdotes that stress themes of sudden enlightenment and antinomian

2 Jiang Wu, Enlightenment in Dispute: The Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-Century China, 5–6, 33–42.
3 David O. Brink, Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics, 14.
morality. An example of antinomianism is a famous gongan known as "Nanquan’s Cat." The Chan master Nanquan Puyuan encounters two sets of monks fighting over possession of a cat. Seeing this, Nanquan holds up the animal and declares that if the disciples can demonstrate their enlightenment the cat will live, but if not the cat will be killed. Reduced to silence by the challenge, the monks watch as Nanquan leaves the cat in two, killing it. Later, Nanquan’s disciple Zhaozhou Congshen hears the story from Nanquan. Putting himself in the place of the challenged monks, Zhaozhou removes one of his sandals, places it upon his head, and leaves. Nanquan calls after him, "If you had been there, the cat would have been saved." 6

There are two important hallmarks of Chan gongan rhetoric in the story of "Nanquan’s Cat." First, in Zhaozhou’s seemingly absurd response to the challenge, we see the trope that enlightenment transcends conventional logic and, quite often, goes beyond words altogether. Second, in Nanquan’s killing of a sentient creature, we see the trope that enlightened wisdom transcends even Buddhist conventional morality, leaving us with the antinomian notion that immorality in pursuit or demonstration of enlightenment is, in fact, moral. This extreme rhetoric was typical of mainstream Chan.

I use the term mainstream Chan in order to draw attention to a collection of tropes that became commonplace in Chan discourse, especially since the influence of one particular dharma-descendent of Huieng, namely, Mazu Daoyi. Mazu, in turn, gave rise to a number of influential students, including Baizhang Huaihai, whose dharma-heir Huangbo Xiyun was the master of Linji Yixuan, whose lineage became dominant in the Song dynasty. 7 As a central figure in the development of mainstream Chan rhetoric, Mazu and his disciples stressed the importance of the “ordinary mind” as possessing enlightenment. Ultimate enlightened truth is the true nature of all reality, they posited, including the everyday human mind. It is the human tendency to cling to deluded thought and attachment that separates us from true reality.

Therefore, for Mazu and the Hongzhou school, Chan was not a process of cultivation through meditation, but rather a striving to eliminate delusions and attachments so that one can finally express their original enlightenment. Additionally, the Hongzhou school came to be associated with sudden enlightenment, although it seems Mazu himself did not discuss the matter much. Perhaps most importantly, Mazu and his disciples were crucial to the development of the encounter dialogue as a vital genre within Chan, thus helping to popularize their views regarding sudden enlightenment and inherent Buddha-nature. 8 These early ideas stemming from Mazu found their most ardent and perhaps radical expression within the Linji sect.

The Linji partisan Yang Yi, who was a powerful court literati during the Northern Song dynasty, further advanced his school’s agenda. Yang was made editor of Daoyuan’s Jingde chuandeng lu (Record of the transmission of the lamp compiled in the Jingde era), which was produced in the first decade of the eleventh century and became an important transmission history because it bore the mark of official government sanction. The Jingde chuandeng lu of the first decade of the 1000s was heavily influenced by the Zutangji (Patriarchs’ hall collection) of 952, as evidenced by its adoption of that text’s multi-lineal format and extensive inclusion of encounter dialogues. What sets the Jingde chuandeng lu apart from its predecessor is Yang Yi’s preface. While earlier Chan advocates believed that Chan existed as a parallel co-practice to other forms of Buddhist discipline, Yang Yi’s preface argued for Chan independence as “a special practice outside the teachings” (jiaowai biechuan). 9 The assertion that Chan stood apart from other forms of Buddhism, including the conventional Vinaya, would open the door for the Linji school’s unconventional teachings and practices to enter the mainstream.

Perhaps the most influential Linji partisan was Dahui Zonggao, who, during the twelfth century, championed the use of gongans and the importance of sudden enlightenment. Dahui gained prominence in part due to his vitriolic condemnation of the Caodong lineage’s use of the meditative technique of silent illumination (mozhao). Dahui saw silent illumination as a quietist method that did not generate a climactic moment of sudden enlightenment as was, therefore, not suitable for Chan practitioners. Instead, he emphasized the use of gongans in the abbreviated form of huatou in order to generate the necessary spontaneous breakthrough that allowed enlightenment to be realized. 10

