

# The Chan Mind: Transmission or Mission-Of-Translation? Reading Wright's *Philosophical Meditations*

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Reading (meditatively) Dale Wright's *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* is a delightful experience. If we say Bernard Faure's *Chan Insights and Oversights* has deconstructed the "Suzuki Zen" in the past decades of Western scholarship, Wright's philosophical work has de-romanticized John Blofeld's reading of Huangbo 黃檗, and thus de-mystified the Chan experience and the expression of that experience. Wright's approach is basically hermeneutical—sometimes Gadamerian and sometimes Derridean—which is, perhaps, both the virtue and the limit of his approach. In this article, I shall take several issues in light of Wright's understanding of one mind, the transmission of the mind, and Chan enlightenment. I shall suggest that Wright's arguments on textuality and contextuality *via* the Buddhist concept of "dependent origination" bring in a new horizon of a (Chan) tradition that is both past and present, old and new. Instead of a molding of the Chan enlightenment as the pure mind, or the pure experience, the text and context become the Chan that is molded. The questions I shall ask here are: Will the hermeneutical inquiry (as known as "meditative reading") envisioned by Wright as the author and experienced by me as a reader be the kind of game that a Chan master like Huangbo would like to play along or "go beyond"? How should we "read" the mind of the Chan master without reducing Chan experience to a linguistic-interpretive experience? How should we understand the Chan idea of transcendence and the role of language in Chan experience?

## I. One Mind—"A Primordial Mind"?

One of the issues raised by Wright when he examines the language used by

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the monastic community is the Chan idea of one mind. As we know, “one mind” (*yi xin* 一心), along with “one vehicle” (*yi sheng* 一乘) and “one voice” (*yi yin* 一音), was one of the most popularly Sinicized Mahāyānic terms in the pre- and post-Chan traditions, but also a problematic one because of its kataphatic tone that may sound at odds with the fundamental Buddhist tenets of no essence or no substantiality.<sup>1</sup> Then, what is the meaning of one? What is the meaning of one mind according to the texts of Huangbo, and according to Wright’s reading of Huangbo? Is it identity, wholeness, unity in terms of interconnectedness, unity in terms of origin or something else? Here I am not attempting (nor was Wright, I guess) to retrieve the “original” meaning of “one” defined by Huangbo and Chan Buddhism; instead I am outlining three models of “one” according to Wright’s reading, to show the impossibility of seeking a conceptually coherent meaning of oneness in Huangbo’s Chan.

First, one denotes an “identical wholeness.” This is suggested by Huangbo’s statement that the wholeness is like “one container of element mercury. Although it separates and moves in all directions, it will once again reunite into an identical whole” (Wright 1998: 158). Wright has pointed out that for Huangbo this “identical wholeness” also indicates an idea of unity, that is, a unity between mind and sense objects. For instance, there are several occasions where Huangbo employed the old Buddhist sayings that “mind and objects of the mind are undifferentiated,” and that “mind and world co-arise and depend essentially upon each other” (Wright 1998: 158). It seems that there are two mutually related and yet slightly different arguments: the first statement speaks of identity, and second of mutual dependence. “Identity” here, says Wright, does not mean “sameness” but a kind of “unity” that does not exclude differentiation (Wright 1998: 159). As Wright has realized, the Chan concept of one in terms of unity within differentiation is no big difference from the concept of the Dao understood by Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子 (for instance, Laozi’s concept of “mystical oneness/*xuantong* 玄同” in the *Daodejing* 《道德經》). Here, Wright seems to suggest that Huangbo’s discourse of oneness was inherited from earlier Buddhism and Daoism both culturally and linguistically. However, whether “an identical whole” or “unity” used by Huangbo embraces the Daoist notion of “harmony” is not clear here, and the idea of “mind” that is associated with one in the Chan tradition also seems to suggest more than that explored by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Wright has no problem with Chan’s under-

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the idea of “one mind” is a quite complicated issue. There are many references to the issue of mind, one mind, true self, etc., in East Asian Buddhism that can be traced back to the Tathāgatagarbha tradition. In the case of Chinese Buddhism, one mind was thematized before the arising of Chan Buddhism. Zhiyi 智顛 of Tiantai Buddhism, for instance, used one mind to denote the idea of a pure mind (*jing xin* 淨心) and distinguish it from that of an impure or delusive one (*yi qie xin* 一切心, or *ran xin* 染心). Early Mahāyāna was definitely aware of the issue of mind, but more as delusive mind. For instance, Nāgārjuna does not directly speak of pure mind, much less the identification of the pure mind, with his idea of the middle way. Due to the nature of the article, my discussion is limited to the texts of Huangbo presented in Wright’s book.

standing of interconnectedness, which in fact serves as a theoretical foundation for his contextualist argument throughout the book.

