

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics>

Volume 31, 2024

*Xuedou's 100 Odes to Old Cases: A Translation and  
Commentary*

Reviewed by Dale Wright

Occidental College  
[wrightd@oxy.edu](mailto:wrightd@oxy.edu)

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: [vforte@albright.edu](mailto:vforte@albright.edu).



# A Review of *Xuedou's 100 Odes to Old Cases:* *A Translation and Commentary*

Dale Wright <sup>1</sup>

*Xuedou's 100 Odes to Old Cases: A Translation and Commentary.* By Steven Heine. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, ISBN 978-0197676998 (paperback), \$29.95.

With a full translation and an insightful commentary, Steven Heine's *Xuedou's 100 Odes to Old Cases* provides superb access to a seminal Chan Buddhist text that gave rise to a literary and religious tradition unparalleled anywhere in the world. Xuedou Chongxian (980-1052), author of *100 Odes*, served as the fourth abbot of the important Yunmen Chan lineage monastery on Mount Xuedou in Zhejiang Province. Having been given a Confucian and literary upbringing, his conversion to Chan at the age of twenty would meld the elite scholar-official literary tradition of poetry with the direct and earthy character of mountain Chan Buddhism.

As Heine explains in two excellent introductory chapters, Xuedou gathered what he took to be the most spiritually compelling stories from the early Chan tradition, brief narratives which, following Xuedou's pattern of choice, would soon be collected in the most famous *gong'an* (J. *kōan*) texts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Occidental College. David B. and Mary H. Gamble Professor of Religion, Religious Studies, Emeritus. [wrightd@oxy.edu](mailto:wrightd@oxy.edu).

These spiritually potent anecdotes featured Chan masters testing one another in verbal competition, challenging their own monastic disciples to delve deeper into practice in hopes of being illuminated by cryptic expressions of dharma at the highest levels. Encapsulated in compact formats, these accounts of Chan wisdom seemed so important yet so difficult to understand that ongoing commentary would be inevitable. Xuedou's odes, Heine explains, were the beginning of this commentarial tradition in Chan, and supported by the wide-ranging prominence of poetry in medieval China, it would take an impressive variety of poetic forms.

Heine's selection of the word "odes" to translate Xuedou's poetic form is perfect. Beginning in ancient Greece, odes were ceremonial lyric poems of admiration and praise for a person, event, or thing, poems that were elevated in style, formal and exalted in tone, often with irregular meter that jolted listeners into attention. Xuedou's odes (*songgu*), Heine shows us, were brief eulogies for iconic teachers from the past that included the author's own distinct perspective that in some cases purposefully goes beyond the original intention into some new dimension of awakened comprehension. Heine writes: "The effectiveness of the work derives from the way Xuedou combines the formal rules of truncated verse with the irregular meters of folksongs and the cadences of tropes from popular culture . . . which introduces. . . the author's distinctive religious stance" (9).

Xuedou's verse commentary on these 100 old cases was completed in 1038 and in hand-copied circulation shortly thereafter. Heine explains how after the master's death in 1052 disciples gathered the odes together with Xuedou's other written work and extended the range of its circulation out to other monasteries and other scholar-officials interested in the complicated, allusion-oriented indirection of Chan poetry.

In translating Xuedou's *100 Odes* Heine first provides the *gong'an* case that is Xuedou's subject, often including prominent capping phrases from Yuanwu of the Song dynasty and Tianqi of the Ming dynasty along with comments by other Chan and Zen masters, followed by Xuedou's

verse response, all of which is finally “capped” by Heine’s own comments of clarification and elucidation. Included in Heine’s comments are his own critical assessments of recent scholarship from Zhou Yukai and other leading Chinese and Japanese researchers in the field. Each ode, along with these additions, is condensed into roughly two pages of Heine’s book, and they’re brilliantly evocative, challenging reading.

Here’s a brief sample: Xuedou’s Ode 37 is written in response to the “old case” of Panshan’s “Triple World without Things.” The poem runs:

Since the triple world is without things, where can you find  
the mind?  
White clouds create a canopy, streaming waters form a  
lute,  
Playing one or more tunes no one gets.  
After autumn evening rain passes, waters deepen in the  
pond.

Gathering subsequent Chan/Zen comments on this verse, Heine adds: “Tianqi: ‘All emotions are distilled but no principle’s proclaimed, like clear water in autumn. Ah, feel the water!’” To which Heine adds Yuanwu’s praise and comparison to the earlier poet Su Shi who is then linked to Dogen’s famous “Sounds of Valley Streams” and Hakuin’s response that the verse “sings the secret melody of ‘the triple world without things.’” The comments, connections, and resonances between generations creates a masterful environment for Xuedou’s verses and the “old cases” (125-7).

Keep in mind that this tradition of “literary Chan” came to prominence in the Northern Song dynasty when China was by far the most literate culture in the world. In addition to the availability of printing centuries before it was in use elsewhere, the sophisticated social network and customs of Chinese literary culture produced a tradition of ecstatic poetry like no other, including Chan masters uttering and writing expressions of the culture’s deepest insights through commentary on past expressions of insight as an ongoing tradition that lasted for centuries beyond that

point in history and continuing today. Chan monasteries flourished in the Song with the support of the literati class of scholar-officials, and the creative interaction between the two gave rise to this unprecedented treasure of historically layered texts, in many ways parallel to the production of scroll paintings with a lineage of poems and stamps serially added to the original for centuries. Heine's translation of the single most important root text of this historic tradition along with its most famous enlightened responses opens all of this to us in spectacular ways.

One of Heine's most thought-provoking themes is that because Xuedou's *100 Odes* came to be inserted into one of the two most important *gong'an* collections—the *Blue Cliff Record*—as its basis and most important element, the *100 Odes* has rarely been treated as the autonomous text that it originally was. Heine's work brings that transformation into explicit view as a significant historical and literary issue and allows Xuedou's original text to be read and understood both on its own and in juxtaposition to its position of embeddedness in the Chan *gong'an* tradition.

Heine's book is a major contribution to our understanding of Chan and of Chinese literary achievements. It continues the insightful trajectory that was well established in his prior book—*The Chan Rhetoric of Uncertainty in the Blue Cliff Record* and his translations of Chinese poetry going back many years. These contributions clearly establish its author as a leading interpreter of Chinese Chan in addition to his groundbreaking work on Japanese Zen and Zen related poetry. Released by Oxford University Press in both cloth and paperback as well as digital formats, the book includes Chinese text, tables to help facilitate reading, photos, figures, maps, notes, a bibliography, and an index. This important book is abundantly endowed with what Chinese poetry critics call *shenyun*—marvelous resonance!