



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Chan Master as Illusionist: Zhongfeng Mingben's Huanzhu Jiaxun

Natasha Heller

Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, Volume 69, Number 2, December 2009, pp. 271-308 (Article)

Published by Harvard-Yenching Institute  
DOI: [10.1353/jas.0.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/jas.0.0020)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jas/summary/v069/69.2.heller.html>

# The Chan Master as Illusionist: Zhongfeng Mingben's *Huanzhu Jiaxun*

NATASHA HELLER

*University of California, Los Angeles*

One day when the illusory man was occupying an illusory room, resting on an illusory seat and grasping an illusory whisk, all his illusory disciples came and gathered like a cloud. Someone asked, “Why is the pine tree straight? Why are brambles crooked? Why is the swan white and the crow black?”

幻人一日據幻室，依幻座，執幻拂時，諸幻弟子俱來雲集。有問松緣何直，棘緣何曲，鵲緣何白，烏緣何玄？

*Tianmu Zhongfeng heshang guanglu*  
天目中峰和尚廣錄

WHEN THE YUAN-DYNASTY monk Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1263–1323), or his literary stand-in, “the illusory man” (*huanren* 幻人), picked up what he termed his “illusory whisk” (*huanfu* 幻拂) at the beginning of his “Huanzhu Jiaxun” 幻住家訓 (The family instructions of “Illusory Abiding”), he evoked the performance of the Chan master and the intellectual history of the metaphor “illusion.”<sup>1</sup> Already

I would like to express my gratitude to Jack Chen, Robert Sharf, and the two anonymous referees for *HJAS* for their comments and corrections on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> This essay is found in *Tianmu Zhongfeng heshang guanglu* 天目中峰和尚廣錄, in *Zhonghua Dazang jing* 中華大藏經 ([Taipei]: Xiuding Zhonghua Dazang jing hui, 1965) [hereafter *GL*] 1:74.32160b–62a; also in *Nihon kōtei Daizōkyō* 日本校訂大藏經, vols. 298–99 (Kyoto: Zōkyō Shoin, 1902–1905). The *Zhonghua Dazang jing* reproduces the text as found in the *Jisha* 積砂 canon (compiled 1335), supplementing the missing portions with texts as they

in the two characters “illusory man” that open the essay, there is a surplus of meaning: the author used the sobriquet “Illusory Abiding” (*huanzhu* 幻住) to refer both to himself and to the cloisters in which he lived.<sup>2</sup> Further, “illusory man” is close enough to his style-name, “Illusory Abiding,” to call immediately to mind Mingben for the readers of this essay. This phrase, then, could be taken to refer to a real person, in the way that style-names were employed ubiquitously by lettered men. Yet he does not use “Illusory Abiding” here, instead opening with “illusory man,” only one of a series of illusory phenomena. Teacher, room, and disciples are all illusory. Because the term *huanren* can also refer to conjurers, Mingben positions himself both as illusory man and as illusionist. The fusion of these two roles is the central theme of his essay.

“The Family Instructions of ‘Illusory Abiding’” is an extended treatment of a prominent theme in Mingben’s works, and was considered by Mingben’s disciples to be one of his five most significant contributions. Although this essay is important in its own right as one of the major philosophical expositions in later Chinese Buddhism, it also speaks to the metaphoric possibilities of illusion and offers one way in which a major Buddhist figure sought to retrieve practice from potential entanglements of language. The significance of Mingben’s work emerges against the background of several earlier lines of discourse: the metaphors used to explain illusion; spiritual cultivation as it relates to the illusory nature of experience; and Chan practice and its relationship to words. In his explication of illusion Mingben hews closely to the discussion of illusion in the *Yuanjue jing* 圓覺經 (Sūtra of perfect enlightenment), a seventh-century scripture that exerted considerable influence in Chan and Huayan circles,<sup>3</sup> while he also addresses the

---

are found in the Hongwu nanzang 洪武南藏 edition (compiled in 1387). For a more detailed textual history, see Shiina Kōyū 椎名宏雄, “Sō Gen ban Zenseki kenkyū—Tenmoku Chūhō kōroku, Tenjo Isoku goroku 宋元版禪籍研究—天目中峰広録、天如惟則語録, *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度学仏教学研究 39.1 (1990): 105–10.

<sup>2</sup> These cloisters were known as “Cloister of Illusory Abiding” (*Huanzhu an* 幻住庵). *Zhu* means to “dwell” or “settle in,” as well as “to rely on.” Mingben seems to have occasionally added *huan* to his name in other positions: Uta Lauer, in her study of his calligraphy, notes that Mingben signed a letter “Illusory Mingben” (*Huan Mingben* 幻明本), and takes this as “an extra comment” that emphasizes “his existence is illusionary.” Uta Lauer, *A Master of His Own—The Calligraphy of the Chan Abbot Zhongfeng Mingben (1263–1323)* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> *Da fangguang yuanjue xiuduoluo liaoyi jing* 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經 in *Taishō*

more recent practice of focusing one's attention on the "critical phrase" (*huatou* 話頭) of a Chan "case" (*gongan*, J. *kōan* 公案). Although both the sūtra and the practice of "observing the key phrase" (*kanhua* 看話) were important in Song- and Yuan-dynasty Chan, they are not necessarily connected. Thus, Mingben's contribution was to bring the discourse of illusion into dialogue with his theory of *kanhua*, and he did so with an emphasis on the physical aspect of language. This represents a significant shift away from the predominantly visual metaphors for illusion found in earlier sources. Mingben took the position that there is no alternative to illusion, and that students not only must realize the pervasiveness of illusion but learn to act within this illusion. Moreover, words and language are particularly useful for the study of illusion because of their role in structuring cognition and discourse. Changing how one relates to words emerges as key both to the understanding and the performance of illusion. To this end, Mingben advocated non-discursive models of relating to words, namely the practice "observing the key phrase," calligraphy, and seals.<sup>4</sup>

The author of this text, Zhongfeng Mingben, was a leading Yuan-dynasty Chan monk. Born in Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou), he was a young man when the Southern Song capital was conquered by the Mongol army. Overcoming his father's initial objections, Mingben became a pupil of the stern and reclusive Gaofeng Yuanmiao 高峰原妙 (1238–1295), who resided in the Tianmu mountains to the west of the capital. Mingben became Yuanmiao's foremost disciple and was expected to assume responsibilities as abbot after his teacher's death. Mingben declined this and most subsequent offers to head monasteries, choosing instead to live in relatively small communities, each called the "Cloister for Illusory Abiding" (*huanzhu an* 幻住庵).

---

*shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 et al. (Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932) [hereafter T], 842, 17:913–22. This version of the Buddhist canon is available online through Zhonghua Dianzi Fodian Xiehui (cbeta.org) and the SAT Daizōkyō Text Database (<http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/>), and I have also used these electronic editions.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Parker has written about the influence of Mingben's essay on the development of Japanese Buddhist aesthetics, especially landscape arts. He has translated portions of this text and discussed several Song-dynasty examples that show that illusion was used to talk about painting the landscape, and the spiritual potential of such art. Joseph D. Parker, *Zen Buddhist Landscape Arts of Early Muromachi Japan (1336–1573)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 155–81; on Mingben, see 168–72.

The text discussed here is a set of instructions for these communities, a common genre of the time.

Despite refusing a more conventional path within Chan institutions, Mingben emerged as a prominent religious and cultural figure. He was within the Chan lineage of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄, the dominant line of the late Song and Yuan. He also followed the Song-dynasty monk Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) in promoting *kanhua* or “observing the key phrase.” Through his prominence within his own region, Mingben came to make the acquaintance of the statesman and artist Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322). Both Zhao and his wife, Guan Daosheng 管道升 (1262–1319), took Mingben as their teacher, and through them Mingben gained a national and international reputation. He was honored by the Yuan emperors and sought out by travelers from Koryō (Goryeo), Japan, and Dali. Like many monks, he was also an accomplished calligrapher and a competent poet. His talents in these areas may have informed his relationship with words and text.

*Huan* 幻, the word that is the focus of Mingben’s essay, seems not to appear in pre-Han texts; one of its early appearances is in the *Liezi* 列子, a text that most likely dates from the fourth century.<sup>5</sup> Thus the term *huan* does not seem to predate Buddhism in China. In dictionaries, it typically is defined with reference to false appearances, the art of magical transformation, and the confusion brought about by such things.<sup>6</sup> Although *huanren* and *huanshi* are often translated as “magician,” they are to be distinguished from *fangshi* 方士, a term frequently translated as “magician” or “diviner.” The *fangshi* had expertise in a series of related fields of knowledge, including the interpretation of the movements of the heavens and the activities of spirits, and the pursuit of physical well-being and longevity. The sorts of skills over which the *fangshi* had mastery were what we might understand as proto-sciences. They were linked to the natural world (of which spirits were also a part) and had practical ends. Although there are salient differences between *fangshi* and *huanren* (or *huanshi*), the distinction between the two is not complete: some *fangshi* were also adept at the

<sup>5</sup> A. C. Graham, “The Date and Composition of Liehtzyy,” *AM*, new series, 8.2 (1960): 142.

<sup>6</sup> *Huan* is variously defined as false appearance, void; transformation; the arts of transformation; strange; to delude; and wondrous in *Hanyu da cidian* (Shanghai: Hanyu da cidian chubanshe, 1990), 4:427.

art of illusion (*huanshu* 幻術), a practice often linked to spirit possession and exorcism. In the examples of the *fangshi* employed to raise Lady Li from the dead in the *Hanshu* (Book of the Han dynasty), and the practitioners of the mantic arts Wang Qiao 王喬 and Zuo Ci 左慈 in the *Hou Hanshu* (Book of the Later Han dynasty), conjuring is treated as tricks and deceptions. Zuo Ci had the ability to transform himself, and prompt other things and beings into action, a skill possessed by Wang Qiao as well.<sup>7</sup> The magician in the tale of Lady Li put up curtains and lamps, but his performance seems calculated to take advantage of an emperor in mourning.<sup>8</sup> These practices illustrated the perfidious trickery of the magicians, and were criticized by the court and the Ru keepers of orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting too that illusionists were depicted as connected to foreign lands. In a passage in *Hou Han shu*, for example, a conjurer (*huanren*) is said to have come from the Roman Empire. He is credited with having powers of transformation (*bianhua* 變化), among them the ability to spit fire and swap the heads of cows and horses.<sup>10</sup> This may suggest that the illusionist is connected to the exotic, and to journeys.