The second model of “one mind” is the idea of “source” or “origin.” In this model, “origin” is connected to the language of “return” in that all interconnected phenomenal appearances go back to the same one origin, that is, a natural, unsullied state of mind. Such images as the “well-spring,” the “earth,” and the “womb” appear in the texts of Huangbo to denote the meanings of origin and the return to origin. It is here that Huangbo’s idea of one becomes problematic, since “origin” and “return” (as the language of looking backward rather than forward) seem to suggest something *a priori* (as opposed to contingent). Does one mind, in ontological terms, function as a “locus” that supports many (phenomenal realities) as “loci”? Or does one mind, in cosmogonic terms, refer to the primordial (mind) that existed before the creation of the manifold world of differentiated things?<sup>2</sup> It is one thing to speak of the idea of oneness in terms of interconnectedness of everything (an idea embraced by the Buddhist concept of “dependent-origination,” *yuan qi* 緣起), and it is another to speak of the root to which everything returns unless the world of dependent-origination itself is identified as the root, or the root here does not refer to a stagnant *a priori* but a continuously generative process that requires transformation. Wright’s reading of the transmission of mind seems to follow the model of “process” rather than that of “return,” a point on which I shall elaborate later.

The third model of one mind is what the Chan tradition calls the “oneness of the mind of the Buddha and the mind of ordinary,” as expressed by the popular Chan sayings, “Everyday mind is the Way” (*ping chang xin ji dao* 平常心即道) or “Mind is the Buddha” (*ji xin ji fo* 即心即佛). Chan argues that the mind of the Buddha is identical with the mind of all ordinary beings. Here, Wright sees the same effort made by Huangbo to bridge the unbridgeable gap between the transcendent and the immanent. However, in doing so, the basic relation between these two concepts has to be changed. Namely, the two are not only connected to each other, but they also become one, and with a focus on the immanent. As Wright rightly puts it, the emphasis on “everyday mind” was

a corrective to monastic “otherworldliness”...(t)he saying works against tendency to turn “dualistically” away from “samsāra” in order to mediate upon its “other” “nirvāna” as if nirvāna were simply another world more splendid than this one. (Wright 1998: 162)

Here, Wright takes oneness as a socially constructed concept to be born out of the context of the Chan community. Thus the idea of one mind only makes sense when the problem of the “implied hearer/reader” of the discourse/text has been reconstructed. To put it differently, one mind here

<sup>2</sup> Wright does not answer these questions directly, but his answers are affirmative since he sees Huangbo’s unity of origin entails the element of “an identity in essence” (Wright 1998: 158).

functions as a communicative way between the master and the student to overcome potential dichotomizations between the mind of the Buddha and the mind of the ordinary, and the nirvānic experience of enlightenment and the samsāric experience of everydayness. According to this understanding, we may argue that one mind in the texts of Huangbo is used as a “third alternative” to embrace both this world and the other world and thus transform the presently absent experience into the presently present experience. “One Mind” now becomes “not two” which lacks a fixed conceptual content in itself and for itself, since it operates only within the context of the monastic community where Master Huangbo intended to get his message across.

## II. The Double-Gesture of One Mind

How is “one” capable of being one if there is no “two”? Though the texts of Huangbo rely on kataphatic terms such as mind, and the mind of the Buddha, it would be mistaken to say that one mind designates a Chan shift from emptiness of emptiness to non-emptiness of emptiness because, as presented by Wright, we also encounter a plethora of apathetic expressions throughout the Chan texts. For instance, the statement that “One who sees that there is no Buddha and no Dharma is called a monk” (Wright 1998: 163) used by Huangbo points to a dual negation of subject and object, a kind of double negativity (in the form of “neither... nor”) popularly adapted in earlier Buddhism. In this sense one mind is identified with no mind.

In the texts of Huangbo, no mind is also expressed in term of a spatial trope, that is, “mind as space,” or more exactly, “mind as an empty space.” In the Chan tradition, “emptiness” or an “empty mind” (*kong* 空) is often employed to translate the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā*, yet it should be noted that the spatial image entailed by *kong* (that is, an infinite empty sky, the vastness of the cosmos that is limitless and immeasurable) was not exactly the same as the Mādhyamikan notion of *śūnyatā*, for the latter signifies the idea of non-substantiality (*wuzi-xing* 無自性; Skt. *asvabhāva*), and is thus devoid of any spatial suggestions. This subtle shift from a more abstract philosophical term (no essence) to something with a more concrete visual image (an empty sky) is very Chinese. Huangbo’s idea of “mind as an empty sky” suggests the comprehensive nature of the mind, as one would find in Huayan 華嚴 Buddhism. In this case, an “empty space” can be understood as a Chan way to describe a mind that has no fixed, centered position, or further, a mind that transcends spatio-temporal limitations. It is interesting that Wright interprets empty space in terms of openness in the section where he discusses Chan rhetoric:

