Chapter 3

Killing Cats and Other Imaginary Happenings: Milieus and Features of Chan Exegesis

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Introduction

Using the well-known story of Nanquan Puyuan 南泉普願 (J: Nansen Fugan; 749–835) killing a cat (南泉斬猫) as a prime example of a prominent subgenre, this chapter explores some of the key issues raised by Chan/Zen exegesis, especially as it pertains to the explanation or rationalization of idiosyncratic anecdotes composed in the encounter dialogue format. By looking at the religious, literary, and social contexts that shape the dissemination and interpretation of stories that depict morally questionable, seemingly pointless, or eccentric behaviors, the chapter attempts to arrive at preliminary conclusions about the nature and latitude of dominant models of Chan/Zen exegesis, as they developed in China, Japan, and elsewhere. That involves careful consideration of the ideological outlooks and institutional constraints that affected the creation and diffusion of these kinds of narratives. It also ties up with the book's general theme of communities of memory and interpretation, by highlighting salient facets of the Chan tradition's general attitudes towards collective memory, religious imagination, and canonical interpretation.

The chapter starts with an analysis of the textual provenance of Nanquan's story and its relationship with the relevant Chan texts and milieus. That is followed by a survey of its exegesis in classical Chan texts such as *Wumen guan* 無門關 (Wumen's Passage), compiled by Wumen Huikai 無門慧開 (1183–1260), and the records of various Chan/Zen masters from the Song (960–1279) and later eras. The later part of the paper briefly examines

modern interpretations of this and other similar stories, especially in light of the developing popularity of Zen and its integration into progressively global modes of religious discourse and practice. At the end, I make a preliminary attempt to put this into a broader religious context, by briefly looking at how the issues of Chan/Zen exegesis broached here converge (or diverge) with analogous developments in scriptural exegesis across a broad range of religious traditions.

The Basic Story

The story about Nanquan killing a cat in front of the monastic congregation is among the most-cited stories or anecdotes of classical Chan/Zen literature. Ever since its emergence about a millennium ago, the story has captured the imagination of numerous writers and commentators, and has often been mentioned or discussed in a variety of contexts, from lectures delivered in meditation halls to the pages of popular books on Zen Buddhism. In addition to Nanquan, widely considered to be among the leading disciples of the illustrious Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788), the story also features his best-known student, Zhaozhou Congshen 趙州從諗 (778–897). Both monks are associated with the Hongzhou school 洪州宗 of Chan, which by the early ninth century emerged as the most vibrant and influential part of the wider Chan movement. In a broad context, the story's two main protagonists are among the best-known Chan teachers of the Tang era. In addition to their records of sayings and their entries in major Chan "histories" such as *Jingde chuan deng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (Record of the Lamp's Transmission from the Jingde Era) and *Tiansheng guang deng lu* 天聖廣燈錄 (Extensive Lamp Record from the Tiansheng Era), a number of stories that feature Nanquan and Zhaozhou as the main (or major) protagonists are featured in the influential *gong'an* 公案 (J: *kōan*; lit. "public case") collections and related types of Chan texts created from the Song era onward.

The earliest version of the story—in its full form—appears in Nanquan's biographical entry in *Jingde chuan deng lu* (compiled in 1004). That takes us to about 170 years after Nanquan's death. Here is the *Jingde chuan deng lu* version of the story.

> 師因東西兩堂各爭猫兒。師遇之、白眾曰、道得即救取猫兒。道不得即斬却也。眾無對。師便斬之。趙州自外歸。師舉前語示之。趙州乃脫履安頭上而出。師曰、汝適來若在、即救得猫兒也。
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> (Once) the monks from the eastern and western halls of Nanquan's (monastery) were quarreling over a kitten. When Nanquan encountered this

> situation, he told the assembled monks, "If any of you is able to say something (that accords with reality), then you will save the kitten. If you cannot say anything (pertinent), then I will kill the kitten." The monks had no (appropriate) response. Nanquan then killed the kitten. (Later) Zhaozhou returned (to the monastery) from someplace outside. Nanquan told him about what had happened earlier. In response, Zhaozhou took off his shoes, put them on the top of his head, and then went out. Nanquan said, "If you were here earlier, you would have been able to save the kitten."[1]