Given its late appearance, the chapter in the *Liezi* entitled “King Mu of Zhou” 周穆王 provides the first example of a sustained treatment of *huan*.<sup>11</sup> This chapter circles around the issues of magic, illusion, dreaming, and memory through a series of anecdotes and conversations. It takes its title from the opening episode, in which King Mu of Cheng

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *Doctors, Diviners and Magicians of Ancient China: Biographies of Fang-shih* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 52–53, 83–86; Ngo Van Xuyet, *Divination Magie et Politique dans la Chine ancienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), pp. 86–87, 138–39. *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 82.2712, 2747.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen Owen, *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), pp. 216–17.

<sup>9</sup> DeWoskin, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書, 51.1685, also 86.2851.

<sup>11</sup> Although a work entitled the *Liezi* is referred to by Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 B.C.E.), and this information is repeated in the *Hanshu*, A. C. Graham points out that extant versions of this text are a late third-century forgery based on the contents listed in the earlier sources. The forger drew on pre-Han texts, but also incorporated later material. Indeed, Graham points to the term *huan*, common in Buddhist translations, as evidence of the late date of composition. Graham, “The Date and Composition,” 139–98. See also T. H. Barrett, “Lieh tzu 列子,” in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute for East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1993), pp. 298–308.

is visited by a conjurer (*huaren* 化人) from the far West. This man was able to

enter water and fire, penetrate metal and stone, upturn mountains, reverse the course of rivers, and move walled cities. He could ascend into empty space without falling and pass through objects without obstruction. It was impossible to exhaust his myriad tricks. He was not only able to change the forms of things, but also to change people's thoughts.<sup>12</sup>

This conjurer takes the pleasure-seeking king on a trip to a marvelous palace in the sky and then to a place so dazzling to the senses that the king is frightened and asks to return to his home. The king, upon finding himself in his palace, learns that he has just been on a "spirit journey" (*shenyou* 神游). The conjurer admonishes him that it is difficult to assess the scope of transformation (*bianhua*); he thus implies that the king's attachment to the permanent is unwarranted and unsound. King Mu fails to understand the message, however, and seems to have gained only a taste for travel; pursuing his own pleasure, he subsequently eschews virtuous government. Although initially in the service of larger issues, illusion here has proven to be dangerously seductive.

The *Liezi* continues with an account of a student who is thwarted in his aim to study illusion:

Lao Chengzi studied illusion with Master Yinwen, but for three years the Master said nothing. Lao Chengzi asked what his mistake had been and sought to leave. Master Yinwen bowed and led him into his rooms. Dismissing his attendants, Yinwen imparted these words: "Some time ago, Lao Dan was going west, and he looked back to tell me 'The *qi* of what has life, and the appearance of what has form—these are all illusion. What is begun by creation, and what is changed through *yin* and *yang* are called life and death. What exhausts numbers and penetrates transformation and what mutates according to form are called change and illusion. The creator has marvelous skills and vast accomplishments, and indeed it is difficult to see the conclusion [of his works]. As for those who [work] following form, their skills are obvious and the accomplishments shallow, and thus [their works] arise and disappear.' If you know that illusions are no different than life and death,

<sup>12</sup> Yang Bojun 楊柏峻, *Liezi ji shi* 列子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), p. 90. See also A. C. Graham, trans., *The Book of Lieh-tzū: A Classic of Tao* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 61.

then you can begin to study illusion. If you and I are also illusory, then what need is there to study?"<sup>13</sup>

From Lao Chengzi's untutored perspective, illusion is something one studies, a skill to be acquired, perhaps to assume magical powers. Master Yinwen complicates his understanding of illusion by quoting Laozi's parting words—that life and death are no more than an illusion perpetrated by a particularly accomplished conjurer, the creator. As with the episode concerning King Mu and the conjurer, perceiving life and death as illusion is difficult because the worldly phenomena outlast any ephemeral conjuring. Lao Chengzi, of course, sought to study illusion, and Master Yinwen dismissed this as impossible. The lesson that life and death are illusions is both the prerequisite to studying illusion and the denial that doing so is possible. On the one hand, one must be able to perceive illusion (in this case, life and death) to be able to understand how to produce it. Yet this knowledge undercuts the reason for studying magic—if all is illusion then the study of it can have no real purpose. Lao Chengzi ponders what he has been told for three months and thereby attains the ability to make himself appear and disappear, along with other powers of transformation. However, he never passes on these teachings, and thus the passage remains opaque on how one studies illusion.<sup>14</sup> This problem—how to study illusion, or study within illusion—emerges as a major theme of Chinese Buddhist discourse on the illusory nature of existence.

*Huan* is the term used to translate the Sanskrit *māyā*, meaning illusion, and its use in Buddhist texts is connected to a series of metaphors by which impermanence is explained. The *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) commentary, *Dazhi dulun* 大智度論, lists ten such metaphors to explain the nature of reality: "Understand that all dharmas are like illusion, like smoke, like the moon in water, like empty space, like an echo, like a city of the Gandharvas, a dream, a shadow, an image in a mirror, and a transformation" 解了諸法如幻如焰如水中月如虛空如響如犍鬪婆城如夢如影如鏡中像如化.<sup>15</sup> The text then goes on to explain these metaphors for the fact that, though things appear to exist permanently, they do not:

<sup>13</sup> Yang Bojun, pp. 99–100; see also Graham, *Lieh-tzū*, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Yang Bojun, p. 100; also Graham, *Lieh-tzū*, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> See *T* 1509, 25:101c8–9.



It is as if there were conjured elephants, horses, and all sorts of other things. Although you know they are not real, their forms can be seen and their sounds heard, and they accord with the six senses without confusion. All dharmas are like this.<sup>16</sup>

*Huan* functions both as something to which reality might be compared, and as a modifier for how phenomena are produced or transformed. In addition to these metaphors, that of “flowers in the sky” (*konghua* 空花) is also frequently employed in passages on illusion.<sup>17</sup> Explained as a result of a defect or of an eye disease, this points to illusion as a misperception. The images employed also indicate ephemerality, the fact that a particular confluence of patterns appears only temporarily. Some of these, like echoes, shadows, smoke, and reflections, are natural or sensory phenomena, but dreams and conjuring are both more abstract and suggest the activity of a creator. The dream is not concrete or visual in the way that the moon is, nor based on sensory experience in the same way as the echo. It is a common experience, and more real than a flower in the sky, but in many ways no less mysterious than what it purports to explain.<sup>18</sup> Of these metaphors, that of a Gandharva city is the most complex, referring to a city conjured in mid-air by demigod entertainers.<sup>19</sup> As it is not an image drawn from the natural world or common experience, this metaphor requires specific cultural knowledge to make sense of the transliterated Sanskrit. In short, the metaphors used to convey illusion are not a homogenous set, and the exploitation of a given metaphor leads to a distinct empha-

<sup>16</sup> *T* 1509, 25:101c19–21.

<sup>17</sup> The *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* contains several passages in which the phrase “flowers in the sky” is included among other metaphors for emptiness. Among many possible examples, see *T* 220, 5:1c4.

<sup>18</sup> On dreams in China, see Berthold Laufer, “Inspirational Dreams in Eastern Asia,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, 44, no. 172 (April–June 1931): 208–16. See also Michel Strickmann, “Dreamwork of Psycho-Sinologists: Doctors, Taoists, Monks,” in Carolyn T. Brown, ed., *Psycho-Sinology: The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1988), pp. 25–46, esp. 37–42 on Buddhist dreams. For later dream interpretation, see Richard E. Strassberg, *Wandering Spirits: Chen Shiyuan’s Encyclopedia of Dreams* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), especially the historical overview, pp. 1–27.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the city of the Gandharvas in South Asian traditions, see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions, and Other Realities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 268–79. The illusory city has its Sinitic analogue in palaces in the sky, as in the *Liezi*.

sis.<sup>20</sup> As some of these metaphors suggest, illusions may be produced by someone other than the perceiver; they thus have the potential to edify as well as delude.

Buddhist texts continue both to use illusion as a metaphor for the transience of the experienced world and to introduce illusions as part of the bodhisattva's work. In the passage from the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* quoted above, a text that links illusion to several other metaphors, the main issue is how the bodhisattva should frame his or her engagement with the phenomena of this world. The illusion here is the phenomenal world and the beings in it, something that bodhisattvas must bear in mind lest they become too attached.<sup>21</sup> Yet in some circumstances a bodhisattva or Buddha also produces illusions to provide edification or encouragement to those sentient beings who are the target of his or her efforts. The production of illusions becomes part of the salvific repertoire of buddhas and bodhisattvas, who consequently are often likened to the illusionist (*huanshi* 幻師, also 幻士) or *huanren*.<sup>22</sup>

Complicating the work of the bodhisattva, the assertion that all things are illusory must apply to the speaker as well as to what is spoken. This issue is a significant focus of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. As with *prajñāpāramitā* texts, the illusoriness of phenomena plays a prominent role in *Vimalakīrti's* teachings.

In preaching the Dharma, you should preach in the manner of the Dharma [ultimate reality]. The Dharma has no sentient beings because it is apart

<sup>20</sup> With the exception of the echo, all the metaphors in the illusion cluster are visual. David L. McMahan has recently argued that *mahāyāna* literature emphasized visuality over orality, and that the emphasis on knowledge gained through the eyes in early *mahāyāna* literature was a turn away from the traps of words and linguistic understanding. Discussing the connection of the discourse on emptiness to visions, he writes, "We have seen that the dialectic is itself an implicit critique of the capacities of language and conceptual, dualistic thinking, and further, that visual metaphors are often employed to indicate the mode of understanding that occurs upon the clearing away of delusive conceptions"; see his *Empty Vision: Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> This is an example of the sutra addressing not the audience within the sutra—bodhisattvas would be beyond such advice—but the imagined readers of the text, who do need reminding of their own illusory status.