6 One of many English translations can be found in John Daido Loori, ed., Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on the Practice of Zen Koan Interpretation, 253. For original see Taisho Canon, T 51.258a3–7.
During the same time that Dahui was leading the Linji lineage to a rhetorical victory over the Cāodòng lineage, the various encounter dialogues and biographical sketches of Linji were being compiled into a stand-alone work that would help popularize Linji’s idiosyncratic actions and sayings. The Linjiju (Record of Linji) was compiled in 1120 by a member of the Yunmen lineage of Chan, Yuanju Zongyan. The Record details Linji’s use of violence and shouting in his endeavor to reveal to his students their own innate Buddhahood. In no uncertain terms Linji taught that the Buddha was to be found within oneself, not outside, and that sudden and complete enlightenment was the only true form of awakening. Linji rejected scholasticism and a gradualist approach to enlightenment, believing that any gradual path employing provisional truths or methods was false. Moreover, the Record is filled with anecdotes about Linji’s employing physical violence against his students, teachers, and peers, as well as his using deafening shouts that were meant to split open their minds and allow their inherent enlightenment to emerge.11

The Chan discourse that Zhuhong encountered during the Ming was still strongly influenced by the ascendancy of the Linji lineage that had taken place during the Song. In 1600, Zhuhong completed the Changuan cejin,12 which he wrote in order to compile useful quotes and anecdotes to help guide Chan practitioners towards proper study and practice. Zhuhong’s preface warns that the Chan community contains both enlightened and deluded individuals and that the wise members of the community must act as “gate-keepers” to ensure that only those deserving and ready for wisdom gain access to it. With this in mind, the Changuan cejin was compiled as a short and readily accessible guidebook for those on the path to enlightenment to gain guidance from the enlightened masters of the past rather than fall prey to charlatans.13 From his preface, we can see his ambivalence with the Chan community and his concerns over proper versus improper practice.

The Changuan cejin demonstrates that Zhuhong did not reject the use of gongans or the wisdom of past Chan masters. He seems to have embraced the Linji tradition of kanhua or gongan-investigation Chan, as evidenced by his quoting of Dahui Zonggao. Dahui’s quotation in the Changuan cejin criticizes those “who just teach people to stop and rest like dead jackals” and instead stresses the importance of meditating on gongans.14 The fact that Zhuhong embraced gongans as efficacious meditative tools is evidenced through stories from multiple masters who achieved progress toward ultimate enlightenment by focusing on the famous gongan, “Zhaozhou’s Dog,” in which Zhaozhou is asked whether or not a dog possesses Buddha-nature and responds, “No.”15

However, Zhuhong does not wholly align with the Linji school’s view of Chan rhetoric. He deviates from mainstream Chan in one major fashion in the Changuan cejin by stressing the recitation of the name of Amitabha Buddha as the single most efficacious gongan, thereby subordinating gongans derived from encounter dialogues and lamp transmissions to a gongan derived largely from Pure Land practice. In his commentary on Chan masters employing the term “No” from “Zhaozhou’s Dog,” Zhuhong stresses that nianfo, or the recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name, is an equally valid object of meditation in the form of the question, “Who is the one reciting the Buddha-name?”16 Zhuhong seems to be ambivalent towards mainstream Chan by accepting the gongan-investigation method of Dahui, yet focusing on nianfo in a way that avoids an emphasis on the sudden enlightenment and violence emphasized by the Linji tradition.

While one possible (and very worthwhile) explanation for Zhuhong’s emphasis on nianfo as a gongan and his subsequent omission of antinomian Chan rhetoric is that he was a passionate advocate for the joint practice of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism,17 I wish to follow a different path of thought in this essay. I look not to Zhuhong’s Pure Land faith but to his fundamental view of Buddhism as incompatible with mainstream Chan. In the following section, I discuss Zhuhong’s interpretation of the Brahma Net Sutra’s prohibition against revenge. Zhuhong’s interpretation puts him at odds with the Linji emphasis on sudden enlightenment and ultimate truth, as he extols the virtues of gradual cultivation. Zhuhong criticizes the Chan tradition’s use of pedagogical violence by prioritizing the Vinaya over the antinomian morality of enlightened masters. This demonstrates that Zhuhong’s de-emphasis of sudden enlightenment stems from the discourse of realism that puts him at odds with prominent Chan masters of the Tang and Song dynasties.

