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*Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record:
Sharpening a Sword at the Dragon Gate*

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A Review of *Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty
in the Blue Cliff Record:
Sharpening a Sword at the Dragon Gate*

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Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record: Sharpening a Sword at the Dragon Gate.
By Steven Heine. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, ISBN 978-0-19-939776-1
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back).

Over the last three decades, Steven Heine has maintained a constant presence at the intellectual forefront of Chan/Zen, and more broadly of East Asian Buddhist, studies. Given that he has published over a dozen monographs and as many edited collections, not to mention scores of scholarly articles, dealing mainly with Chinese and Japanese Chan/Zen in its historical, philosophical, and literary dimensions, it should come as no surprise that Heine's latest monograph, *Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record: Sharpening a Sword at the Dragon Gate*, will prove required reading for anyone studying not only the *Record* itself, but also a wide range of related topics in Chan/Zen/Seon studies, embracing the manifold histories of textual, doctrinal, and practical transmissions and

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transformations from Song-dynasty China to later eras in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Buddhism.

Heine's book is centrally concerned with the *Blue Cliff Record* 碧巖錄 (C. *Biyānlù*, J. *Hekiganroku*), a collection of one hundred *gongan/kōan* 公案 cases and commentaries compiled and composed by Xuedou Chongxian 雪竇重顯 (980-1052) and Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 (1063-1135), and long celebrated, as Heine notes, as the “premier work of the Chan school” (1). The opening sentence explicitly states that Heine’s “aim in this book is to provide a critical textual and innovative discursive analysis . . . of the inventive rhetorical style and its intimate relation to the fundamental religious message of the *Blue Cliff Record*” (1). The constructive aspect of Heine’s endeavor centers upon formulating a hermeneutic of the *Record* founded upon the principle of uncertainty. This principle, which Heine advances as “the key to undergoing spiritual realization” (12) as per the *Record*, is variously defined as, for example, “a resourceful approach to discourse that is characterized by fundamental ambiguity and purposeful inconclusiveness” (1), “a diversion, inversion, or subversion that epitomizes upending fetters and, thereby, gaining liberation from conventional views by virtue of the Chan master’s facility with utilizing diverse sorts of discursive devices” (34), and “a spiritual condition of upholding and perpetuating the interior illumination of the ancestors gained through undergoing experiential upheavals and reversals” (38).

Heine’s first chapter, entitled “Prolegomenon to a New Hermeneutic,” is primarily devoted to making a case for “uncertainty as an innovative interpretive tool for deconstructing each and every standpoint” (12). In the course of this chapter, Heine provides a preliminary introduction to many of the themes that will occupy him for the rest of the book, including the content and structure of the *Record* itself; the background to and complicated history of its composition, destruction, and rehabilitation; and the influence it exerted on later Buddhist compositions throughout East Asia.

Heine's interpretation of the *Record* in terms of uncertainty relies upon a close reading of the text as a structurally multi-layered, literarily poly-morphous, and authorially dual-composed whole. It is in Chapter 2, concerned with "Textual Formation in Historical and Rhetorical Contexts," that this reading first gets fleshed out. As in the rest of the book, Heine alternates here between historical exposition and literary hermeneutics, on the understanding that his interpretive goal can and will be buttressed through substantiation of its historical validity. Thus, Heine initially catalogues and evaluates related earlier texts from all "Five Houses" of Chan and beyond, including encounter dialogues, transmission of the lamp texts, poetry collections, and pre-Buddhist Chinese literary and religio-philosophical writings. Heine uses this material to then detail how Yuanwu's comments on Xuedou's base text resulted in what he describes as "a baroque seven-layer style of commentary" (70) comprised of the main case 本則 and verse 頌 by Xuedou together with introduction 垂示, case-capping phrase 著語, case evaluative remark 本則評唱, verse capping phrase 著語, and verse evaluative remark 頌評唱 by Yuanwu. Heine proceeds to focus on Yuanwu's *pingchang* 評唱 comments, a term which ordinarily refers straightforwardly to prose as opposed to poetic remarks, but which Heine uses to suggest "the entire inventive commentarial style of Yuanwu" (72); a "harmonetics" (73) by means of which Yuanwu creatively interacts with Xuedou's remarks. It merits mentioning here that, through Heine's nuanced and detailed expositions of the *pingchang* commentarial method, Yuanwu emerges as the central figure—and a truly creative writer and profound thinker—of both this chapter and the book as a whole. A section on "Uncertainty as a Model of Self-Realization" follows, in which Heine argues that, rather than positing either a literary 文字 or nonliterary 無字 stance (as per standard typologies), the *Record's* main concern is in aiding awakening through "breakthrough instances that create a radical turnabout at the spur of the moment" (78), the components of which experience are then listed. The chapter concludes with an unfortunately brief list of what Heine considers the five main elements of "the Song worldview that informed