<sup>22</sup> *Vimalakīrti* is the best-known example of the pedagogical use of illusions. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha likens his own work to that of the guide in the parable of the conjured city. See *T 262*, 9:26a23–25. For a similar example in the *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, see *T 220*, 5:277b11–18.

from the defilement of sentient beings. The Dharma has no self because it is apart from the defilement of the self. The Dharma has no lifespan because it is apart from the cycle of birth and death. The Dharma has no persons because the delimitations of past and future lives have been cut off. The Dharma is ever quiescent because it has eliminated all marks. The Dharma is without marks because there is nothing to serve as a condition. The Dharma is without names, because all language has been cut off. The Dharma is without preaching because it is removed from perception and contemplation. . . . Mulian, as the marks of the Dharma are like this, how can it be preached? Those who preach the Dharma do not preach or demonstrate. Those who listen to the Dharma neither hear nor understand it. This is like the conjurer who preaches the Dharma for conjured people. It is to establish this meaning that you should undertake preaching the Dharma.<sup>23</sup>

The accomplished layman Vimalakīrti here emphasizes the inexpressible nature of the Dharma, and attempts to undercut all attempts to make assertions about it. The key to this passage is the assertion that one should preach the Dharma in the manner of the Dharma, and that the Dharma's explication should reflect the nature of the Dharma. After the long list negating attributes of the Dharma, Vimalakīrti concludes that the act of explicating the Dharma is like the preaching of a conjurer for conjured people. Vimalakīrti's later explanation of his illness—that it is an act to edify the assembly—points to the way in which all the bodhisattva's activities are conjuring. That is, the conjurer himself has no more standing than the conjured audience, and the teaching reflects this.

At that time the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī asked Vimalakīrti, "How should the bodhisattva regard sentient beings?" Vimalakīrti said, "Just as the conjurer regards the people he has conjured up, so does the bodhisattva regard sentient beings. Like the wise man seeing the moon in the water, like seeing one's own face in the mirror, like seeing a heat mirage when it is hot, like the echo of a call, like foam on water, like bubbles on water, like the banana stem, like the clouds in the sky, like the duration of lightning, like a fifth great element, like a sixth aggregate (*skandha*), like a seventh sense, like a

<sup>23</sup> T 475, 14:540a4–8, a17–20. See also Burton Watson, *The Vimalakīrti Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 38–39.

thirteenth sense-field, like a nineteenth realm [of sensory cognition]<sup>24</sup>—the bodhisattva regards sentient beings as if they are like these things. Like form in the formless realm, like sprouts from scorched grain, like the view of the body held by a stream-winner [or advanced practitioner], like a non-returner entering into a womb [to be reborn], like the three poisons [of desire, anger, and ignorance] of the arhat, like greed, anger or violating the precepts by bodhisattvas who have attained forbearance, like Buddhas cultivating afflictions (*kleśas*),<sup>25</sup> like the blind seeing forms, like the cessation of one who has entered into the samādhi of utter extinction, like bird tracks in the sky, like the child of a barren women, like a conjured person giving rise to afflictions, like the sights of dream after waking, like being reborn after nirvana, like fire without smoke—this is how bodhisattvas regard sentient beings.<sup>26</sup>

As before, the metaphor of the conjurer, and his conjuring, appears in a long list of other metaphors. These metaphors indicate ephemerality, contradiction, and impossibility. Each of these images conveys a slightly different meaning. For example, the seventh sense does not exist. The bubble on the surface of the water, however, may be empty and of short duration, but in some sense it is *there*. A mirage and the reflection of the moon in water share the quality of being only appearance. Conjured illusions, on the other hand, are produced by someone, and, as this passage indicates, the bodhisattva is to regard sentient beings as the *conjurer* regards his conjured illusions. That is, the bodhisattva has agency in the creation of what is illusory and like the illusionist regards these creations with knowledge of how they came to be and the provisional nature of their existence.

Thus this passage instructs that the bodhisattva should regard sentient beings as apparitions and teach them in a manner reflecting the dharma. The logic of the sūtra suggests one way in which this might happen. Its philosophical climax appears in the chapter titled “Ru buer famen pin” 入不二法門品 (Entering into non-duality), in which a

<sup>24</sup> Each of these items represents an addition to a conventional list. Traditionally, there are only four great elements, five *skandhas*, six senses, twelve sense-fields, and eighteen realms of sensory cognition.

<sup>25</sup> As with the previous list, these are phenomena that do not occur: the stream-winner does not have incorrect views of the body, the non-returner will not be reborn, and so forth.

<sup>26</sup> T 14, 475:547a29-b12. See also Watson, p. 83.

series of bodhisattvas are given the opportunity to express their view of how to enter into non-duality. Vimalakīrti, who is the last to offer his opinion, remains silent, winning praise from Mañjuśrī as being truly able to enter the gate of non-duality. With the transition to the next chapter “Xiangji fo pin” 香積佛品 (Accumulated fragrance Buddha), the text moves from silence to legerdemain. It opens with the Buddha’s close disciple Śāriputra asking the most mundane of questions: How will everyone eat? Vimalakīrti responds by conjuring a bodhisattva (*huazuo pusa* 化作菩薩)<sup>27</sup> to go to a world made apparent through Vimalakīrti’s powers during samādhi, and to ask the Buddha of that land for food. Both strategies—the response of silence, and the use of conjuring—are attempts to model the correct understanding of the world through pedagogical forms.

A more spectacular instance of pedagogical or soteriological illusion appears at the end of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. In the last chapter of this sutra, “Ru fajie pin” 入法界品 (Entering into the Dharma-realm), Sudhana is granted a vision of a wondrous treasure-tower by Maitreya. The narrator of the sutra uses a series of analogies to evoke Sudhana’s experience.

Sudhana, in this way, while contemplating the tower, saw all around him the realm of ornamentation, with each part distinct and not muddled together. This was like a bhikṣu entering into trance in all places—whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, wherever he is in contemplation, the realm appears before him. It was like this for Sudhana as well: when he entered into contemplation of the tower, all realms were completely clear. It is as if there is a person who sees in the sky the Gandharva city replete with ornamentation all distinct and without obstruction. It is like the yakṣa palace and the palace of men existing in the same place without being interfused: each is in accord with its own karma so what is seen is not the same. It is like the great sea in which all the colors and forms of the three thousand worlds are reflected. It is like a conjurer who by means of his power of illusion manifests all kinds of illusions, through various kinds of effort. Sudhana’s experience was also like this. Because of Maitreya’s august spiritual power and the inconceivable power of the wisdom of illusion, because he knew all dharmas through the wisdom of illusion, and because he had attained the power of the freedom of the bodhisattva, Sudhana saw in the tower all the

<sup>27</sup> T 14, 475:552a.

ornamented, independent realms. At that time the bodhisattva Maitreya gathered his spiritual powers and entered into the tower, snapped his fingers and told Sudhana: “Good son, awake! Dharma-nature is like this. This is the appearance manifested by the wisdom of the bodhisattva’s knowledge of all dharmas and the coalescence of causes and conditions. Self-nature is like this—like an illusion, like a dream, like a shadow, like an image, in that none are [truly] achieved.” At that time Sudhana heard the snap of the fingers and arose from his samādhi.<sup>28</sup>

The conjured vision is produced from within a state of samādhi. Maitreya explains that the object of this vision was to show Sudhana the nature of reality, and that the principles of non-abiding and mutual interpenetration are better understood through experience rather than through discourse.<sup>29</sup> This passage, with its reference to “causes and conditions,” implies that Sudhana’s abilities and mental state contribute to the production of the vision. It likens Sudhana’s experience to a number of other mental states or visual images and, significantly, it compares that experience to the state of trance (*ding* 定) attained by the meditating bhikṣu. Sudhana’s own vision is due to the power of the “wisdom of illusion” (*huanzhi* 幻智) in addition to the bodhisattva’s use of spiritual power. That this vision emerges out of the powers of both the bodhisattva and the adept Sudhana is reinforced by a passage in the dialogue that takes place between the two when Sudhana seeks to understand what it is he has seen. When Sudhana inquires where the vision has gone, Maitreya responds that it has gone where it came from, whereupon Sudhana in turn presses him to elucidate the origin of the display. Maitreya explains:

It comes from the spiritual power of the wisdom of the bodhisattva and abides through reliance on the spiritual power of the bodhisattva’s wisdom.

<sup>28</sup> T 10, 279:437c5–21. See also Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (Boston: Shambala, 1993), p. 1498.

<sup>29</sup> Such visions are not unlike the uses of magic in the European Enlightenment: magic served the ends of education as well as to expose the workings of supposedly divine interventions; and illusion and ventriloquy were used to train the senses to recognize deception and to recognize the ease with which they are deceived. See Leigh Eric Schmidt, “From Demon Possession to Magic Show: Ventriloquism, Religion, and the Enlightenment” *Church History* 67.2 (1998): 274–304. For a contemporary perspective, see Stephen Macknik et al., “Attention and Awareness in Stage Magic: Turning Tricks into Research,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 9, no. 11 (November 2008): 871–79, doi:10.1038/nrn2473 (accessed May 18, 2009).

It goes nowhere, resides nowhere; it is not an assemblage and it is not constant. It is far away from such things. Sudhana! It is like when the nāga-king sends down rain: it does not come from his body, does not come from his mind, and does not accumulate, yet it is not unseen. But by means of the power of the nāga-king's thought, vast rains appear throughout the world. Like this, [his] realm is inconceivable. Sudhana! That instance of ornamentation is also like this. It does not reside in the inside, nor does it reside on the outside, yet it is not unseen. But owing to the power of the bodhisattva's august spirit and to the power of your good roots, you see this kind of thing. Sudhana! It is like the conjurer who produces all sorts of illusions. They come from nowhere and go nowhere. Although there is no coming and going, the power of illusion makes the illusions manifest and visible. That instance of ornamentation is also like this. It comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. Although there is no coming and going, yet by means of the practice of inconceivable power of the wisdom of illusion, and owing to the power of a past vow, it is manifest in this way.<sup>30</sup>

Sudhana's "good roots" (*shangen* 善根, alternatively translated by Thomas Cleary as "your own capacity") refers to the seeds planted by his virtuous behavior, and thereby involves him in this vision of liberation. While bodhisattvas can, and do, put on many amazing displays for the benefit of sentient beings, and in so doing manifest themselves in ways suited to the states of those sentient beings, this particular vision is not solely the bodhisattva's work. Rather, Sudhana's capacity or spiritual attainment facilitates his vision. Finally, the term "practice," or habituation (*guanxi* 慣習), also suggests the developmental aspect of the power of illusion: it is his understanding of illusion that makes it possible for him to see the illusion.

