

Yushanzhu's narrative of awakening as a thematic substrate for the abbot's stylised self-representation.

Dongshan Liangjie: Awakening Through the Sight of His Reflection

Dongshan Liangjie was the nominal founder of the Caodong 曹洞 school of Chan Buddhism, whose hagiography records his sudden awakening occurring alone, sparked by the sight of his reflection while fording a river.³⁴⁸ A hanging scroll painted by Ma Yuan preserves an elaborate pictorial rendition of Dongshan's experience of awakening, augmented by an *encomium* by Empress Yang of the Southern Song (fig 4.1). As Huishu Lee's exemplary study of Empress Yang has shown, the empress made extensive use of paintings commissioned from favoured court artists as sites for calligraphic inscription. Empress Yang's calligraphy was an integral part of her cultural education, and a centrally important tool for her social advancement in court society.³⁴⁹ Through firmly identifying works produced under the empress' earlier moniker of 'Little Sister Yang' 楊妹子, Lee offers an insightful reappraisal of the intertwined political and artistic career of this exceptional woman. Ma's depiction of Dongshan stands out among the empress' impressive oeuvre, as it is one of the earliest surviving examples of an imperial figure adopting a voice of exegetical authority in their inscription upon a Chan figure painting.

Believed to have originally been part of a set of five paintings representing the founding patriarchs of each of Chan's five schools, three extant works depict Dongshan Liangjie, Yunmen Wenyan 雲門文偃 (864 – 949), and Fayuan Wenyi 法眼文益 (885-958) (figs. 4.10-4.11). All works in the set were painted by Ma Yuan, the recipient of an unparalleled degree of patronage from Empress Yang among court painters of the day.³⁵⁰ The upper register of each painting is filled with the recognisable, boldly brushed regular-script calligraphy used by Empress Yang. The empress' hand is similar to the calligraphy of Song emperor Lizong 宋理宗 (1205–

³⁴⁸ For an example of a textual iteration of this narrative, see Dongshan Liangjie's hagiography in, JDCDL j.15, in: T.2076.51: 321, b20-323, c19.

³⁴⁹ Lee 2010, 169

³⁵⁰ For a discussion of these three works within the broader oeuvre of Ma Yuan see: Edwards 2011, 107-22.

64, r. 1224–64) (fig. 4.12) to whom seventeenth Japanese connoisseurs attributed the calligraphy on this scroll.³⁵¹ These imposing calligraphic evocations of an imperial presence are followed by impressions of the Kunning Palace seal of Empress Yang (*kunning zhi gong* 坤寧之宮), the name of her residence at the rear of the palace compound in Lin'an 臨安, modern day Hangzhou 杭州.

Produced in the high value format of hanging scrolls in ink and colours on silk, these paintings were likely given as donations to local temples in a public demonstration of Empress Yang's support for the Chan clerical establishment.³⁵² Alternatively, they may have been hung in Empress Yang's residence, the Kunning Palace, the name of which is impressed on all three extant paintings. Whether donated to a monastery outside of the palace complex, or hung within the confines of an imperial space, the paintings indicate both an interest in and support for the Southern Song Chan clerical establishment. Such patronage and support was a reciprocal affair. After her death in 1233, none other than Wuzhun Shifan authored Empress Yang's liturgy, wherein he praises her as: "Reverently believing in the teachings of the Buddha, profoundly awakened to its principles 崇信佛乘,深悟教理."³⁵³ The second phrase of this excerpt is particularly important, as it credits Empress Yang with religious authority as well as piety, using the term *wu* 悟 to characterise her as awakened.

Huishu Li's analysis of the paintings of Chan prelates credits Empress Yang with a politically savvy use of visual culture to disseminate her public image. Arguing that these works combined the empress' pragmatic self-representation as a powerful patron with an expression of her sincere piety, Li makes an anachronistic distinction between the empress' public projection of power and her personal attitude of devotion. The following analysis proposes an alternative reading of these paintings.