[t]his open or empty space is not to become a new object of knowledge. We will be unable to determine conceptually what it is since it becomes manifest precisely in the emptiness that opens up which the practitioner is dislodged from the position of the subject who “represents,” and “determines.” (Wright 1998: 99)

Wright here attempts to maintain a Chan-like position between what is the conventional (a new object of knowledge) and what is the ultimate, claiming that the latter, i.e., emptiness (*kong*) cannot be conceptualized.<sup>3</sup> Then how do we interpret this non-conceptual mind? It is upon this question Wright has posed a radical challenge to Blofeld's romanticized version of no mind which, according to Wright, takes no mind as confirmation of a primordial, pure mind, a position seen in the Chan/Zen intellectual tradition since Suzuki. Instead of prioritization of the pure mind, or the mind of the Buddha, Wright contends that no mind is not a negation of "various diluted minds," but a solution to the antimony between the mind of the Buddha and the mind of the ordinary. Therefore, no mind means "not two" as we just noted. On the other hand, no mind also designates the idea of a non-conceptual mind; yet "non-conceptual" (that is, not conditioned by a conventional subject-object structure) does not necessarily mean "pure" in that it belongs to the domain of the "wholly other." Wright further questions the idea of "pure mind" by using Huangbo's argument that one mind is not an object of experience, nor is it a subject, since "mind cannot see mind" and in mind "there is no subject, no object, no self, no other" (Wright 1998: 161). To affirm this non-dual position, Wright cites another passage from the texts of Huangbo:

People often desire to escape the world in order to quiet the mind, to abandon activities in order to grasp principles. They fail to realize that this practice uses the mind to obstruct the world; it uses principles to obstruct activities. Just empty your mind and the world will be emptied of itself. Just release your grasp on principles, and activities will themselves be released. (Wright 1998: 162)

The negation of the mind here shows a double gesture of mind: constructive and deconstructive, whose purpose is to avoid any possible "objectification." Then a question such as "What is one mind?" is obviously a wrong one, for one has already objectified "it" by posing the question of "what it is." Yet to change a perspective, what can be tentatively reconstructed from one-mind-as-no-mind in the texts of Huangbo is that there was a traditional Chinese concept employed here to illustrate a Buddhist point: the concept of the *ti yong*. There are two aspects that one mind embraces: the aspect of *ti* 體 (what it is) and the aspect of *yong* 用 (what it does). This *ti yong* structure

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<sup>3</sup> Wright has recognized that Huangbo's use of the analogy "Mind is like empty space" is an interesting issue but does not explore the theme. I don't think the Chan use of "sky" or "empty space" in this specific context implies any spatio-temporal contingency, but just the opposite in that an empty space was an attempt on the Chan part to bring in an experiential dimension that was believed to be timeless and spaceless, and thus Chan made a deliberate disassociation from the "space" (in terms of spatial and temporal) in a conventional sense. Wright "skillfully" defers the issue and turns the job to Bernard Faure by referring to a specific chapter in Faure's book. Yet Faure in his book discusses more on temporary conditions and specialization of time in Dogen, which is not quite the same kind of "sky" or "empty space" we find in the text of Huangbo. For instance, Dogen's expression, "the sky skys the sky" where "sky" is also used as verb in order to deconstruct the conventional subject-predicate dualism, is a new argument. For more detailed discussion, see Faure: ch. 6.

was used by almost all Mahāyānic schools in China and hence represents an indigenous ethos of Chinese philosophical discourse.

The word *tī*—when it is translated as “substance”—seems to suggest something that is most fundamental, most real, and most important. Wright sees *tī yong* as a kind of division, arguing that the division between “what it is” and “what it does” “works to maintain an essence for enlightenment in the face of its changing appearances,” which, however, “inevitably pushes the elusive ‘essence of enlightenment’ out of the finite world into a transcendent realm.” Thus Wright argues that the dichotomization of *tī* and *yong* “share(s) a similar essentialist pattern” as western “substance/accidence dichotomy” (Wright 1998: 145).