That both teacher and student contribute to the perception of illusion suggests the subjective and objective aspects of the metaphor. For example, expressions such as "illusory transformation" (*huanhua* 幻化) reflect the work of the illusionist and provide a description of the world. However, the expression "like illusion" (*ruhuan* 如幻) points to individual experience or perception; that is, if one perceives correctly, one sees the world as like illusion.<sup>31</sup> Sudhana's vision of the

<sup>30</sup> T 10, 279:438a3–14. See also Cleary's translation of this passage in his *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, p. 1499.

<sup>31</sup> This observation is drawn from Baba Shōhei's 馬場昌平 essay on the term "wisdom of illusion" (*huanzhi*) in the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*; see his "Nyū hokkai bon ni okeru genchi

treasure tower combines the production of the tower by Maitreya and Sudhana's own experience. This represents a shift from the use of illusion solely by the bodhisattva to an experience, drawing in part on the cultivation of visions, in which the illusion is the joint effort of conjurer and audience. The understanding that Sudhana gains from the experience is enlarged by his own contribution to its production.

Sudhana's participation in the construction of illusion raises the issues of how the metaphor of illusion informs practice and how the production of illusions might be used in this context. Sudhana's experience contrasts with that of Lao Chengzi in the *Liezi*, for, in the final chapter of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra*, Maitreya uses illusion as part of pedagogical efforts. Aside from such displays, however, the problem of how to see, or see through, illusion remains. As with the Chan tradition as a whole, Mingben's understanding of this issue is shaped primarily by the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*.<sup>32</sup> The sutra is practice-oriented, opening with Mañjuśrī inquiring about the "Dharma practice of the Tathāgata's originally pure causal stage" 如來本起清淨因地法行, specifically about how to give rise to a pure mind and get rid of all faults (*bing* 病).<sup>33</sup> In his reply, the Buddha explains the insubstantial nature of ignorance by referring to metaphors commonly connected with illusion, such as dreams or flowers in the sky.

Illusion emerges as a central theme in the second section of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, when the bodhisattva Samantabhadra makes further inquiries about practice. Although the question is first posed in a general way, Samantabhadra later elaborates on it, making clear that his concerns center on the possibility of practice in an illusory world. If both practitioner and practice are illusory, how can practice be efficacious, and on whom does it act?

World-honored one, if these sentient beings know that all is like an illusion, that body and mind are illusory, how can they practice within illusion by means of illusion? If all illusory natures are entirely destroyed, then there will be no mind. Who will carry out the practice? How can you again

---

ni tsuite" 入法界品に於ける幻智について, *Indogaku Bukkyō gaku kenkyū* 12.2 (1964): 641-44.

<sup>32</sup> For a reliable translation of this text, see A. Charles Muller, trans., *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999). I follow Muller's translation of the title of the sūtra.

<sup>33</sup> *T* 17, 842:913b11. I have consulted Muller's translation. The "causal stage" (*yindi* 因地) is the period of practice prior to the "result stage" (*guodi* 果地) of Buddhahood.



speak of practicing what is like an illusion? If all sentient beings originally do not practice, then they will ever dwell in illusory transformation within the cycle of birth-and-death, and never comprehend the illusory realm.

How may they be liberated from the mind of ignorant thoughts? Please, on behalf of all sentient beings of the latter age, [I ask] what expedient should we gradually practice to cause all sentient beings eternally to leave behind all illusions?<sup>34</sup>

This passage acknowledges that the teaching of illusion puts the unenlightened in a difficult position. The beginning practitioner can be told that the world around them is illusory and that the teachings have value only as expedients, but such an explanation does not necessarily lead to true understanding of illusion. Moreover, upon hearing that all phenomena are illusory, the practitioner may see no purpose to spiritual cultivation. Samantabhadra knows that practice is necessary, but he knows neither how to understand it, nor how it should be carried out.

In responding, the Buddha does not deflect the inquiry as flawed—as did the teacher in the *Liezi* passage—but, rather, answers the question. In his answer, the Buddha first names the practice he intends Samantabhadra to carry out: “On behalf of all the bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the latter age, you are able to practice the bodhisattva’s ‘illusion-like’ samādhi (*ruhuan sanmei* 如幻三昧). This expedient gradually will cause all sentient beings to separate from illusion.” The “‘illusion-like’ samādhi” is the meditative contemplation that all phenomena are illusory and well predates the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*. By way of explanation, a passage in the *Dazhi dulun* likens the bodhisattva’s contemplation of the illusory nature of the world to the conjurer’s production of illusions.<sup>35</sup> In his response to Samantabhadra, the Buddha then addresses what illusion means. In this passage, it is conceived of as unreal phenomena generated out of the absolute, the mind:

Good sons, the various illusions of sentient beings are produced from the perfectly enlightened marvelous mind of the Tathāgata. This is just as sky-flowers exist in the sky: Although the illusory flowers disappear, the nature

<sup>34</sup> T 17, 842:913c27–914a3. See also Muller, trans., *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, pp. 87–89, Yanagida Seizan, *Enkakukyō* 円覚經, in *Chūgoku senjutsu kyōten* 中国撰述經典, no. 1 (Chikuma Shobō, 1987), pp. 33–36.

<sup>35</sup> See T 25, 1509:418b17–23. Cited in Yanagida Seizan, *Enkakukyō*, p. 37.

of the sky is not destroyed. The illusory minds of sentient beings also disappear because of illusion. When all illusions have disappeared completely, the enlightened mind does not change. To speak of enlightenment on the basis of illusion is also called illusion. If you say there is enlightenment, then you have not yet separated from illusion. If you say there is no enlightenment, it is also like this. Thus when illusion disappears it is called “unchanged.”<sup>36</sup>

This passage returns to the allegory of flowers in the sky to explain illusion, suggesting that illusory phenomena emerge from an intrinsically pure ground. The sky-flowers are not real, and thus their disappearance has no effect on the nature of the sky. At a certain point—which is neither specified nor explained in this passage—the illusory mind will vanish, but this disappearance is also “based on illusion” (*yihuan* 依幻). That is, the disappearance of an illusory thing is itself unreal. This is an important point, because if the illusion were to disappear in some real way, the disappearance would suggest that formerly there was a real entity that could have disappeared, thereby granting what was said to be illusion the status of something real. Thus the eradication of illusion does not change the mind at all, and there is fundamentally no difference between before and after.

The assertion that the eradication of illusion does not change the mind makes it impossible to speak of either being enlightened or being unenlightened without remaining in illusion. Here a tension that is evident in the *Liezi* passage, and is also present in Mingben’s essay, comes to the fore. Speaking from a reliably enlightened and omniscient position, the Buddha explains how it is that sentient beings should practice:

Good sons! All bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the latter age should detach themselves from the realm of illusory transformation and falsity. By taking hold of the detachment from mind, you also detach from the mind as illusion. Detachment becomes illusion, and again you must detach from it. Detached from the detachment from illusion, you again detach yourself until there is nothing from which to be detached. This is getting rid of illusion. It is as if making a fire with two sticks: fire bursts forth, the wood is exhausted, ashes fly, and smoke is extinguished. Cultivating illusion by

<sup>36</sup> *T* 17, 842:914a10–15. I have consulted the translations of Muller, pp. 91–92, and Yanagida Seizan, *Enkakukyō*, pp. 38–41.

means of illusion is also like this. Although illusion is exhausted, you do not enter into extinction.<sup>37</sup>

The cure for illusion is to overcome the discriminating thought processes that posit terms like “illusion” and “real.” Disentangling from illusion means to detach oneself from the “mind as illusion” (*xin ru huan* 心如幻).<sup>38</sup> But the act of detachment itself is illusory and should not be taken as a new, real state. Thus this first stage of detachment is an illusion that one must transcend. The process continues in this fashion, with the practitioner ever vigilant for attachment to, or hypostatization of, the “separation from illusion” (*yuan li huan* 遠離幻). This amounts to a mental process of continual self-watchfulness and deconstructive analysis until there is no more illusion to be seen through, an intellectual vanishing point. The concluding metaphor of the fire and two sticks is meant to explain not the process of removing illusion, but the fact that an illusion is removing an illusion. The tension between two phenomena ultimately leads to their mutual destruction. Although this is the general sense of the metaphor, it is not wholly apt and requires additional clarification. The two sticks are consumed, but the resulting conflagration also must come to an end. Since the metaphor of a flame being extinguished is also used for the cessation of the cycle of transmigration, it could be misunderstood here as indicating that “cultivating illusion by means of illusion” will ultimately lead to *nirvāṇa*. However, the end-state is enlightenment, not extinction.

The *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* depicts enlightenment as the result of the removal of illusion: it centers around the definition of perfect enlightenment and the means by which it might be reached. The *sūtra* adds a soteriological dimension that was absent in the original metaphor of illusion. Earlier Madhyamakan treatments of *Prajñā-*

<sup>37</sup> T 17, 842:914a15–20. See also Muller, p. 95; Yanagida Seizan, pp. 38–41.

<sup>38</sup> The term *li* 離 has a wide range of meanings: to separate, to eliminate, to be free from, to detach from, and to transcend. Within translations from primary texts I have used “detach” and “detachment” but refer to the idea of *li* using other of the possible translations in discussions of these passages. On the use of this term in early Chan texts, see Robert B. Zeuschner, “The Concept of *li-nien* (“being free from thinking”) in the Northern Line of Ch’an Buddhism,” in *Early Ch’an in China and Tibet*, ed. Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster (Berkeley: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1983), pp. 131–48; cited and discussed in Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), pp. 199–203.

*pāramitā* materials used illusion to assert an epistemic fallibility. Likewise, the passage from the *Liezi* suggests the impossibility of studying illusion, undercutting the reliability of any knowledge in much the fashion of the *Zhuangzi*. That the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* asserts an end state beyond illusion is a reflection of the pervasive influence of tathāgatagarbha thought, and of the belief in the innate enlightenment of all beings.