³⁵¹ Nezu Bijutsukan 2004, 145.

³⁵² Lee characterises inscriptions on public works such as the painting of Dongshan as: "... a means to display cultural leadership and patronage, ...the accompanying imperial voice would be public and generic. On the other hand one cannot dismiss the possibility that genuine belief and personal devotion inspired the patronage of such images." Lee 2010, 181.

³⁵³ My translation is adapted from Li's, rendering *wu* 悟 as awakened rather than comprehending, given the specifically Buddhist context of the liturgy as a posthumous commentary on Empress Yang's spiritual achievements by a senior cleric. Earlier translation and discussion in: Edwards 2011, 110; Lee 2010, 181. Original Chinese in: WZHSZDY, j.1: X.1383.70: 277, b12 X.1365.70.

Approaching Empress Yang's inscription as a commentary on Liangjie's sudden awakening, we see how the empress' calligraphy integrates the court aesthetic characteristic of her collaborations with Ma Yuan with exegesis in the inscribed *encomium*. This combines the projection of material power with the appropriation of an interpretive authority conventionally enacted by Chan clerics. As Shifan's liturgy shows, Empress Yang's religious authority was at least posthumously acknowledged by one of the pre-eminent prelates of the day.

Ma Yuan's painting depicts the precise instant that the ninth century master Dongshan Liangjie was awakened, prompted by the sight of his own reflection while fording a stream. The figure and his surroundings occupy only the lower quarter of the scroll, setting the moment of transformation within a defined landscape context enlivened by the subtle use of colour. Dongshan's iconographic centrality of the painting is reinforced by the downward sloping silhouette of a mountain ridge in the mid register of the scroll, which ends directly above the fording patriarch. Ma Yuan has suspended him mid step, the rippling water spreads out around his right leg, while his left leg has just been lowered into the stream and has yet to disturb the water's surface. His progress is implied by the rock behind him and the tuft of reeds ahead. With his weight still on his back foot, the diagonal angle of his staff searches out a footing for his next step. As an image of a patriarch crossing a body of water, the painting prompts immediate comparison with depictions of Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi on a Reed. However, Ma Yuan's painting and Dongshan's hagiography instrumentalises the river itself as a stimulus for awakening, rather than focusing on the protagonists act of transition across it. Contrasted with the already awakened Bodhidharma's thaumaturgical suspension atop the waves Yangzi, Ma Yuan shows Dongshan's legs submerged within the stream.³⁵⁴ Standing in the water, Dongshan's head is angled down to examine the water, frozen in a transformative revelation prompted by the sight of his own reflection.

In the 1004 *Jingde Era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde Chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄), hereafter *Jingde Record*, Dongshan's awakening is the culmination of a teaching offered by the teacher from whom he was to receive *dharma*

³⁵⁴ For a discussion of Bodhidharma's transition see chapter two, pages 77-80.

transmission, Yunyan Tanchang 雲巖曇晟 (782-841). After lengthy journeys between different masters, Dongshan had come to Tancheng to seek a teaching on the *dharma* of insentience (*wuqing* 無情). Yet Tancheng rebuked him, stating that if there is a person come to seek this teaching, then they will not receive it. The account reads as follows:

Thereupon [Dongshan] arrived, and asked Guishan: “What sort of person is able to hear the dharma expounded by non-sentient beings?” Yunyan replied: “The nonsentient are able to hear nonsentient beings expound the dharma”. The master [Dongshan] asked: “Monk, can you hear it?” Yunyan replied: “If I could hear it, then you would not be able to hear the dharma that I expound.” “If this is so, why can I, Liangjie, not hear you, monk, expound the dharma?” Yunyan said: “You cannot [even] hear the dharma that I expound, how much less so the dharma expounded by the nonsentient!” Master [Dongshan] then produced a *gatha* and offered it to Yunyan, it goes:

How amazing, how amazing!