the composition of Chan gongan commentaries” (85), and an attempt to find resonances of *Blue Cliff Record*-style uncertainty in contemporary Western culture. This last section, which mentions figures as disparate as Werner Heisenberg, Richard Schell, John Keats, and James Joyce among others, may well prove divisive among readers: Those familiar with Heine’s forays into such territory (he has authored a monograph called *Bargainin’ for Salvation: Bob Dylan, A Zen Master?*) will doubtless find such zooming-out from the Chan context welcome, while those suspicious of cross-cultural comparative work in the study of religion will grumble at the absence of any theoretical framework or enough detail to substantiate the claims made in a section which is in any case altogether tangential to the arguments of the book as a whole.

Heine’s constructive project in Chapters 1 and 2 is intimately related to his critical aim of demonstrating the untenability of what he identifies as the five current approaches to theorizing Yuanwu’s relations to his predecessor Xuedou and successor Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089-1163). These are listed on 92 and critiqued in the remainder of the book: The “lettered Chan thesis” and “prose preference thesis” in Chapter 3 on 98-115 and 115-127 respectively, the “stepping stone thesis” and “precursor status thesis” in Chapter 4 on 149-157 and 157-167 respectively, and the “diminishing impact thesis” in Chapter 6 (223-258). Heine characterizes all of these standpoints as “one-sided” (93) insofar as they err toward seeing Yuanwu as aligned with one or other of the “literary” or “anti-literary” factions within Chan. Instead, Heine examines Yuanwu’s *pingchang* method of prose and poetic commentary to argue that Yuanwu is both aware of the dangers of discourse as a hindrance to enlightenment and consummately able to deploy literary means as an aid toward it. As such, “Yuanwu seeks to carve out a middle position between naïve affirmation and stubborn rejection of literary Chan” (94).

Chapters 3 and 4 elaborate on this thesis through study of Yuanwu in relation to Xuedou and Dahui respectively. Thus, Chapter 3 on “Yuanwu in His Own Write Vis-à-Vis Xuedou” charts the Song and pre-

Song literary and philosophical terrain within which Xuedou, and Yuanwu following him, wrote. Heine deflates the “lettered Chan thesis” (according to which Yuanwu is said to embrace literature unproblematically and thereby align himself with Xuedou as against Dahui) through study of Xuedou’s and Yuanwu’s rhetorical approaches as per selected passages, all with an eye to demonstrating that “the primary focus of the *Blue Cliff Record* is on edification in regard to realizing enlightenment rather than erudition based on literary flair” (98). Heine then turns to a critique of the “prose preference thesis” (according to which Yuanwu is said to move the emphasis of the text toward prose as against poetry), arguing that “for Yuanwu poetic and prose approaches to gongan commentary are compatible and reinforcing” (43).

Chapter 4 on “Yuanwu in His Own Write Vis-à-Vis Dahui” is concerned with Yuanwu’s compositions in the *Record* in light of his disciple Dahui’s supposed burning of the text around 1140. Heine begins by charting “the historical and ideological (dis)connections between Yuanwu and Dahui” (128) through study of both the main textual sources describing (and in some cases justifying) Dahui’s action, and the intellectual development of Dahui himself in relation to his master Yuanwu. With this as preamble, Heine argues that the “stepping stone thesis” (according to which Yuanwu is said to move toward but not fully achieve the minimalism espoused by the mature Dahui) “is overshadowed by contrary evidence demonstrating significant differences between the two thinkers” (153). The “precursor status thesis” (according to which Yuanwu is said to anticipate, even embrace, Dahui’s position as the logical consequence of his own) is rejected on similar grounds, such that “a careful analysis of the rhetorical structures of their respective works for the most part shows a significant disparity between approaches” (158). Chapter 4 ends with a section of “Further Reflections” as to Yuanwu’s relation to Xuedou and Dahui in which Heine proposes three general conclusions. Briefly put, these are, firstly, that Yuanwu’s relationship to these other thinkers, themselves complex, is complex; that Yuanwu’s position on literature is ambivalent; and that (in tension with both this

last claim and with Heine's earlier rejection of Yuanwu as a "stepping stone" or a "precursor" to Dahui) Yuanwu largely shares Dahui's misgivings as to the soteriological efficacy of linguistic formulations.

Chapter 5, on "Case Studies of Representative Gong'an," suspends Heine's critical project in favor of further analyses of Yuanwu's commentarial strategies. In the opening section, Heine rehearses his reading in terms of uncertainty (also referred to here through terms such as vagueness, inconclusiveness, and ambiguity) through a series of brief comments on cases culled liberally from throughout the *Record*. The rest of the chapter is then concerned with "examining how Xuedou and Yuanwu reacted to diversity and disparity within Chan" (188), and is structured according to a word-play method familiar to readers of Heine's corpus. Thus, Heine divides the "three commentarial components used to construct the rhetoric of uncertainty in the *Blue Cliff Record*" (188) he identifies here in terms of (1) an informative and formative foundational level; (2) a reformative and performative transitional level; and (3) a transformative and deformative transcendent level.