Even though the description of progressive detachment from illusion would seem to be a gradual process, the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* clearly conceives of enlightenment—the final insight into illusion—as a *sudden* discernment: “Good sons, when you know illusion, then you can separate from it, without recourse to expedient means. Separating from illusion is just enlightenment, without graduated steps” 善男子，知幻即離，不作方便。離幻即覺亦無漸次。<sup>39</sup> The bodhisattva need not expect to spend a long time refining his realization; freedom from illusion is just enlightenment. Although the focus of this discussion is the intersection of practice and illusion, much room remains for question and interpretation. The entire passage is itself an *allegory* for getting rid of illusion, as the term “separating from” (*li* 離) likens mental activity to a physical action. Indeed all description of mental processes are metaphorical since the actual content of the mind, prior to language, cannot be described through language. Because the metaphor can only point in the direction of real cognitive activity, the process by which illusion is transcended seems especially in need of elaboration for a practitioner who is interested in attaining this end.

The *sūtra* returns to the role of illusion in practice in a later section, in which Bodhisattva Mastery of Awesome Power (Weide Zizai 威德自在) requests clarification on the methods of practice. The Buddha responds by outlining three primary ways of practice, those of *śamatha*, of *samāpatti*, and *dhyāna*.<sup>40</sup> The first of these, *śamatha*, is described as the observance of thoughts based on the enlightened mind, which then produces tranquil wisdom (*jing hui* 靜慧), and from

<sup>39</sup> T 17, 842:914a21.

<sup>40</sup> The text gives these terms *shemo* 奢摩, *sanmōboti* 三摩鉢提, and *chan* 禪. The former, *śamatha*, is usually translated into Chinese as *zhi* 止, a form of meditation in which the mind is concentrated or stilled. *Samāpatti* refers to a state of tranquility or equanimity, and is translated as *dengzhi* 等至.

this the body, mind, and defilements are extinguished. The second method, *samāpatti*, employs illusions. The Buddha explains:

Good sons, there are some bodhisattvas who awaken to pure, perfect enlightenment. By means of their pure, enlightened minds they understand that this mind and nature, along with the senses and their objects, are all transformations caused by illusion. Thus they give rise to all sorts of illusion in order to get rid of illusion. They transform all illusions and thereby awaken the illusory masses. By giving rise to illusion, they are able to produce great compassion and tranquility within. All bodhisattvas from this give rise to practice and gradually advance. This contemplation of illusion, because it is not the same as illusion, it is not equivalent to illusory contemplation. Because both are illusions, illusory forms are eternally left behind. This marvelous practice that the bodhisattvas have perfected is like sprouts growing from the earth. This expedience is called *samāpatti*.<sup>41</sup>

The result of awakening is the perception that all is illusion, which in turn allows the bodhisattva to use illusion both externally, in saving others, and internally, as a means to compassionate tranquility. As the Buddha explains toward the end of the passage, the contemplation of illusion is itself not illusion and thus not an illusory contemplation. Although this seems to provide the practice of contemplation with a slightly different status so that it may remove illusion, ultimately that which contemplates illusion is also illusory, and all such marks must be transcended. The sūtra makes plain in other places that any wisdom or mental state achieved through practice is also illusory and harbors the potential of becoming an obstruction.

*Samāpatti*, with its emphasis on illusion, is the second of three methods. The third, *dhyāna*, is presented in the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* as neither availing itself of the enlightened mind, as in the first expedient practice, nor relying on illusions. It goes beyond the prior two methods, transcending both the obstructed and unobstructed realms 超過礙無礙境, offering a way that balances and surpasses the first two alternatives.

Chan texts continue to use illusion and the conjuring of illusionists, alongside other images, to express impermanence and lack of essential being. Moreover, when Chan authors assess their tradition, they also apply what might be termed the critique of illusoriness to

<sup>41</sup> T 17, 842:917c15–26. I have consulted Muller, p. 173.

that tradition. In this rhetoric, the Buddhas and patriarchs are no longer to be revered as having a superior understanding, and their teachings are not to be regarded as having special status. Likewise words and language have only limited value as the means to capture ultimate reality or the experience of awakening. This surfaces as especially significant in relation to the symbolic systems of the Chan tradition itself, as Chan discourse is in tension with its own injunctions to avoid reliance on words and letters. On one level, this is a matter of rhetoric, since Chan authors derived power from claims to avoid the pitfalls of other Buddhist practice; yet it is also a matter of serious philosophical engagement, as witnessed in the work of the Chan teachers Dahui Zonggao and Mingben, both of whom engaged in serious attempts to imagine different functions for language. The *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* clearly had a major influence on Mingben in his formulation of the theory of illusion. A long passage in his *Dongyu xihua* 東語西話 summarizes the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment's* position on separating from the thought of illusion. In particular Mingben emphasizes that in this process of separation one should avoid creating “expedients like the mind of separating from the subject and from the object, and all such expedients” 能離所離之心皆方便.<sup>42</sup> This echoes both the advice in the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* against becoming attached to detachment and Mingben's arguments elsewhere that practitioners need to be wary of overly intellectualizing their self-cultivation.

In its perspective Mingben's essay stands apart from the texts discussed thus far. The sūtra literature speaks from an omniscient point of view; because the author of a scripture is hidden, discussions of illusion within that scripture are not troubled by the specter of illusoriness. Mingben's position, however, is more problematic. Although “the illusory man” may be a (semi-)fictional persona, it does point to Mingben as a historical personage. Mingben would seem to be bound by something of an Epimenidean liar's paradox, here being unable to exempt himself and his teachings from assertions of illusoriness. From the first two characters “illusory man” (*huanren*), Mingben attempts to play with the necessarily illusory nature of his text through devices suggesting fictionality. “The Family Instructions of ‘Illusory Abiding’” begins by setting a scene that evokes countless exchanges between master and disciple in Chan literature. All such conversations, as set

<sup>42</sup> *GL*, 32167a.

down and preserved as representative of a given figure (if not canonical), are in some sense fictionalizations. The actors play parts—as general as the Master playing the “Master” and the student acting as the “student”—but more specifically, they play those parts with the gestures and phrases that are associated with each figure. This fictionalization appears even more clearly in the opening passage of Mingben’s essay, the scene of the epigraph, in which an illusory man on an illusory seat raises an illusory whisk to instruct illusory disciples.

Although this passage may be describing a Chan setting, the initial query has no specifically Buddhist content: “Why is the pine tree straight and the brambles crooked? Why is the swan white and the crow black?” The interlocutor is not asking to be taught Chan, or to be told the secrets of the patriarchs; rather he or she is asking about how various objects come to have their defining attributes. The question is not about how things are named—“Why is a black bird called a crow?” is an easy question—but about the basic identity of things. The list of items is a pair of plants and a pair of birds, each pair being in opposition. The implication, though not spelled out, is that the question is also connected to the way in which such opposites serve to delineate the world. Birds are perceived as being white or black, or some admixture of the two, falling somewhere on a scale between the two poles.

The images of pine, brambles, swan, and crow are frequently also found in poetry, though rarely all together. Indeed, the function of such images in poetry is often indirectly to signal straightness or crookedness. Their effect at the opening of this passage is to increase the essay’s literary, or fictional, quality. Beginning such a dialogue with the names of historical personages and geographical places would serve to suggest that the conversation had actually occurred and to obscure the constructed nature of such a conversation. By removing the traces of the real and using language that is also at home in poetry, Mingben frames the conversation as a kind of fiction. Yet as with his name, boundaries are blurred here: sections of the essay read as plausible sermons from Mingben, in line with the tone and subject of his teachings elsewhere. This doubleness of language—suggesting both fictionality and recorded speech—is critical to Mingben’s aim, as he attempts in this essay to show how language might be used in the realm of illusion.

In keeping with the dramatic dialogue of this opening exchange, Mingben—as illusory man—responds by using a prop.

The illusory man held up his whisk, and summoned the assembly, stating, “When I hold up this illusory whisk, it is not upright of itself but relies on illusion in order to be upright; if it is horizontal, it is not horizontal of itself but relies on illusion in order to be horizontal. If I hold it between my fingers, it is not of itself between my fingers, but relies on illusion to be held between my fingers. If I set it down, it is not of itself set down, but relies on illusion to be set down. Look carefully, and this illusion is endless in the ten directions and fills the three periods. When it is upright, it is not upright; when horizontal, it is not horizontal; when grasped, it is not grasped; and when set down, it is not set down. In this way you should realize fully without obstruction, and then you will see that the pine is straight by relying on illusion, the brambles are crooked by relying on illusion, the swan is white by relying on illusion, the crow is black by relying on illusion. Leaving aside this illusion, [then] you see that the pine is originally not straight, the brambles are originally not crooked, and since the swan is not white, how could the crow be black?”<sup>43</sup>

The whisk mentioned here is one of the material objects signifying status as a high-ranking monk.<sup>44</sup> In the Chan tradition, when the Master ascended the hall to offer teaching, he very often did so with whisk in hand. Because the original function of the whisk was to clear away dust or chase off insects, as a lecture device the whisk is metaphorically associated with clearing away confusion or mental obstacles.<sup>45</sup> Here the whisk is an appropriate prop to dislodge the obstruction of illusion.

In this section the master makes the point that the whisk does not move of its own but instead takes different positions by relying on illusion. Of course, it is the master’s own movements that alter the position of the whisk; in this sense the master himself conducts the illusion. He applies this to the other objects mentioned, saying that each assumes its characteristics by relying on illusion. However, if illusion is something

<sup>43</sup> *GL*, 32160b.

<sup>44</sup> Although it most likely originated in India, the whisk is not a uniquely Buddhist object; it was used as an aid for debaters and conversationalists in the secular tradition as well, associated in particular with the “pure conversation” (*qingtan* 清談) tradition. The whisk is also often called *zhuwei* 麈尾. For a discussion of the whisk as it relates to the *ruyi* 如意, also used when lecturing, see John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 145–46.