The question here is whether *tī* and *yong* should be understood as a division between “is” and “does,” between what is primary and what is derivative, and between what is permanent and what is contingent. To an extent, Wright’s argument seems a valid one, since one mind as a source of return (the issue we touched previously) can be read as something that invites the notion of substance, even though it is still not a clear argument in the texts of Huangbo. Yet at the same time, it would miss the point if we take the *tī-yong* merely as a division without talking about the mutual dependence of these two terms, just as the mutual relationship between no mind and one mind. Accordingly, one should avoid seeing *yong* only as the external operation, or the functional/instrumental manifestation of the ground, as some other Buddhist texts may show.<sup>4</sup> In the context of Chan, *yong* can also define what *tī* is in that it changes and transforms *tī* via “various means” and as such is both “from itself” and “of itself.” To put it differently, *tī* does not signify a shift in denotation from a stress on the normative/functional aspect to that of substantive aspect. One of the best examples of this non-dual position is, in fact, given by Wright himself when he speaks of the role of language in Chan experience, particularly when he rejects Blofeld’s argument that language is simply a provisional or functional designation that points to the essence (*tī*) of enlightenment. The Chan speaks of the concept of *upaya*, a skillful means (*fāngbiàn* 方便), which entails the meaning of “gates toward the enlightenment” (*fāmen* 法門). This skillful means as the methodological and functional process of enlightenment, however, cannot be separated from the nature of enlightenment itself. In this sense, *upaya* is not simply instrumental (and thus derivative) but communicative and efficacious. It follows that acknowledging the differences between ordinary experiences—such as language—and the experience of enlightenment does not necessarily deny that language plays a role in shaping that experience.

To avoid dichotomous views between no mind and mind, *tī* and *yong*, one has to constantly erase the idea of *tī* as something outside *yong*, or no mind as something outside mind. The texts of Huangbo show a self-

<sup>4</sup> Wright’s interpretation of the *tī-yong* relationship works better for certain Buddhist texts, such as *The Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, where *tī* is given a clearer substantial quality.

conscious struggle with this problem. However, how can mind be one that embraces both many (various minds, various experience) and one (same mind, same experience) without reducing many to one? The Chan master's response was to drop all dualistic concepts, for any attachment to both mind and no mind "imprisons" the mind "between two iron mountains." This statement from the texts of Huangbo reminds us of the Chan teaching of the middle path in light of "not-one-and-not-two" (*buyi buer* 不一不二), and "being far away from the two extremes" (*luanli liangbian* 遠離兩邊). This is why we have the following answer given by Huangbo when asked the question of "what is":

Question: What is the Buddha?

Answer: Mind is the Buddha and No Mind is the Dao (*ji xin ji fo, wu xin shi dao*  
即心是佛，無心是道)

Here, the Dao is seen as one that embraces both mind (*ji xin* 即心) and no mind (*wu xin* 無心). Yet on the conventional and provisional level, the Chan master cannot avoid the issue of differences coming out of different states of mind, as Wright has observed:

Overwhelmingly, the texts claim people experience only diversity of things, their separateness and distinct identities. Only rarely is this ordinary state of the mind intersected by awareness of the interconnectedness and unity of all things. Nevertheless, this "identity" is represented as somehow more fundamental and therefore, more difficult to appropriate. (Wright 1998: 158)

The distinction is made here between the enlightened mind (an "awareness of the interconnectedness and unity of all things") and the ordinary state of the mind. Though the passage does not make a direct association of the "more fundamental" thing to the *ti* of enlightenment, it does suggest a kind of self(less?) identity, as a qualitative leap, vis-à-vis the flux of different experiences. Here is the dilemma of the Chan language: affirmation within negations. Huangbo's negation of the two-ness between one and diversities/many, as Wright points out, does not completely free itself from the framework of transcendent sameness. This is, perhaps, the double-bind nature of Chan: it is a deconstruction of a full presence, yet functioning within a schematic (quasi-metaphysical) circle at the same time.

### III. "Going Beyond" the Mind of Huangbo

How do we understand the Chan maxim of "being outside the tradition" (*jiao wai bie chuan* 教外別傳), "being not dependent on words" (*bu li wenzi* 不立文字), "direct pointing" (*zhi zhi* 直指), and "mind-to-mind transmission" (*chuan xin* 傳心)? Wright points out that Huangbo's texts were initially called "The Essential Teachings of Mind Transmission" (*chuan xin fayao* 傳心法要) with an implication that what matters is the mind, not the word. Were Chan masters like Huangbo riding a horse and claiming that there was

no horse when they depended on words for “mind-to-mind transmission”? The argument that Chan manifests a rather skeptical view towards language has been a widely accepted one in Chan studies. Anyone who is confronted with the Chan tradition has to deal with the Chan negation of language. Nevertheless, no other traditions in China, except Daoism perhaps, have accomplished so much through a creative use of language than Chan, where one finds both the depth of reticence and the peak of loquacity.