Hard to comprehend that nonsentient beings expound the dharma.

It simply cannot be heard with the ear.

But when sound is heard with the eye, then it is understood.³⁵⁵

既到雲巖問：『無情說法，什麼人得聞？』雲巖曰：『無情說法，無情得聞。』師曰：『和尚聞否？』雲巖曰：『我若聞，汝即不聞吾說法也。』曰：『若恁麼即良价不聞和尚說法也。』雲巖曰：『我說法汝尚不聞，何況無情說法也！』師乃述偈呈雲巖曰：

也大奇，也大奇！

³⁵⁵ This text comes from JDCDL, j.15, T.2076.51: 321, c3-11. My translation draws extensively on William F Powell’s translation of *The Discourse Record of Dongshan Liangjie of Ruizhou* (*Ruizhou Dongshan Chanshi Yulu* 瑞州洞山良价禪師語錄). Powell’s source text was originally part of a collection of discourse records, known as the *Discourse Records of the Five Houses* (五家語錄), compiled in 1632. For Powell’s translation of the equivalent passage see: Powell 1986, 25-6. For Powell’s source text see: RZDSCSYL in: T.1986.47.

無情說法不思議，
若將耳聽終難會，
眼處聞時方得知。

Dongshan then takes his leave, but before he departs ask his master what he should say if long in the future his is asked if it is possible to see the master's true likeness. Yunyan pauses a while, before responding that Dongshan should confirm that it is possible. During his subsequent wanderings after departing from Tancheng's company, Dongshan becomes awakened on the sight of his own reflection. Tancheng subsequently ratifies this delayed, private realisation of the import of his earlier teaching, in a pedagogical context familiar from our earlier analyses of Zhixian and Yushanzhu. In the *Jingde Record*, the moment of Dongshan's awakening is encapsulated in a single line: "Later, on seeing his reflection when crossing a stream, he underwent a great awakening because of the prior instruction 後因過水覩影大悟前旨."³⁵⁶

Ma Yuan focuses on the exact moment of Liangjie was confronted with his own reflection, elaborating a much fuller setting for the pictorial moment than in the *Jingde Record's* textual narrative prototype. This has certain similarities with the Zhixian scene from *Eight Eminent Monks*, which also provides a rich visual context for an instant of non-verbal awakening. However, Ma's composition is sparser, leaving large areas of the painting surface blank. The painting is also experienced simultaneously with the inscription in the upper register. The simultaneous presentation of text and image is in the same mode as Wuzhun Shifan's inscription on the painting of Yushanzhu, rather than presenting image before text as in the Zhixian narrative on the *Eight Eminent Monks* handscroll. However, unlike the Yushanzhu painting, Ma's meticulous depiction of both figure and landscape concurs with the details of setting provided in Empress Yang's inscribed verse. Empress Yang's *encomium*, brushed in an imposing imperial hand, reads as follows:

Carrying a staff to push aside grass, gazing into the wind,

³⁵⁶ JDCDL, j.15, T.2076.51: 321, c19.

He could not but climb mountains, and ford streams,
Unaware that all places he comes to are ditches,
With one glance, head lowered, he delights himself.³⁵⁷

携籐撥草瞻風，未免登山涉水，
不知觸處皆渠，一見低頭自喜。

Empress Yang's *encomium* contextualises the visible actions of Dongshan Liangjie within his life as an ambulant ascetic. The description of his itinerant life frames the instant of spiritual awakening with explicit reference to the geographic features of Ma Yuan's painting: the mountain, the wind blown grass, and the stream itself. The line also borrows from an exchange with Weishan Lingyou prior to Dongshan's awakening. Weishan encourages Dongshan to seek teachings from Yunyan Tancheng, saying: "if you are able to push aside the grass and gaze into the wind, these are the things that are valuable in a disciple 若能撥草瞻風，必為子之所重."³⁵⁸ Empress Yang's verse draws the viewer's attention to the correlation between Weishan's portentous description of the type of student who would learn from Tancheng, and Ma Yuan's depiction of Dongshan's physical circumstances of awakening during his itinerant wanderings.