<sup>45</sup> In another instance a Chan master uses his staff symbolically to drive out illusion. See *Mingjue Chanshi yulu* 明覺禪師語錄, T 1996, 47:684c.



to be relied upon, in what sense is it still illusion? How is this different from saying something is *like* illusion or is itself illusion? Although it would be possible to read these lines as elevating illusion to the status of ontological ground, akin to the use of emptiness and buddha-nature in other contexts, the passage instead concerns the fact that we have no access to the world except through illusory distinctions. To put it in another way, Buddhists have long distinguished between two levels of truth, the conventional and the absolute. The conventional truth is the world as experienced on a day-to-day basis, imputing permanence and independent existence both to people and to material objects. On the level of absolute truth, however, all phenomena are devoid of any enduring existence. As Chinese exegetes realized early on, the absolute truth is also at risk of being considered an enduring phenomenon; they therefore emphasized the ultimate identity of the two truths.<sup>46</sup> Mingben takes the position that looking for and becoming attached to an alternative to reality—an absolute truth—is a more salient risk for his audience. Thus the audience needs to understand that they are bound by conventional truth and that illusion saturates every aspect of existence:

You should know that this illusion obstructs your eyes and gives rise to illusory views, permeates your consciousness and gives rise to illusory distinctions. You see straight as not crooked and indicate white as not dark. With all these stratagems and methods, you have a nature and are born, caught up in birth-and-death from the distant past to today.<sup>47</sup>

From this passage, Mingben turns to argue that Buddhism and Chan are also bound by a perpetuating illusion. The linguistic pivot for this move is the phrase “with all these stratagems and methods” (*bian ji zhu fa* 徧計諸法), in which *fa* can be translated both as “method” or “Dharma,” indicating Buddhist teachings. Mingben accuses the Buddha of participating in this deception, then cites Yunmen’s threat to kill the Buddha, asserting that this comment merely adds to the illusion

<sup>46</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this line of thinking. On the two truths, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 69–72; Paul L. Swanson, *Foundations of T’ien-T’ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two-Truth Theory in Chinese Buddhism* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989); Whalen W. Lai, “Once More on the Two Truths: What Does Chi-tsang Mean by the Two Truths as ‘Yüeh-chiao’?” *Religious Studies* 19.4 (1983): 505–21.

<sup>47</sup> *GL*, 3216ob.

(*tian yi chong huan yi* 添一重幻翳). Mingben revises the assertion that the Buddha did not preach a fixed set of doctrines: “At that time—during the Buddha’s forty-nine years and over three hundred assemblies—one side asked illusory questions and the other gave illusory answers” 當時四十九年三百餘會，彼以幻問，此以幻答. This teaching then flourished through literature like “echoes” and produced “the illusory [concepts] of ‘sudden’ and ‘gradual,’ and ‘partial’ and ‘perfected’” 其幻頓幻漸，幻偏幻圓—categories that indicate the classification of teachings. Mingben points out that Kāśyapa’s smile when the Buddha raised a flower, the first transmission of Chan, was likewise illusory. This example opens a list of Chan conventions and allusions, all prefaced with the term illusory: Bodhidharma “faces an illusory wall” (*mian huan bi* 面幻壁), other patriarchs “write illusory gathas” (*shu huan jie* 書幻偈), “polish illusory tiles” (*mo huan zhuan* 磨幻磚), or think in terms of “illusory guests and illusory hosts” (*huan bin huan zhu* 幻賓幻主).<sup>48</sup> This is the patrimony of a flourishing Chan lineage, and in his description of that lineage’s success, Mingben emphasizes the literary qualities of Chan works: “Eloquent are their words, crafty are their techniques; lofty is their style, pleasing are their rhymes, majestic are their commands, and great is their school” 文其言，巧其機，高其風，逸其韻，峻其令，大其家. These expressions and devices, however, do not transcend the realm of illusion; Mingben concludes this section by noting: “No one is able to escape from this illusion” 無有一人能出其幻者.<sup>49</sup>

Although escape is impossible, how one positions oneself in relation to illusion can be changed, and Mingben next suggests that words and letters are the site of this transformation of viewpoint.

Illusion! Its purpose is perfect, its meaning complete, its essence grand and its function universal! It has functioned together with all the Buddhas and patriarchs from beginning to end, exhausting kalpas that are as numberless as grains of sand. Yet there are still those who are not able to understand this great illusion in the forms of words and images.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Nanyue Huairang 南嶽懷讓 (677–744) rubbed a tile, saying he was trying to produce a mirror, in order to demonstrate the futility of sitting Chan to achieve Buddhahood to his disciple Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (707–786). Analyzing Chan encounters in terms of “host” and “guest” was a device of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866–867).

<sup>49</sup> This discussion is found at *GL*, 32160b–c.

<sup>50</sup> *GL*, 32160c.

Illusion is pervasive, but “forms of words and images” cause students to go astray. As words are the entry point for so many students, they likewise provide an important opening for the perception of illusoriness. However, the illusoriness of words and images applies equally to Chan and means that no one strand of Chan may be prized as less illusory and more penetrating than another. To make this point, Mingben mockingly lists different strains of Chan that are variously praised or condemned by his contemporaries. This evaluative mindset shows that students still allow emotion to dictate their approach, and picking and choosing among teachers is just another kind of poison (*du* 毒). The words and gestures of these great Chan masters were illusions as well, and should not be taken as absolutes. He describes their verbal utterances as “spitting out a phrase and putting forth a command” (*fan tu yi ci, chu yi ling* 凡吐一辭, 出一令).<sup>51</sup> In his choice of words, Mingben suggests the physical, non-deliberative aspect of speech, something he will develop later in the essay. Emphasizing the physical aspect of language—how words become instantiated in materiality—points to alternative uses of language.

Before students can move on to such alternatives, however, they must overcome the tendency to treat certain words as worthy of special attention. Mingben mocks those who spread texts before them, making careful notes in the hope of attaining some understanding, and again suggests that insight must be based in bodily experience rather than in intellectual discrimination:

There are men who take the texts of Chan, read them broadly, and make extensive notes, hoping to match the meaning of the patriarch coming from the west and achieve the dissemination of the true Dharma. How could the way of not establishing words and directly pointing at the human mind end up twisted like this? If one really and truly wants to realize this Dharma-gate of great illusion, then ask your entire body (*quanshen* 全身) to enter it, and immediately there will not be the least obstruction.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *GL*, 32160c. To “spit out phrases” is associated with producing poetry, and “putting forth a command” is connected with the work of officials. These present a contrast between the figurative and functional uses of language. Neither necessitates intellectual analysis. With these choices, Mingben may have been advocating certain types of speech-acts over others.

<sup>52</sup> *GL*, 32160c.

Rather than pursue an exercise in intellectual correspondences, the would-be Chan student is advised to “enter directly” the teaching with his (or her) “entire body.” We are here put in mind of Sudhana entering the treasure-tower, where all realms coexist without obstruction and where bodily experience was seen as the most appropriate means of gaining understanding.

Those enlightenment experiences to which Mingben makes most frequent reference reinforce the importance of bodily understanding. For his students, Mingben selects examples of insight gained through sensory perception rather than intellectual apprehension:

If you wish to compare with other ancient men who have liberated themselves and become enlightened, this is not different than the vast difference between heaven and earth. [One should] only be like Xiangyan striking bamboo,<sup>53</sup> Lingyun seeing the peach [blossoms],<sup>54</sup> Taiyuan hearing the horn, and Dongshan crossing water.<sup>55</sup> In this way, everyone in this cohort extinguishes the thieving mind and dissipates intellectualization. Subject and object are both eliminated, gain and loss are both forgotten. It is like empty space joining with empty space, or water striking water. It is certainly not forced, and how could it require covering one’s eyes? Where there is no knowing or perception, one casts off senses and sense objects, and of themselves words are silenced and motions stilled. One does not need anything extraneous. This is the great gate of liberation. Only those whose mind is dead and consciousness extinguished, and whose emotions have

<sup>53</sup> *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄, T 2076, 51:284a. When asked to express his state before he was born, Xiangyan could not do so. Sensing that he had failed, he departed. Some time later he was clearing brush in the mountain and heard a tile strike bamboo, and thereby he was awakened.

<sup>54</sup> The Tang monk Lingyun Zhiqin 靈雲志勤 was awakened after seeing plum blossoms on Mount Wei 滄山 after a protracted period of study. See for example T 2076, 51:285a23–26.

<sup>55</sup> Two episodes in the record of Dongshan refer to his crossing a river. In the first, he asks his master Yunyan 雲巖 how he should respond if asked to draw the teacher at a later point. Yunyan paused and told him to respond “Just this person” or “Just this man of Han,” adding that he should be cautious given his new burden. Dongshan did not understand in the moment, but crossing a bridge at a later point glimpsed his face in the water and had an awakening. In the second episode, Dongshan inquired how to cross a river, and was told “Do not wet your feet.” Dongshan scolded his older companion, who in turn asked him how he would cross a river, whereupon Dongshan replied, “Feet do not get wet.” The context suggests that Mingben was most likely referring to the first episode. See T 1986b, 47:520a17–23, 521a28–b2; William F. Powell, trans., *The Record of Tung-shan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986), pp. 27–28, 34.

been eliminated and views rejected, are able to enter. If half a speck of conscious thought has not been extinguished, even if one passes through past and present and surpasses words and images, wishing to clasp hands with the ancients in the sea of great extinction, how is this different from a firefly adding its light to the sun? They are not the same kind. Nowadays, even if one wanted to join others in responding to a situation, one could not just say it this way and stop.<sup>56</sup>

Observing the large gap between students of today and the achievements of past Chan teachers, Mingben attributes the distance between these two to pedantic overthinking. Of the four examples of Chan masters becoming enlightened, two are connected to sound, specifically nonverbal sound. The other two examples concern vision, and the objects that are seen are connected to metaphors of illusion. Dongshan seeing his image as he crossed the river is clearly connected to the metaphor of the moon in water and that of images in a mirror. Seeing his image in water provides Dongshan with a sudden insight into the unstable nature of personal identity. Plum blossoms are associated with the endurance of adversity, but like all flowers they also suggest ephemerality and change. After offering a standard description of the necessity of eliminating deliberative thought, Mingben avers that just explaining this is not enough and suggests that previous Chan strategies have lost potency. What Mingben proposes is to replace these stale methods with illusion writ large:

One avails oneself of a pen the size of five Mount Sumeru, dipping into the water of the four seas. One faces Pūrva-Videha in the east to make an extension [𠂇, the first brush stroke], [then] heads southward to Jambudvīpa, turning corners [𠂇, the second stroke]. [Turning] toward Uttarakuru in the north, one slowly makes a dot [丶, the third stroke, making 𠂇 the left portion of the character]. Turning to face the western continent of Godāna,<sup>57</sup> one presses out half [the character] for “knife” [𠂇, the fourth stroke]. Together these [brush strokes] form the character for illusion, 𠂇, which is suspended at the top of the empty space that exhausts the ten directions, so that all those in this great land who have eyes will see, those with ears will hear, those with bodies will feel, and those with consciousness will understand.

<sup>56</sup> *GL*, 32160c–61a.