Revenge and Political Realism

The Twenty-First Minor Precept of the Brahma Net Sutra prohibits revenge using the following language:

A disciple of the Buddha must not, because of anger, answer with anger; nor

12 The Changuan cejin can be found in Yunqi Zhuhong, Lianchi dashi quanji, 1999–2092. Translated in J. C. Cleary, Meditating with Koans.
15 Ibid., 2010–11, 2018–22, 2025, 2030, 2033. For the corresponding translation see Cleary, Meditating with Koans, 30, 38–43, 46, 51, 53.
16 Ibid., 2011, 2041–42, 2055–60. For corresponding translation see Cleary, Meditating with Koans, 31, 62–63, 77–82.
17 Yu, Renewal of Buddhism in China, 29–63.
because of being struck, answer with a strike. If his/her parents, elder brothers, younger brothers, or six relations are killed s/he must not seek revenge. If there is one whose ruler is, because of others, killed, s/he must not seek revenge. Taking life is not in accordance with the filial way.²⁸

The bulk of Zhuhong's commentary supports the prohibition against revenge as formulated in the Brahma Net Sutra and reiterated in Zhiyi's commentary. Both Zhiyi and Zhuhong indicate that while the precept states that one may not "answer with a strike," "because of being struck," neither can one take revenge for the sake of virtue. Zhuhong goes further by referencing the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras in stating that a disciple of the Buddha should not even give rise to ill-will, no matter what harm they must endure.十九 However, Zhuhong problematizes the prohibition against revenge by employing a realist argument that Buddhists should be willing to support those state institutions and morality that allow for Buddhism's continued existence.

The first step in Zhuhong's problematizing of the Twenty-First Minor Precept is in challenging himself with a hypothetical objection to the precept:

The Brahma Net Sutra tells us not to take revenge on an enemy. By that logic one should, unwilling to harm others, sit and look up at the sky with a reckless patience. If that is so, then by following the dharma the human way is abandoned and as the Vinaya prospers the virtues of loyalty and filial piety die.²⁰

Zhuhong's fictional opponent raises the issue that if one does not avenge wrongs done to one's family or one's ruler then one cannot possibly be loyal or filial, and therefore the precept goes against two of the foundational virtues of Chinese culture. Against this hypothetical charge, Zhuhong presents three defenses for Buddhism and the Twenty-First Minor precept.

First, Zhuhong argues that the precept against revenge is more filial than Confucian ritual propriety, which allows for revenge. He begins by noting that revenge spawns further revenge. Moreover, focusing on avenging one's kin, Zhuhong remarks that the ensuing cycle of vengeance only causes loss for both families. He asks his reader how harming the family, the source of life and virtue, could possibly be considered filial.²¹

Second, Zhuhong argues that once one realizes the ultimate truth of Buddhism, gradual moral restrictions, such as revenge, will no longer have any relevance. Specifically, he informs us that in the realm of pure reality, "one cannot discern between what is within or without one's self."²² In other words, in the realm of ultimate truth there is no subject-object dichotomy. There is no individual who kills and there is no individual who is killed. There is only unity and equanimity. While revenge may make sense from a gradualist and provisional perspective, from the standpoint of Buddhism's ultimate truth, revenge itself is a meaningless construct, and its prohibition does not endanger virtue.

However, in his third defense, Zhuhong abandons ultimate truth, embraces the necessity of provisional truth and gradual cultivation, and breaks with Zhiyi's earlier commentary. While Zhiyi had interpreted the Twenty-First Minor Precept as applying to all Buddhists, lay and monastic, Zhuhong instead states, "the original sutra only regulates monastic bodhisattvas, and does not prohibit the ministers and people [from taking revenge]."²³ After declaring that Zhiyi's commentary is incorrect on the issue of to whom the precept applies, Zhuhong goes on to say:

It is true that fear spreads like a fire fueled by wind and enmity produces enmity without end.... [Yet] reason accords with reliance and outwardly [we] are protected by Confucianism and therefore wrongs need not be revenged. When you become a monk, do not say to your family that you have forgotten king and father. If Confucius had accepted the bodhisattva precepts, how could it be that as soon as he had spread his teachings he broke the precepts? If Zhao Dun had taken up the Brahma Net Sutra, how could he have extolled observing the precepts while not fighting his enemies?²⁴

Zhuhong's commentary makes clear that while monastic Buddhists are held to the standard of abstaining from killing and even from giving rise to ill-will, lay Buddhists in some circumstances kill, as outlined by Confucian morality. However, in order to understand exactly what forms of violence are allowed we must look at the two specific examples raised by Zhuhong: Confucius, and Zhao Dun.