Through this integrated pictorial and poetic focus on a uniquely Chan moment of sudden enlightenment, Empress Yang enacts a pedagogical role in mediating the viewer's reception of Dongshan's experience of awakening. The crux of her religious commentary comes in the final two lines. As an explanation of the visual narrative, Empress Yang's *encomium* venerates the paradigmatic narrative of this historic exemplar's awakening. As a more generalised exegesis, her commentary highlights the ubiquity of possible experiences of transformative awakening, and the ideal that

³⁵⁷ Translation adapted from: Edwards 2011, 109. In particular I differ from Edward's rendering of the third line, which contains a double entendre based on the word *qu* 渠, which can be both a pronoun and mean a ditch or man made watercourse. Edwards renders the third line as: "Unaware that everywhere he is..." I have chosen to keep the original meaning to make the double entendre of the original Chinese more apparent. Dongshan is being equated to the the mundane manmade watercourses of the everyday, equating Dongshan's world to the everyday world of Chan.

³⁵⁸ JDCDL, j.15, T.2076.51: 321, c3-4.

they are self-generating, non-verbal, and instantaneous. The stream is an image of the ubiquitous presence of possible enlightenment. All one needs to do is look down.

Dongshan's own verse, composed after his transformative confrontation with his own reflection, provided Empress Yang with a canonical precedent for the image of the stream as a signifier for an omnipresent potential to achieve sudden awakening.

Dongshan's *gāthā* verse, reproduced in the *Jingde Record*, includes the following couplet:

The ditch is now the true me, but I now am not the ditch.³⁵⁹

渠今正是我，我今不是渠。

The surface of the stream is an ideal metaphor for Dongshan's consideration of the subjectivity of his personhood, encapsulated in the couplet quoted above. In the first part of the couplet, Dongshan treats his reflected likeness on the water's surface as an accurate reflection of the illusory nature of his subjective self, stating that the stream is analogous to him. However, the insubstantial nature of his selfhood is underscored in the second half of the couplet. Though Dongshan's reflection is seen as a truer form of himself than his physical body, the transience of his selfhood means that he is not analogous to the stream. The equivalence between Dongshan and the stream cannot be mutual because one half of the equation, Dongshan, is an illusion. This verse demonstrates Dongshan's comprehension of Tancheng's earlier teachings, that understanding insentience depends upon a realisation of the illusory nature of the self. Empress Yang appropriates this image in her *encomium*, redeploying the canonical metaphor of Dongshan's verse to clarify the significance of Ma Yuan's visual narrative. Like Tangcheng, and later Dongshan, Empress Yang and Ma Yuan's combination of text and image suggest that the experience of enlightenment is immediate and available everywhere, one just needs to notice it.

³⁵⁹ JDCDL, j.15, T.2076.51: 321, c23. As discussed above the character *qu* can be read as both a ditch, and as a pronoun. Powell translates the same lines as: "He is now no other than myself, But I am not now him." Powell 1986, 28.

Empresses Yang's appropriation of clerical authority is performed on an expansive scale. Three extant commissions are believed to have originally been a set encompassing the founding patriarchs of all five Chan schools, indicating that the empress used these paintings to systematically present a holistic authority over all lineages of Chan Buddhism. The verses appropriate the rhetorical structures of Chan clerical *encomia* in a combination of quotation and commentary. However, the imperial identity of this religious exegete is immediately legible in the visual associations of the bold, regular script of the empress' hand, and the prominent palace seal. Thus, these works are not solely a material manifestation of imperial power through public patronage of religious subject matter. The commentaries Empress Yang offers on the specific details of Dongshan's hagiography contribute to her self-fashioning as an authority on Chan, and not simply a patron of Chan institutions. Collectively, these works and Empress Yang's agency over their subjects provide a platform for a public performance that goes far beyond a generic affirmation of her faith. They enact clerical commentary as an expression of catholic authority.