<sup>57</sup> Mount Sumeru is the cosmic mountain at the center of the world, and Pūrva-Videha, Jambudvīpa, Uttarakuru, and Godāna are the four continents that surround it.

Now know that the Buddhas of the past have long ago already realized nirvana in this. The present Buddha achieved complete perfect enlightenment in this. The future Buddha will open the true Dharma-eye in the midst [of this illusion]. Even the bodhisattvas as numerous as grains of sand do not leave this place when they cultivate the six pāramitās, revolve the four minds,<sup>58</sup> save all sentient beings, and cut off the bonds of suffering. Even among the endless sages and worthies there is no one who does not rely on this illusion to be replete with the power of spiritual transformation and to attain freedom.<sup>59</sup>

This section is a critical part of Mingben's essay, offering a description of the various strokes used to write the character for illusion. Because the character is written on a cosmic scale, appropriately colossal implements are employed, and by using the four continents as guideposts the character for illusion encompasses the entire world. The character *huan* then rests at the top of the cosmos, permeating the world and suffusing the senses and bodily experiences of all beings. Because this illusion is everywhere, it is the site of realization of the Buddhas of the three ages and the place of all spiritual attainments.<sup>60</sup>

On the face of it, this statement makes no new philosophical assertions: illusion pervades the universe. However, with this new metaphor of the calligraphic *huan*, Mingben introduces an approach to language different from that which he has criticized in the earlier portions of this essay (and elsewhere).<sup>61</sup> In so doing he is working within the discourse of *kanhua* Chan and adopting its language. *Kanhua* Chan had developed in the Southern Song as a reaction against literary or scholarly uses of collections of Chan cases (*gongan*). These cases were

<sup>58</sup> There are several sets of four minds, or thoughts (*si xin* 四心). Given that the phrases immediately preceding and following concern the salvation of sentient beings, "four thoughts" may here refer to a set including the "extensive thought" (*guang da xin* 廣大心) of the bodhisattva that includes all sentient beings in his or her salvific efforts; the "foremost thought" (*di yi xin* 第一心), that the bodhisattva aims to cause all beings to attain nirvāṇa; the "constant thought" (*chang xin* 常心) that sentient beings are fundamentally empty; and the "non-distorted thought" (*bu dian dao xin* 不顛倒) that does not imagine sentient beings to have marks. See *Foguang da cidian* (Gaoxiong: Foguang chubanshe, 1989), 2:1671.

<sup>59</sup> *GL*, 32161a.

<sup>60</sup> This passage distantly echoes a verse in *Dafangguang fo Huanyan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經, likening the mind's creation of the world to an artist who paints a picture without being aware that he is doing so. *T* 289, 10:102a11–b1.

<sup>61</sup> For example, see *GL*, 32118a, 32162, 32173b.

based on anecdotes about Chan masters and their students, often recording their exchanges on practical and doctrinal issues. Given that Chan admits of no fixed position that can be termed correct—any articulation claiming to be definitive would necessarily fall within the realm of dualistic thought—these exchanges, as Robert Sharf has argued, can be read as “rhetorical models” of how to deal with such issues.<sup>62</sup> Sharf further suggests that *gongan* were used as templates for meeting with the abbot and as such were a means of training monks in the modes of Chan speech.<sup>63</sup> As collections were compiled to incorporate the original *gongan* case, as well as commentaries in both prose and verse form, some Chan teachers came to see these collections as problematic. On the one hand, collections such as the *Biyān lù* 碧巖錄 (Blue Cliff record) could be read as an erudite form of competition that maintained the rhetorical spirit of the original *gongan*; that is, they were personal encounters played out in literary form. Yet, studying the text and mastering its attendant literary elaborations could become a distraction for students. Frequent enjoinders against intellectual approaches to these collections, in Mingben’s writings and elsewhere, indicate that Chan masters perceived this as a problem for their students, who likely were accustomed to the commentarial practices of other kinds of texts.

If literary and scholarly approaches to *gongan* were obstacles, so too were certain meditative approaches. Dahui Zonggao was a defender of the Linji tradition on guard against both hazards, and his understanding of the potential risks to practitioners informed his instruction to students; through the practice of *kanhua*, he attempted to chart a path between analytical verbiage and block-like sitting. *Kanhua* was a means of changing how students related to words. Dahui Zonggao tried to keep words as central to the practice, but he re-deployed them so that they could serve to undo entanglements to other uses of words. Foreshadowing the concern about ways of relating to language was Yuanwu Keqin 圓悟克勤 (1063–1135), the compiler of the *Blue Cliff Record* who laid the groundwork for the *huatou* practice

<sup>62</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “How to Think with Chan *Gong’an*,” in *Thinking with Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Charlotte Furth, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Ping-chen Hsiung (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), pp. 229–30.

<sup>63</sup> Sharf, pp. 233–35.

advocated by his student Dahui. He suggested alternative ways of relating to language: “Hear clearly the phrases outside sound; do not seek within meaning” 聞清聲外句，莫向意中求。<sup>64</sup> This advice rejects the recitation of a text as well as intellectual probing. Expanding on the theme of what to do with words, Dahui advocated attention to *huatou* as the focus of practice. Such words resisted analysis, and were deemed “live phrases” (*huoju* 活句) rather than those “dead phrases” (*siju* 死句) that fostered intellectual distinctions. In Dahui’s description, observation of the *huatou* served to generate “great doubt” (*dayi* 大疑) within the practitioner. This great doubt was then released by an external stimulus that caused a sudden and dramatic shift in perception. Dahui explains the process as follows:

Here just observe the *huatou*. A monk asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have buddha-nature or does it lack it?” Zhaozhou said, “It lacks it (*wu* 無).” When you observe it, do not use extensive evaluation, do not try to explicate it, do not seek for understanding, do not take it up when you open your mouth, do not make meaning when you raise it, do not fall into vacuity, do not hold onto your mind waiting for enlightenment, do not catch a hold of it when your teacher speaks, and do not lodge in a shell of no concerns. But keep hold of it at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. “Does a dog have buddha-nature or not?” Hold onto this “lack” (*wu*) until it gets ripe, where verbal discussion and mental evaluation cannot reach. The square inch of your mind will be in a muddle. When it is as if you have clamped your teeth around a tasteless piece of iron and your will does not retreat—when it is like this, then that is good news!<sup>65</sup>

Here the procedure for using the *huatou* is largely explained by negation: One is *not* to evaluate or subject the *huatou* to interpretation, or

<sup>64</sup> T 1997, 47:719b, cited in Ding-hwa Evelyn Hsieh, “Yuan-wu K’o-ch’i’n’s (1063–1135) Teaching of Ch’an *Kung-an* Practice: A Transition from the Literary Study of Ch’an *Kung-an* to the Practical *K’an-hua* Ch’an,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 17.1 (1994): 80. On the development of *kanhua* practice, see Robert E. Buswell, Jr., “The ‘Short-cut’ Approach of *K’an-hua* Meditation: The Evolution of a Practical Subitism in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism,” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987), pp. 321–77.

<sup>65</sup> T 1998, 47:901c27–902a6. This passage is also translated and discussed in Morten Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute Over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty Chan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), p. 108.



to figure it out through exchanges with one's teacher. The most positive suggestion comes through metaphor, when the practitioner is advised to gnaw on the word like tasteless iron. Although the passage—and indeed the practice—would suggest a visual approach to the word, the verb Dahui chooses in his explanation deserves note. Twice he instructs the student to “take hold of” (*ti si* 提撕) the word *wu*, using a physical act for something abstract. This passage relates to the removal of illusion advocated by the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* in that Dahui employs a series of negations and uses a physical metaphor as well. Where the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* speaks of negating each step of detachment through a further detachment, Dahui lists the methods to be avoided in *kanhua* Chan. Both texts also use a physical metaphor, but for Dahui the verb indicates taking up something within the mind, rather than an act of distancing.

Like Dahui, Mingben promotes a kind of physical engagement with words, but he emphasizes the written aspect of the word rather than its sound. In keeping with his emphasis on bodily or physical aspects of practice, he envisions that writing the character requires physical engagement. This is not an intellectual inquiry into the character *huan*, but a performance of it. The meaning of the word is secondary to its enactment. Although operating within illusion, Mingben is in some sense the author of this particular illusion, the one who avails himself of the brush. In the subsequent section, Mingben indicates he has provided a *written* manifestation of his teaching.

Today, especially for you, I have taken on the appearance of sketching and set out [this teaching] for you. As I have said before, just take your whole body and directly enter; in all places you will straightaway be able to distinguish the dots and strokes [of writing], and in all places its use will be manifest. Along with the Buddhas of the three time periods and the historical patriarchs, you will match their meaning and activity and, like them, emerge and disappear. How could there be blockages or obstructions? Would this, in preserving seeing and hearing, still block the effects of cultivation?<sup>66</sup>

This section takes us closer to Mingben's prescriptions for practice. Repeating what he said before, Mingben states that the “whole body” enters. He characterizes what he is doing as “sketching” (*mohua* 模畫),

<sup>66</sup> *GL*, 32161a.

a term that refers more to drawing than to using words. Even as he may be describing his own writing of the text, he emphasizes the nonverbal aspects of putting pen to paper. (Indeed, this may refer to his own calligraphic practice.) But here he suggests that after one enters, dots and strokes will become distinguishable. On the one hand, Mingben may be implying that, through the perception of each element of the written character, one can enjoy the world as the script of illusion. Yet the act of entering into the character also shows the way one might approach *kanhua* meditation. Mingben is a strong advocate of Dahui's approach to Chan contemplation. Like Dahui, he too finds metaphor the best way to convey the process of contemplating the *huatou*. Writing a character differs from such abstract cognitive tasks as "extensive evaluation" (*bo liang* 博量) described in the opening of the Dahui passage quoted above. The practice of observing the word is significant in that it does not eschew language and does not claim that language is always an obstruction. Rather, it indicates that one must approach words in a certain way. Mingben, by juxtaposing his critique of over-intellectualization as illusory with the image of the calligraphic *huan*, likewise tries to propose a new metaphor for understanding what to do with language in a Chan context.