Following the Chan critique of language in general, Wright’s critique of language calls for a substitution of living words (*huo ju* 活句) for dead words (*si ju* 死句). In his analysis of Chan language, Wright classifies what he calls “Chan rhetoric” into four distinctive styles: the rhetoric of strangeness, the rhetoric of direct pointing, the rhetoric of silence, and the rhetoric of disruption (Wright 1998: 85-99). It is interesting to see that among these four styles, the rhetoric of direct pointing and the rhetoric of silence suggest a non-linguistic (if not anti-linguistic) position in Chan, whereas the rhetoric of strangeness and the rhetoric of disruption speak of Chan’s creative way of employing language. This paradoxical view of language is very similar to one embedded in Chan’s argument of mind and no-mind: The former attempts to affirm something while the latter puts doubts on any affirmation that has just been established, and becomes part of “conventional norms.” Wright has observed that all styles of Chan rhetoric were employed for the purpose of appropriating and re-appropriating the Chan tradition within various traditions, the process of which was an ongoing effort. The texts of Huangbo, therefore, offer an excellent example of the nature of “dependent origination,” a Buddhist term borrowed by Wright for his hermeneutic argument.

What intrigues me in Wright’s arguments is that he speaks of the Chan critique of “dead words” *via* his own creative hermeneutic of Huangbo’s doctrine of “going beyond.” By challenging Blofeld’s “representational” interpretation that sees Chan words as a linguistic instrument to denote a non-linguistic experience, Wright proposes his theory of language that is “dependently originated” from the hermeneutical principle.<sup>5</sup> Namely, language is not a mere designator, pointing to something, say a pure mind. Instead, language should be perceived dynamically rather than instrumentally. This shift of emphasis on the dynamic or performative aspects of language in fact has blurred the hierarchical structure between enlightenment/transcendence (*ti*) and the process of enlightenment/transcendence (*yong*). From this standpoint, Wright attempts to establish the connection between such Chan ideas as “mind-to-mind transmission” and “going beyond” and the concept of tradition and the role of language within tradition. Wright contends that Chan experience, as an experience of “going beyond,”

is a product of the realization that the tradition had in fact changed in spite of its occasional claims to immutability. It is true that the expectation in the tradition was that “transmission” would occur only at those points where each new Zen

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<sup>5</sup> According to Blofeld’s reading, mind is primary, and the language of the mind is secondary (Blofeld: 169), and as such an enlightened experience is one that goes beyond language.



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master had attained an “original” experience—his or her own—rather than a replication of someone else’s. (Wright 1998: 152)

I would like to emphasize two points of Wright’s argument here: (1) “going beyond” in Chan can be read as “going beyond” previous traditions in order to seek something “new” rather than something that is “already there.” This means that “going beyond” is looking forward rather than backward; (2) the movement of “going beyond” has always to be dependent on the previous reference, and thus being “beyond” is just a relative term followed by “infinite beyond(s).” Transcendence or one mind in the texts of Huangbo, in this sense, points to an infinite flux of finite experiences (including the linguistic experience), and thus becomes “horizontal” rather than “vertical.” It is along this line of thinking Wright suggests that the Chan notion of “transmission” also means “dependent origination.” In other words, transmission is always a temporal process in relations in that it was conditioned by the past that conditions the future. It follows that seeking one mind would not be a process of “recollection,” or “repetition,” but a process of ongoing re-appropriation and reconstitution. Transmission, then, is also a cultural translation: to decipher and transmit the meaning of the texts of Huangbo, as all the Buddhist texts before him and after him, involves an imaginative (creative) configuration of a self-other relation that keeps the meaning adding itself to something that is a plus.<sup>6</sup> Based upon the above argument, Wright offers his new understanding of transcendence in term of “going beyond”:

If transcendence is a historical phenomenon, found in historically constituted cultures among historical human beings, it would be subject to change and transformation under the influence of alterations in other factors and circumstances. Transmitted from one generation to the next through historical traditions, texts, and teachings, this experience, like any other, would lack an immutable, eternal essence. (Wright 1998: 152)

Obviously, Wright’s argument of “no immutable, eternal essence” here directly targets toward Blofeld’s idea of “a transcendent, pure experience” or a “Transcendental experience of Reality” where the “enlightened mind” as “ultimate perfection” lies beyond the realm of “ever-changing mind.” Wright’s contextualist position makes Blofeld’s argument difficult, if not impossible. In his essay, “Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience,” Wright has expressed the same opinion, claiming that the alternative interpretation (of the role of language) “will consist in an

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<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the book when he discusses the Chan strangeness, Wright shows us specifically how a person’s context (as historically effected consciousness) influences the way he or she reads and understands the text. Furthermore, a personal context (with its limitations) is not only necessary but also useful in encountering the text as the act of knowing involves (1) recognizing the strangeness of the text, and (2) transforming the text while being transformed by the text as well. However, without the contextual, one neither has a self-awareness of what needs to be “stranged,” nor an ability of transformation. Wright argues that strangeness “functions to open the minds of hearers and readers by breaking the hold that ordinary discourse has on them” (Wright 1998: 85-91).

interpretation of Zen practice and enlightenment that acknowledges numerous ways in which language and linguistically articulated social practice have shaped and made possible distinctively ‘Zen’ modes of experience” (Wright 1992: 113). Wright even challenges the distinctions between experience itself and the post-experiential experience (language), since for him “the movement from primordial experience to linguistic articulation cannot occur without presupposing distinctions, judgments, and meanings already present within the primordial” (Wright 1992: 118).<sup>7</sup> The concept of “going beyond” does not mean “going beyond,” as it is usually understood, for the point of the enlightened mind is formation, transformation, and change.