Although the Confucian Analects (Lunyu) seem generally sympathetic to non-violence, the sayings of Confucius do support the idea of an armed nation willing and able to support itself. Confucius advocates lengthy training programs to ensure that the commoners of a state would be able to survive an armed conflict. In instances when a traitor killed his ruler, Confucius advocated for the

²² Ibid., 428.
²³ Ibid., 428–29.
²⁴ Ibid., 429.
raising of an army in order to avenge that killing. Moreover, Confucius sided
with those historical figures who had killed for the survival of the state. It is
that viewpoint that links Confucius and Zhao Dun as the two men Zhuhong
references as potential lay precept holders.

Zhao Dun was a minister of the state of Jin whose acts are recorded in the
Zuozhuan. As a minister, he was respected for fixing old regulations, searching
out runaways, and reforming civil and criminal law to ensure that punishments
were in line with the severity of the crime. At the time of the death of Duke Wen
of Jin, his primary heir, Ling, was too young to become Duke. Therefore, the
ministers argued over who should succeed Duke Wen. Zhao Dun recommended
Yong, who had been serving as a minister in the state of Qin, due to his virtuous
qualities. However, another minister, Gu Ji believed that Le would be a better
successor. Zhao Dun disparaged Le’s poor morality and the two ministers
gathered entourages to bring their respective choices back to the state of Jin.
Zhao Dun, in order to guarantee good governance for Jin and, thereby, preserve
the state, had Le killed before he could reach the borders of Jin.

In light of Zhao Dun’s story it seems that Zhuhong is telling us that lay
Buddhists may kill if it serves the survival of the state. Zhuhong’s statement that
Buddhism is “outwardly protected” by this shows his understanding that the
Ming state, which protected Buddhism and allowed it to thrive, could itself only
survive through using violence to quell both external threats and internal disorder.
This puts Zhuhong in line with Morgenthau’s understanding of political realism.
Zhuhong’s decision to exempt lay Buddhists from the prohibition against revenge
reflects his acknowledgement of the state’s power and his own selfish desire to
employ that power to protect the Chinese Buddhist community. A strict moral
realist would have held the Brahma Net Sutra’s rejection of violence above any
concern for the protection of the community. Zhuhong instead prioritizes the
survival of the community above moral realism. In doing so he also emphasizes
the importance of gradual teachings (Confucianism) over the ultimate truth of
Buddhism that he had outlined. As such, his political realism is incompatible
with mainstream Chan rhetoric based on sudden enlightenment.

Pedagogical Violence and Moral Realism

The Tenth Minor Precept in the Brahma Net Sutra prohibits the storage of
weapons. It states the following:

26 James Legge, ed. and trans., The Chinese Classics: With a Translation, Critical and
Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes, 243–45.

Yunqi Zhuhong’s Chan Realism

A disciple of the Buddha must not store any swords, staves, bows, arrows,
spears, axes or other implements of battle. They must also not store even
one net or other implement for taking life. Even if the bodhisattva’s parents
are killed, s/he will not seek revenge, how much more will they not take the
life of a sentient creature. If s/he does store a weapon, s/he has committed a
light offense.

Zhuhong interprets this precept as applying equally to both monastic and lay
Buddhists, but also makes clear that rulers may store weapons, as armed soldiers
are required for the defense of the nation. However, Zhuhong does argue that
civilians, even non-Buddhists, should not store weapons. As for the prohibition
of hunting implements, Zhuhong argues that no one, Buddhist or non-Buddhist,
common or noble, should injure or kill an animal.

The issue of owning weapons would seem to be resolved if it were not for the
 reappearance of Zhuhong’s imaginary opponent who problematizes the precept
by provoking the following exchange:

Question: Deshan’s staff and Shigong’s bow, do these not go against the
precept and give rise to evil? Answer: Those are a blessed staff that
preserves life and a divine bow that prevents death. How could they be
weapons? [However,] if among those within [the Buddhist community] who
are without accomplishment and those outside [the Buddhist community]
who study with empty heads, one who is blind violently strikes with a staff
or one who is deluded confusedly raises a bow and falsely discusses wisdom
then, doubting the enlightenment of those who have come before and fixed
the Vinaya and clarified the texts, they obtain sin without limit.

In this exchange Zhuhong upholds the correctness of the Tang dynasty Chan
masters Deshan Xuanjian and Shigong Huizang, while simultaneously deriding
those within and without the Buddhist community who imitate their practices and,
thereby, violate the Vinaya.