Continuing his discussion of practice with the *huatou*, Mingben describes the state of tension that one must generate in order to be awakened. The metaphors and allusions he uses—biting one's head up against a steel wall, gnawing on a tasteless morsel, and standing on a tall pole—are common and represent no innovation on Mingben's part, but he has chosen metaphors that are all connected to physical or tactile experiences. Into this metaphorical matrix Mingben introduces illusion:

You should know that the teaching of great illusion is under your feet; you do not need to move in the least. Only wait for your emotions to dissipate and your views to be extinguished, and you will tread on it as you walk. Then you will know that Taiyuan's hearing the horn and Dongshan's crossing water are not separate from your own self. At this point you must know you have entered into the Dharma-gate of great illusion, and with a kick you kick over [deluded views] without leaving a trace. So begins the liberation of a great man.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> *GL*, 32161b.

The significant metaphor in this passage is that of walking and movement, a physical transit of “the teaching of great illusion.” The aim of *kanhua* practice is to have the same mind as the previous Chan masters, and the experiences Mingben cites involve hearing and doing. Then, noting that one should not be happy to reach this attainment, he uses this observation to return to the failings of contemporary students. First on his list of complaints is the pursuit of “intellectual understanding” (*jiehui* 解會); as he continues on, he additionally criticizes contemporaries for looking for an easy path. Accounts of the patriarchs, he says, have made the awakening seem easy, and students of his age tend to focus on the awakening rather than on the difficult periods of cultivation that precede it. Next Mingben returns to the written character of *huan*:

It is just like explaining the character “illusion”: those of past and present all know that, if one wants to search for a person within it, [then] one shakes one’s arms and enters, inserts oneself and sits, and looses one’s feet and travels, [all] within this illusion. [This is] freely functioning (*ren yi er yong* 任意而用), letting go and gathering up. All these freedoms are difficult to find in men.<sup>68</sup>

Again, the activity of illusion is physical, having to do with bodily positions and movement. The ability to “function freely” is to accord with circumstances, and emerges as a key attribute of being in illusion. The idea of “freely functioning” is related to the work of the illusionist, whose transformations change to accord with varied situations and audiences.

Mingben also refers to the earlier Tiantai 天台 formulation of three truths. This formulation developed out of the two-truths system, to which a third level, called the mean (*zhong* 中), was added. The mean included and yet went beyond the truths of provisional existence (*jia* 假) and emptiness (*kong* 空). As part of a course of self-cultivation, the practitioner first contemplates the fact that all dharmas are ultimately empty. The second phase of contemplation, in which the practitioner considers all existence as provisional, turns from the potential nihilism of emptiness to the way in which this first truth is manifest in the world as it is conventionally perceived. Finally, this is

<sup>68</sup> *GL*, 32161b–c.

followed by the contemplation of the mean, to balance the two truths that are the focus of the first two contemplations. Presenting another expression of what he has been trying to convey to his students, Mingben writes: “If one thing is provisional, then everything is provisional; there is no mean, no emptiness and nothing that is not provisional” — 假一切假, 無中無空而不假.<sup>69</sup> Mingben thus singles out not the third, mediating position but rather the second level of contemplation with its emphasis on the perceived world.<sup>70</sup> His emphasis on the provisional is in accord with his valorization of illusion because the second type of contemplation of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*—*samāpatti*, in which the bodhisattva uses illusions to eliminate illusions—neatly aligns with the contemplation of the second Tiantai truth. This is a way to equate the provisional with the illusory, and to assert, in yet another form, that there is nothing that is not an illusion produced out of a provisional assemblage of conditions. By highlighting the second in the Tiantai sequence of contemplating the three truths, Mingben makes an argument—albeit an oblique one—about the locus of practice and realization. In the section of the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* on the contemplation of illusion, ultimately the contemplation itself is illusory and can be accorded no permanent value. Mingben uses the second of the three Tiantai contemplations, instead of the third, “mean” (*zhong*) contemplation, in order to make the same point: even practices claiming to transcend distinctions and the states that result are subject to the same provisionality or illusoriness.

As Mingben moves toward his conclusion, he offers a long list of phenomena that are illusory, beginning with various aspects of the Buddhist teachings and concluding with the examples with which the essay began: pine, brambles, swan, and crow. His first examples are the intellectual meanderings of the teachings and the literary overgrowth of *gongan* collections, two parts of the Buddhist tradition that

<sup>69</sup> *GL*, 32161c. I believe the *er* 而 is a scribal mistake for *wu* 無, as it both makes better sense and then matches other explanations of the three contemplations (*san guan* 三觀) within Tiantai. Note Dahui’s reference to these formulations, found at *T* 1998, 47:907a13.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of the three truths in Tiantai, see Brook Ziporyn, *Evil and/or/as the Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), esp. pp. 119–35. For a discussion of Tiantai interpretations of “perfect enlightenment,” see Iwaki Eiki 岩城英規, “Chūgoku Tendai ni okeru Engakukyō” 中国天台における円覚経, *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 37.1 (1988): 116–18.

his audience are most likely to recognize as illusory. He then widens his scope to embrace the practices of the bodhisattvas and the key terms that structure Buddhist understanding of cultivation. When he returns to the initial examples given by his interlocutor, he asks, “Did you think it was only the straightness of the pine, the twistedness of the brambles, the whiteness of the swan, and the blackness of the crow that were illusory?” 豈但松直棘曲，鶴白烏玄是幻？<sup>71</sup> Not only is the discriminating consciousness illusory, but so are the very teachings taken as the cure for illusion. As Mingben concludes, “The profusion of phenomena is all marked by the seal of illusion. In this great seal of illusion, certainly no dharmas remain” 森羅萬象一幻所印，此大幻印中固是不留剩法。<sup>72</sup> The seal, like the writing of the character, represents a nonsemantic version of *huan*.

The seal is an important image in Chinese Buddhist thought, used as a translation for *mudrā*, and later to indicate the transmission between a Chan master and his disciples. This latter usage echoes the functions of seals in authentication, especially by officials.<sup>73</sup> Seals reproduce a character or set of characters exactly and as a complete unit.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to normal modes of writing, there are no individual strokes. Moreover, the application of a seal physically marks an object, changing it but without material addition or subtraction. Seals frequently function in medicinal or apotropaic contexts, stamped to provide protective talismans.<sup>75</sup> In such uses the form, as much as the meaning of the seals, carries potency. The idea of transmission in the Chan sense—that what is gained by the student is an identical reflection of the attainment of his teacher and all prior patriarchs in the Chan tradition—was no doubt in Mingben’s mind. This passage rewrites the mind-seal as the seal of illusion, shifting the emphasis from transmission to a pervasive quality. As such the mind-seal seems

<sup>71</sup> *GL*, 32162a.

<sup>72</sup> *GL*, 32162a.

<sup>73</sup> Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 142

<sup>74</sup> One Tang author noted that a seal “completes a text without any ‘before’ or ‘after.’” Quoted in T. H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> The apotropaic and medicinal roles of seals are discussed in depth in Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, pp. 123–93. Seals were also used to make one invisible, as described on p. 172.

to function more as the cosmos-sized character of *huan*, another metaphor expressing the way in which illusion penetrates all phenomena. Like the cosmos-sized *huan*, the seal represents a use of language that de-emphasizes the semantic content of the word or phrase in favor of its physical aspect. This view of language reflects Mingben's view of practice: from the image of the seal of illusion, he moves to reiterating metaphors to convey the proper attitude of meditation on the *huatou*. These are all bodily metaphors: running up against something hard, standing in a precarious position, or chewing on something indigestible. Like the character in a seal, which cannot be taken apart, these metaphors require that one take on the *huatou* as a whole, rather than deconstructing it through the intellect.

Mingben's essay shows a clear shift away from dominantly visual metaphors of illusion to metaphors emphasizing physicality. Given the Chan critique of language and intellectual attainments, it may be that visually oriented metaphors were problematic. If one reads the text and sees the words, one risks entanglement. Mingben's discussion of *huan* focuses less on its status as a visual aid to meaning than on the embodiment implied by the character as cosmograph. He is thereby proposing using language in a way that avoids the pitfalls of textual engagement through reading. This requires, on the one hand, a shift from passive apprehension of language to an active engagement. However, illusion (*huan*) is predominantly a visual metaphor, and to transform it into something active, and less reliant on the visual, demands a focus on the character of *huan* itself. The study of metaphor sheds some light on this. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that "no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis."<sup>76</sup> Illusion begins a visual metaphor, and Mingben's recasting of illusion is necessitated by the fact that the experience he wished to reference is not conceived of as strictly visual. As with Sudhana's treasure-tower, it is visible but also an experience into which one might enter bodily. Although Mingben is attracted to other associations of illusion, he repositioned the way in which one relates to, and comes to comprehend, illusion. The other way in which

<sup>76</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 19. The significance of bodily experience is also discussed in Zdravko Radman, *Metaphor: Figures of the Mind* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), pp. 90–101.

illusion is made active—by moving from the perception of illusion to the active engagement in and production of illusion—is through the work of the illusionist. It is one thing to see the trick, and another to do it. Even if the illusion is perceived, it cannot be understood until it has been enacted. It is the performative quality of illusion that Mingben hoped to evoke with *huanren*—the illusory man and the illusionist—and with the fictionalized nature of his essay.

The teaching of illusion renders the aim of practice not the escape from illusion (which is impossible) but realization within illusion. This realization, however, is always subject to the critique that it too is illusion. Faced with this double bind,<sup>77</sup> Mingben closes his essay with a pair of questions:

But is this called illusion or not illusion? If you say it is illusion, then this drags the illusory man into the illusory net, and for ten thousand kalpas he cannot escape. If you say it is not illusory, please get rid of words and silence, motion and stillness, and make plain the situation.<sup>78</sup>

Mingben's questions echo the exchange between teacher and student in the *Liezi*, in which the would-be illusionist is advised: one must see through illusion before beginning to study illusion; and if one sees through illusion there is no need to study. To assert that something is illusory would seem to implicate one in the very thing one is trying to escape. But if one says it is not illusory, then one is asked to prove it by transcending dualities—precisely the kinds of dualities that have led to the answer of “not illusory.” This is Mingben's parting shot, a Chan joke as it were, cutting away the ground of the metaphor itself. Mingben thus ends with a challenge to expose the trick, knowing that the attempt to do so would make the audience complicit in its perpetration, as he himself was.

<sup>77</sup> Bernard Faure has used this phrase in critiquing the assertion that *kōans* are a type of “riddle”; see his *Chan Insights and Oversights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 212.

<sup>78</sup> *GL*, 32162a.