It should be pointed out that Wright does acknowledge the existence of a form of pretheoretical or prediscursive experience in the texts of Huangbo; yet he maintains that neither pretheoretical nor prediscursive should be taken as pre-linguistic, and thus cannot be replaced by “pure experience.” In doing so, Wright leaves a space for the idea of pretheoretical or non-linguistic experience but with certain qualifications. For Wright, the purpose of saying that Chan experience is prior to thought—pretheoretical—is to avoid its reduction to intellectual or rational exercise, and yet pretheoretical experience itself is still specific and contextual (Wright 1998: 171).<sup>8</sup>

I must admit that Wright’s argument of “going beyond” is too attractive to be questioned. Yet I still have to ask if the idea of “going beyond” he describes is something perceived by him as someone outside the history of Chan or something recognized by Huangbo as someone within the history of Chan. In Wright’s book, two narrative voices are heard: Wright as

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<sup>7</sup> Here Wright’s argument against “pure experience” resembles a “contextualist” position given by Steven Katz (see Katz). For a counter-argument, see Nagatomo, where Nagatomo challenges Katz’s contextualist view, arguing that “the truth of matter, however, is that authentic mystical experiences are neither of the body nor of the mind as they are understood from the everyday standpoint because they are experiences that transcend both the mind and the body of everyday dimension. Therefore, they cannot be explained by appealing to materialist reductionism or to logical transcendentalism” (Nagatomo: 189). Sallie B. King holds a similar anti-contextualist view when she defends “thusness” as a kind of “ecstatic experiential apprehension of reality as-it-is,” in which there are no thoughts, views, or concepts. She also argues that this ecstatic experiential apprehension has nothing to do with reducing realities to something more primary, more real, though realities being experienced at that point are “intensely real, intensely vivid, and uniquely themselves” (King: 187).

<sup>8</sup> Wright’s thesis on “dependent origination” has challenged both the logical and practical validity of the claim of “extra-linguistic” experience. For him, this kind of argument is no more desirable than it is possible. For me it seems to be almost an impossible job to argue the for-and-againstness of “pure experience” since the argument from above cannot convince the argument from below, and vice versa. Assuming there is such experience, the question we have to ask is how we distinguish it, with its trans-spatial, and trans-temporal nature, from other “hyperessential” claims that may repress and exclude it. After all “pure experience” suggests a kind of “timelessness,” “secrecy,” or a moral privilege that could divide the one who knows from the one who does not know despite the language of oneness and unity. The same thing can be said of the meaning of the Chan *gong’an* 公案 which has been taken by those who speak of “pure experience” as “obvious” but paradoxical only from the perspective of “the outsider.” Wright’s reformulation of emptiness as finitude, which I shall discuss, attempts to prevent interpreting the Chan tradition from the possibility of this kind of self-containment.

part of Huangbo's Chan community and Wright as a critic. Readers of Wright's book are still looking for the answers to the following questions: Did Huangbo himself and his followers, and the Chan tradition as a whole, understand "trans-mission" as a hermeneutical task of "mission-of-translation"? Has Wright de-stranged the strangeness (otherness) of Chan by locating Chan texts into the framework of contemporary Western hermeneutical theory? Why are there two truths rather than one conventional truth in Buddhism (despite the "neither...nor" gesture in Chan)? Why does the Chan master speak of "one mind," "direct awareness," and "the essence of enlightenment" after all?

#### IV. Emptiness as "Finitude"

With his interpretation of "going beyond," Wright has pushed the argument further. He suggests that the Buddhist idea of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), in a sense, can be understood as the Buddhist principle of finitude (Wright 1998: 148). What?! Are we talking about a Tillichian estrangement, a hermeneutic of suspension, a Derridean undecidability, or a Buddhist enlightenment?! I am particularly struck by the term "finitude," also used by so many existentialists and post-existentialists in the West, a word that is deeply connected to the realm of history, philosophy, religion, and language in the West, and a word that is also associated with conditionality, causality, fate, desire, anxiety, fear, estrangement, or even death, things Buddhism calls *samsāra* and considers "unreal" and "empty." Wright, on the other hand, sees finitude as a hermeneutic concept of historicity (in terms of existential temporality) in the sense that all human experience is finite, historical, and open to transformation. "Finitude," in this sense, refers to our physical limitations (spatio-temporal conditions) and our psychological limitations (the desire for permanence and eternity), both of which are, in fact, connected to the problem of temporality, since being finite means being temporal.