Deshan and Shigong are early sources for the “blows” component of the
“blows and shouts” that are identified with Linji Chan. Deshan was a disciple of
Longtan Chongxin, who had initially been a student of the Vinaya and Diamond
Sutra and set out to argue against practitioners of Chan. However, Deshan was
converted by Longtan and became famous for striking his students with a staff.
Shigong made his living as a hunter, pursuing deer with a bow and arrow. One

27 Brahma Net Sutra, T1484.24.1005c.
29 Ibid., 378–79.
day, while out hunting, Shigong came upon Mazu Daoyi and was quickly converted to Chan. As a teacher, Shigong would lead his students around by their noses and again took up his bow and arrow, using it to test the mettle of his students.31

Both Deshan and Shigong ended up connected to Linji Chan discourse due to the content of the Record of Linji. Linji asserts that Shigong is one of the primary sources of his dharma, while Deshan is presented in an ambivalent position as one of Linji’s peers. Linji expresses skepticism regarding Deshan and his methods, and both employ violence against each other when they meet. However, it is telling that Linji sends students to test Deshan and he himself attends one of Deshan’s teaching sessions. Regardless of Linji’s possible suspicion of Deshan, the phrase “Linji’s shout and Deshan’s stick” would go on to become common in the Chan community.32

While Zhuhong defends Deshan and Shigong by saying that they did not transgress the precept, he offers a moral realist argument against anyone imitating the two Chan masters. In Zhuhong’s words, one who imitates the two Tang masters by wielding weapons against others transgresses the Vinaya and, therefore, clearly must doubt the enlightenment of those who have written and clarified the Vinaya. While Zhuhong placed the protection of the Buddhist community above the Vinaya in his commentary on the Twenty-First Minor Precept, here he places the Vinaya above the power of pedagogical violence. In order to understand Zhuhong’s view of the Vinaya’s power, it is worth digressing to the issue of animal sacrifices.

In his discussion of the First Major Precept, which prohibits killing, Zhuhong’s hypothetical opponent reminds him of the long tradition of rulers who sacrificed animals and used the meat to nourish ministers and worthies. He then goes on to ask Zhuhong how a ruler could adequately govern while suppressing the killing of animals. Zhuhong answers as follows:

It is only considered a transgression when a person is killed and, therefore, the above-mentioned execution of animals is obeyed. However, what crime have animals committed that they are taken to the execution grounds? Moreover, if we can be honest about what the gods enjoy, there was no harm in the Spring sacrifice, which used green and sweet vegetables and water. Must we then use bulls and other animals in our sacrifices? Because the Buddha-dharma has not yet entered into China’s provisional teachings, how can [one who] carries out provisional teachings follow the eternal dharma?

Zhuhong argues against the use of animal sacrifices in state rituals and ancestral worship. He supports this argument by referring to the Spring sacrifice of the Xia and Shang dynasties, which used vegetables and water rather than animal offerings. He goes on to reference the Buddhist-convert Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty in order to show that proper ritual propriety (li) can be harmonized with the Buddhist dharma. Emperor Wu had banned meat and wine from the imperial household in 511, and in 517 outlawed the use of living creatures for medicinal or sacrificial reasons by instead advocating for the use of flour, fruits, and vegetables.34

Zhuhong’s argument is that the Vinaya has the power to rectify the Chinese state. While upholding the rituals and sacrifices that had legitimized the state for millennia, he argues that only by allowing the Buddhist Vinaya to dictate the specifics of those rituals can the provisional truths of ritual propriety be brought in line with the ultimate and eternal truth of the Buddhist dharma. Likewise, Zhuhong does not critique Chan lineage, with its claims to a mind-to-mind transmission of a unique non-textual dharma. However, he does feel that Chan must, like state rituals, be guided by the Vinaya. He does not question the enlightenment of Deshan and Shigong but does strongly condemn any who would imitate them.

For Zhuhong, the Vinaya contains moral truth that can either be rejected in favor of the provisional morality of Confucian ritual propriety or embraced so that all activities are brought in line with the one true, eternal dharma. His moral realism led him to become a reformer who criticized both non-Buddhist and Buddhist deviations from the Vinaya. While his criticism of animal sacrifices may have ruffled feathers among court literati, his condemnation of blows and shouts was thoroughly incompatible with mainstream Chan.

