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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

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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/kōan* 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 *huaou* 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 (*jiyuan wenda*) 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 *Biyuanlu* (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 *Biyuanlu* 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 Schlütter, “‘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. Schlütter 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 *Biyuanlu*, 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.

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