Conclusions

The immediacy of pictorial expression was ideally suited to capturing the experience of enlightenment claimed to be unique to Chan pedagogical practice. Painting conveyed both the suddenness of awakening, and the non-verbal stimuli that prompted pictorial protagonists' transformations. Sumptuous images provided elaborate contexts for these instants of transformation, such as Ma Yuan's *Dongshan Liangjie Fording a Stream* (fig. 4.1), and the *Eight Eminent Monks* scroll depiction of Xiangyan Zhixian (fig. 4.2). The painters of these works created extensively detailed visual moments, significantly enriching texts' terse narrative prototypes. In the depiction of Yushanzhu attributed to Wuzhun Shifan, in which the monk is inattentive and the donkey alert, we see how ink paintings were able to deploy subtle visual nuances to elucidate and clarify attitudes absent from contemporaneous hagiographies. Compared to painting's holistic and detailed contexts for axial moments of awakening in Chan exemplars' hagiographies, prose accounts of these exact moments appear reductive and perfunctory.

Visual narratives of Chan awakenings significantly overlap with the other two narrative themes discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis. As with images of transition, Chan paintings of awakenings capture isolated subjects in moments of profound, private experience. Like images of interaction, visual narratives of awakenings reinforce the paradigmatic importance of master-disciple relationships. The spiritual transformations depicted in the paintings of awakening are invariably predicated upon a prior teaching. Though the teacher is not present at the moment of awakening, they are frequently called upon to provide a subsequent verification of the transformative experience. While paintings focus on either the exact moment of awakening, or the circumstances close to it, these pedagogical contexts are frequently alluded to in the paintings' accompanying *encomia* and prose inscriptions. In approaching inscribed figure paintings of Chan subjects, text and image should be conceived of as a holistic object. This is especially pertinent when text and image are incorporated into a single surface, as with the paintings of Dongshan and Yushanzhu. In narratives of Chan awakening, image and text balance the non-verbal drama of a moment of enlightenment with a verbal commentary that approximates the nature of that experience through analogy.

The paintings discussed in this chapter, as with works analysed in chapters two and three, were painted and inscribed by diverse range of artists and calligraphers. Senior clerical commentators are the most visible voice within this community, literally imposing their identity onto the painted surface with the impression of their seals and their personalised calligraphic styles. Though the attribution of the works abbots inscribed to a known artist is often problematic, as with the Yushanzhu painting, extant works and the expansive lists of subjects for inscriptions in clerics' discourse records are testament to a vibrant monastic visual culture. However, the presence of imperial inscribers, court artists, and later followers of court artists also shows the significant appeal of Chan themes beyond the confines of the cloister.

Among the three themes of Chan visual narrative discussed in this thesis, only images of awakening represents a mode of action specific to the Chan tradition. Chan visual narratives of transitions and interactions overlap with pictorial narrative themes found across Song and Yuan visual culture. Chan figure paintings of transitions adapt the visual rhetoric used in Buddhist *arhat* iconography, and in secular narratives, to

illustrate the legitimacy of the Chan lineage, focusing on seminal moments in the lives of Chan's putative founders, Bodhidharma and Śākyamuni. Chan visual narratives of interactions deployed figure painting's familiar didactic function to present exemplary models of pedagogical authority, and to construct appealing and engaging narratives that addressed audiences beyond the cloister. Complementing these visual illustrations of legitimacy and authority, paintings of Chan awakenings serve a unique function in demonstrating of the efficacy of Chan teachings. They played a unique role in the visual representation of the Chan tradition, constructing a distinctive identity among the various schools of Chinese Buddhism by showcasing an idiosyncratic mode of awakening.