Furthermore, if we take a closer look at Wright's use of finitude, we can see two interrelated arguments underlining his definition of finitude: One is more specific and functions as a form of cultural critique while the other is more general and functions as a philosophical statement. For the first one, Wright shares some of the concerns expressed by Faure, whose cultural critique aims at what he calls "Zen Orientalism" represented by Suzuki and Nishida in Zen studies.<sup>9</sup> Wright sees the same danger in "romanticizing" the Chan experience expressed by Chan tradition itself as well

<sup>9</sup> According to Faure, both Suzuki and Nishida "were still speaking from within the discursive arena opened by Western Orientalism. That is to say, their description of Zen/Chan in many respects is an inverted image of that given by the Christian missionaries, and they relied on Christian categories even when rejecting them. If the Western standpoint represented an Orientalism by 'default,' one in which Buddhism was looked down upon, Suzuki and Nishida, among others, represent an Orientalism 'by excess,' a 'secondary' Orientalism that offers an idealized, 'nativist' image of Japanese culture deeply influenced by Zen" (Faure: 53).

as Chan scholars like Blofeld:

One problem that the tradition has not faced is a pronounced tendency not to recognize Zen doctrine as doctrine. Perhaps due to the influence of “no dependence” slogan, Zen Buddhists have tended to assume that traditional pronouncements about the “the Way” are something other than doctrine, and therefore not susceptible to critical thought. As long as ideas are naively thought to “flow directly from experience” (or, in other traditions, directly from God), they will be held dogmatically. (Wright 1998: 179)

In this case, “finitude” is used by Wright to question an essentialist closure that exists both in the tradition of Chan in China and the tradition of Chan studies in the West. Finitude enables us to “let go” of our attachment to the idea of the absolute that invites transcendental pretensions and an illusion of self-sufficiency, whether in the form of the “original reality” or in the form of the “primordial experience.” The notion of a fixed point of origin which one finds in Buddhist teachings including Chan constitutes a self-imposed and self-contained limitation that has weakened the tradition. We need to point out that Wright’s critique does not intend to deny the creative and deconstructive elements of Chan Buddhism, but reaffirms the necessity of repeating such Chan teachings as “non-abiding,” “non-grasping,” and “emptying” when one is confronting the essentialist elements within and outside the Chan tradition.

The second (philosophical) argument is connected to the cultural critique and yet functions in a much broader sense. It is, in fact, a much more important point that Wright intends to make throughout the book. In order to do so, Wright brings a Derridean deconstruction into the Buddhist position of no essence in terms of “dependent origination,” both of which, says Wright, have challenged the notion of a “solid ground,” an essentialist tendency in philosophical or religious teachings that looks for a closure, a full presence, and the final inquiry. This challenge is significant for Wright’s main thesis because it leads to his conclusive argument that finitude is “freedom.”<sup>10</sup> As Wright puts it,

In Buddhist doctrinal terms, the realization of “dependent origination” in practice is not a rejection of what has thus originated, but rather a reorientation of one’s relation to it. The “emptiness” of things allows one to let go of things, and thus to be released from one dimension of the hold that things have on us. Displacement reworks freedom by means of replacement, a new orientation, and an ability to move in and among relations. (Wright 1998: 136)

Here Wright confirms his reading of “going beyond” we discussed earlier. However, Wright is still facing the same question that Derrida used to face,

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<sup>10</sup> When Wright talks about freedom in terms of a specific Chan monastic community, he also talks about the dialectic relation between freedom and restraint, contending that freedom “can only take place against a background of constraints: alternative choices, the possibility of unfree acts, and all the stage-setting features of any context of understanding” (Wright 1998: 123). To link this to Wright’s argument of finitude, we can also say that finitude as a form of restraint enables freedom to take place.

that is, how can we make a de-constructive project constructive? Freedom is the word for Wright: finitude is a sign of limits (*jie* 界) but also a sign of de-limits (*wu jie* 无界) that makes transformation possible. Finitude, then, is not a word of despair. On the contrary, it is a word of creative power coming out of a creative (enlightened?) mind. Therefore, Wright contends,

If we reject the doctrine of mind as “pure experience,” or give it extensive qualification...what options remain for understanding the element of “enlightenment” in Huangbo’s mind? Plenty! Lacking full presence, the “absence” or “void” can be experienced as “mystery.” Lacking secure and solid ground, the freedom and contingency of finite existence can be experienced. Lacking the closure of certainty, “openness” becomes the primary feature of the cultivated mind. (Wright 1998: 168)