The final chapter, on "Enduring Legacy in Relation to Textual Controversies," is designed to function as a substantial refutation of what Heine earlier identified as the "diminishing impact thesis," according to which the *Blue Cliff Record* is said to have "quickly faded in significance, almost never to be duplicated or followed again" (223). To buttress his own position (viz., that the Yuanwu-style *pingchang* method of evaluative reaction "not only did not die out but was also sustained during all developmental stages of the gong'an tradition" (225) in China, Japan, and Korea), Heine draws on myriad textual sources. These range from "Early Emulations" (228-238) of the *Record* in Song-, Yuan-, and Ming-dynasty China, Goryeo-era Korea, and Kamakura-period Japan; "Medieval Applications" (238-241) in Muromachi-era Japanese fine arts (temple gardens, Noh theater, and poetry); "Edo Appropriations" (241-243) in the form of *pingchang*-style commentaries on the *Record* itself as well as both gong'an collections and haiku poems inspired by it; and

“Modern Adaptations” (243-245) in a 20th-century Japanese novel, modern Chinese and Japanese scholarship, and a contemporary Western recreation of Yuanwu’s rhetorical style. The chapter concludes with a foray into the question of the *Record*’s transmission to Japan, with particular attention to the *One Night Blue Cliff* 一夜碧岩 purportedly brought to Japan by Eihei Dōgen 永平道元 (1200-1253).

The book concludes with several end matters. First among these are four appendices: (1) a detailed “Blue Cliff Record *Lineage Chart*” which provides (what the reader is left to infer are) the *Record* case numbers in which the mentioned figures occur and their name in Chinese characters but not their dates; (2) a list of “Blue Cliff Record *Cases with Notes*” which lists the 100 cases in order together with the dialogue participants and terse notes as to who, if anyone, composed an introduction or notes; (3) a list of “Blue Cliff Record *Cases in Other Chan/Zen Texts*,” specifically the *Record of Serenity* 從容錄 by Wansong Xingxiu 萬松行秀 (1166-1246) and the *300 Cases* 正法眼三百則 and *Verse Comments* from the *Extensive Record* 真字正法眼藏 by Dōgen; and (4) “*Timelines*” of Yuanwu and Xuedou. Following this are reference “*Notes*”; a “*Sino-Japanese Glossary*” of important terms, individuals, and texts; “*Bibliography*”; and “*Index*.” Almost two dozen photographs, maps, textual reproductions, tables, and timelines appear throughout the volume.

Helpfully, the original Chinese text is consistently reproduced in citations, though the occasional Sanskrit terms mentioned are rendered without diacritics (thus, for example, “*dharmakāya*” is rendered “*dharmakaya*,” and “*kleśa*” is rendered “*klesa*”). Unfortunately, however, the book as a whole is marred by dozens of copy-editing errors, including straightforward typographical mistakes (e.g., “618906” for the dates of the Tang dynasty, or “Daosim” for Daoism), wrong transliterations (e.g. “*pushou*” instead of *pushuo* for 普說, or “*tutishen*” instead of *tudishen* for 土地神), and other Chinese language related errors (e.g., “*範林間錄*” instead of 林間錄 for the *Linjianlu*, or “*四家評唱*” instead of 四家評唱錄 for the *Sijia Pingchanglu*), among others. Though not as numerous as in

some other recent publications from major scholarly presses, such production errors are disappointing from Oxford University Press, and do vitiate one's reading enjoyment particularly in the latter half of the book. I mention them here in the hope that they may be rectified in any future edition.

In conclusion, this is an important and innovative literary, philosophical, and historical study of the *Blue Cliff Record*, and thus—given the work's importance—by extension of Chan/Zen writing, thought, and practice in China, Japan, and—to a lesser extent—Korea over the last thousand years. Throughout the book, Heine's truly impressive erudition on the topic is evinced above all by the sheer mastery with which he handles primary and secondary sources composed in diverse languages, cultures, and epochs. Heine seems to have read everything. He couples an intimate knowledge of the base text to thorough familiarity with the myriad prefaces, postfaces, and paratexts composed around it; the gongan and poetry collections inspired by it; and the several centuries of commentarial and scholarly work relating to it in Chinese, Japanese, and, more recently, European languages. Although some of the scholars critiqued by Heine will doubtless disagree with his depiction of their views and/or his interpretation of the text, there can be no denying that his espousal of uncertainty as a soteriologically oriented rhetorical strategy in Chan works such as the *Record* will inform scholarly debate on the topic for many years to come.