**Conclusion**

Zhuhong’s interpretation of the Brahma Net Sutra rejects the antinomian and pedagogical violence that is the mainstay of mainstream Chan rhetoric and practice, as seen in the gongan of “Nanquan’s Cat” as well as the Record of Linji, in favor of a new realist approach to Chan. Zhuhong’s Chan realism is comprised of the uneasy emulsion of moral and political realism. On the one hand, Zhuhong

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33 Yunqi Zhuhong, “Fanwangjing xindipin,” 252.

is an ardent defender of the Vinaya, as a moral reformer who sees in Buddhism the ability to rectify all of Chinese society. He calls for non-Buddhists and Buddhists alike to conform to the moral dictates of the Vinaya. At the same time, Zhuhong allows for lay Buddhists to engage in violence guided by Confucian morality. He does not justify this allowance in moral terms, but in political terms. Confucian violence allows the state to protect the Buddhist community from external invaders and internal turmoil. Therefore, the existence of the Buddhist community overrides moral purity. These two seemingly incompatible viewpoints are expressed in the same document written during the Wanli era (1572–1620) of the Ming dynasty.

Both his moral and political realism put Zhuhong at odds with the mainstream Chan tropes that define gongan rhetoric. In his defense of Confucian morality as the defender of Buddhism, he characterizes Confucianism as gradual teachings. His emphasis on gradualism over the ultimate (or sudden) teachings that would prohibit the killing necessary to defend the state is the exact opposite of mainstream Chan’s denigration of the gradualist approach. In his criticism of blows and shouts both within and without the Buddhist community, Zhuhong attacks centuries of established pedagogical violence in the Chan establishment. Here, the anything-goes approach to cultivating sudden enlightenment so often celebrated in gongan discourse is shown to be morally inappropriate. If we understand mainstream Chan to be characterized by an emphasis on sudden enlightenment and ultimate truth over gradual teachings as well as an embrace of violence used on a rhetorical level, then Zhuhong cannot be understood as anything other than a critic of mainstream Chan.

Given this state of affairs, we might expect Zhuhong to be seen as an outsider, perhaps even a heretic, by the Chan community. Instead, Zhuhong is included in Chan transmission histories, even though he cannot be fit into an established lineage. Moreover, we may expect the wider Buddhist community to condemn Zhuhong for his concessions regarding violence, yet he was famous in his lifetime and afterwards for being a moral reformer. Why is this the case?

I cannot explain why Zhuhong was able to combine moral and political realism while still being embraced by both the Chan and larger Buddhist communities. However, I can offer some explanation as to why we do not yet have an answer to this intriguing riddle. Although Zhuhong was a prolific author, very little of his works have been translated. I argue that the very reason that Zhuhong is worth examining at length is the same reason why scholars have generally overlooked him. The study of Ming-dynasty Buddhism and of Chan, in particular, is still recovering from an old stigma that saw it as a non-event defined by the perceived stagnation of traditional Buddhist institutions, literary genres, and practices. However, the works of Timothy Brook, Joanna F. Handlin Smith, Chün-fang Yü, and others has shown that the Ming gave rise to a new prominence for lay Buddhist societies as well as an evolving relationship between government and non-government literati and Buddhist figures. Both of these factors have shaped Buddhism into its transition to modernity and still exert tremendous influence today. Yet, some scholars of Chan gongan discourse still ignore Ming Buddhism because its novelty is mistaken for decline.

We must remember that decline is relative. Decline in mainstream rhetoric makes counter-narratives more apparent. Institutional degeneration can give rise to ingenuity and invention. Zhuhong’s Chan realism is one small example of Ming Buddhist innovation. However, in order to recognize these innovations we must allow ourselves to stop using mainstream rhetoric as definitive. Once we acknowledge Chan realism as a legitimate counter-narrative rather than a symptom of decline, we can begin asking questions that will unmask the innovations of Ming Buddhism and their implications for modern Buddhism. In order to fully understand the use and importance of gongans, we need to remain open to the arguments of Chan thinkers such as Zhuhong, who were critical of their contents.

Glossary

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<tr>
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35 These works include Karl Friedrich Neumann’s *The Catechism of the Shamans* (1831) as well as J. C. Cleary’s *Meditating with Koans* (1992) and Cleary’s *Pure Land, Pure Mind* (1994), which represent the bulk of English translations of Zhuhong’s works. More telling is the fact that Chün-fang Yü’s *The Renewal of Buddhism in China* (1981) remains the only book-length treatment of Zhuhong in the English language.

36 Timothy Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China*.

37 Joanna F. Handlin Smith, “Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ch’ing,” 309–37.
References