Again,

The tension between traditional models of excellence (the results of prior activities of “going beyond”) and current acts of going beyond those models through critical innovation is potent in its creative force. Positive idealization gives substance and concrete shape to the tradition; critical appropriation builds the tradition by pushing it beyond its old forms into further refinement or reformulation. Zen practice requires correlating these positive and negative functions so they sustain each other over time. (Wright 1998: 215)

In the first passage cited above, Wright uses the word “mystery” to signify the possibility of undecidability that includes the textual causal relationships. Yet this absence of certainty makes mystical elements possible. Mystery, in turn, leads to an open domain, an unknowing territory. Wright affirms this argument through a statement given by a Chan master when he speaks of the posture of “not knowing”: “Not knowing most closely approaches the truth” (99). He then continues,

This line makes it abundantly clear that “the truth” is not a matter of correct belief, but rather something that is manifest in the absence of grasping. “Knowing” is here figured as an inauthentic form of self-securing and grasping. It represents human “desire” and “craving” more than it does the “openness of things.” (Wright 1998: 99)<sup>11</sup>

It is at this moment that Wright sounds more Derridean than Gadamerian in that he speaks of not knowing/not understanding rather than knowing/understanding.<sup>12</sup> The questions we have to raise here are: Can we iden-

<sup>11</sup> I hoped Wright would explore this argument further, since not knowing is closely related to the issue of finitude and the nature of finite reason. It still remains an issue if the Chan notion of not knowing can be conceived as the *docta ignorantia*, the “learned ignorance,” described in the classical form in the western tradition by Nicolaus Cusanus and Immanuel Kant.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in her introduction to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, G. C. Spivak writes that Derrida suggests that what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but never-annulled difference from “completely other.” Such is the strange “being” of the sign: half of it always “not there” and the half always “not that.” The structure of the

tify “not knowing” used by the Chan master with “not knowing” used in contemporary hermeneutics as a means of dealing with the text of a polyvalent nature? Or does Wright intend to make an a/theological argument rather than a hermeneutic one by telling us that a true enlightenment is that there is no (final) enlightenment? It seems that Wright wants to be more deconstructive than Chan. Perhaps this is also what he means by “going beyond Huangbo.” Then, what about the “ultimate truth,” *nirvāna*, and “direct awareness,” all those things Buddhism has not yet fully erased? When Chan masters like Huangbo kept saying, “*Samsāra* is *nirvāna*, and *nirvāna* is *samsāra*,” did they really mean it, or just say it methodologically or rhetorically? If finitude is THE word, shall we sing the song of “the splendid world of *samsāra*”? Those questions, arising out of my horizon, are addressed to the texts of Huangbo based upon the text of Wright, and I am waiting for the text to address the same question from its horizon to me: Whom should I follow? Master Huang or Master (W)right? This may be a false dilemma for the Chan master, since I am looking for a conceptually consistent argument that Chan ultimately rejects. Nevertheless, I could not resist Wright’s overall reinterpretation of the Chan tradition, particularly his view on finitude, freedom, and openness, one of the most engaging parts of the book. It is much more important for us to acknowledge the limitations of our conventional discourse where we often encounter philosophical finitude (i.e., seeing-things-as-we-are) rather than experiential enlightenment (i.e., seeing-things-as-they-are).

## V. Conclusion

Wright maintains that tradition (including language) plays a fundamental role in the origins and shaping of the monastic world that made a unique “Chan mind” possible. Through a creative application of the Buddhist idea of “dependent origination,” Wright has broadened the hermeneutic concept of historicity in that it is more than a linear and causal relationship of contextuality (that is, the person is always a person-in-community, and the text is always a text-in-context). Instead, contextuality refers to a (w)holistic network of associations and re-associations. The word “tradition” thus becomes an open tradition that is constantly shaped and reshaped, formed and transformed. The meaning of tradition as such is always a “trace” of that other which is forever absent. In this sense, Wright is quite Derridean. Like Derrida’s deconstruction, Wright’s interpretative endeavor, as part of the tradition of “linguistic turn,” seems to become separated from the real world of flux and takes on an independent status, that is, the realm of reading, explaining, and understanding (perhaps mis-understanding, sometimes). Wright’s project fits the need of those who have a passion for “doing things

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sign is determined by the trace or track of the other, which is forever absent (see Derrida 1976: xvii).

with words,” and those who prefer meditative reading to meditative practice (in a Buddhist sense). Though Wright keeps reminding us that the effort to play language in relation to Chan experience does not imply that Chan enlightenment/mind is in any sense reducible to language; it still remains a question whether his critical “philosophical meditations” are fully out of the “spell of conceptuality” of the hermeneutical circle. Wright might say that there is no need to be out of the circle, or there is no such circle in the first place.

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