There is also an earlier version of the first part of the story, from the beginning up to the point where Nanquan kills the cat, which appears in Deshan Xuanjian's 德山宣鑑 (782–865) biographical entry in *Zu tang ji* 祖堂集 (Hall of Patriarchs Collection; compiled in 952). This version predates the longer *Jingde chuan deng lu* version by half a century, and helps establish that key elements of the story were in circulation by the middle of the tenth century. That, however, is still far removed from the time of Nanquan. The *Zu tang ji* version goes as follows:

> 因南泉第一座養貓兒。隣床損腳、因此相諍。有人報和尚。和尚便下來、拈起貓兒曰、有人道得摩。有人道得摩。若有人道得、救這個貓兒性命。無對、南泉便以刀斬做兩截。

> Nanquan, who at the time was a head monk (in the monastic hall), was raising a kitten. The kitten damaged the leg of the neighboring sitting platform, which initiated a verbal squabble (among the monks). Someone reported that to Deshan. Deshan then went to the scene, grabbed and raised up the kitten, and asked (the assembled monks), "Is there someone who can say something (that accords with reality)? Is there someone who can say something (that accords with reality)? If there is someone who can say something (meaningful), then he will be able to save the life of this kitten." As nobody could come up with (a satisfactory) response, Nanquan took a knife and cut the kitten into two.[2]

In the earlier version of the story, the physical setting is Deshan's monastery in Langzhou 朗州 (located in present-day Hunan),[3] where the young Nanquan serves as a senior monk. The event presumably takes place in the Sangha hall, which among other things functions as a residence for the practicing monks. The question posed to the monastic congregation, which challenges them to say something profound or meaningful—presented against the vivid backdrop of the poor kitten dangling in the air—is put into

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[1] *Jingde chuan deng lu* 8, T 51.258a3-7; the translation is adapted from Mario Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism*, p. 9. For another translation, see Chang Chung-yuan, *Original Teachings of Chan Buddhism*, p. 156.

[2] *Zu tang ji* 5.130.

[3] The location of Lanzhou corresponds roughly to the present Changde 常德 prefecture in Hunan province.

the mouth of Deshan. Nonetheless, Nanquan still performs the extraordinary act of killing the hapless animal. Zhaozhou is nowhere to be seen in this version, which makes sense in the overall context of the story. Namely, this supposedly happened while Nanquan was still a relatively young monk, before he became an abbot of a monastery and a prominent Chan teacher of talented monks such as Zhaozhou.

In contrast, in the later version from *Jingde chuan deng lu*—the standard version cited in virtually all subsequent sources, including modern works—the primary setting appears to be Nanquan's monastery in Chiyang 池阳 (located in present-day Anhui).[4] There we find him in the role of leader of a monastic congregation that, among other things, seems to be prone to discord and quarreling. The monks at Nanquan's monastery come across as being somewhat inept and clueless about the subtle truths of Buddhism. At a basic level, they are ignorant about the sublime realization of Chan awakening, which is a conventional trope in stories of this kind.

The only exception is the brilliant Zhaozhou, who appears at the scene only after the cat has been dismembered. His ostensibly eccentric performance is (presumably) meant to serve as a lively and concrete demonstration of a higher truth, which resonates with the reality embodied in his teacher's violent act. As for the cat, perhaps its untimely demise can be understood as a sacrifice of sorts, performed in the context of a timeless search for ultimate realization, or perhaps as a symbolic gesture that points to the rarefied truth of Chan awakening. At least that seems to be the interpretive slant presented in the subsequent commentarial literature, although as we will see this kind of exegetical strategy is not without problems and incongruities.

Issues and Incongruities

While it is oft-cited, the histrionic story about Nanquan killing a cat is among the most notorious anecdotes in traditional Chan literature. The story raises a host of intriguing issues and opens up a number of interpretive possibilities, most of which are not followed through by traditional and modern commentators. To begin with, there are ethical questions about the behavior depicted in it, which tie up with the general understanding of the Chan school's attitudes towards the monastic precepts and traditional Buddhist

[4] The location of Chiyang corresponds approximately to the present Guichi district 貴池區 in Anhui province.

morality. The story also highlights some of the problems arising from the purported introduction of radical teaching methods—or pedagogical techniques—by monks associated with the Hongzhou School, which according to post-Tang sources included inordinate verbal and physical acts, such as beating and shouting, as well as the asking of perplexing, paradoxical, or seemingly pointless questions. There are also issues related to the story's textual provenance, which in turn connect with broader topics regarding the growth and evolution of Chan literature during the Tang-Song transition.

There is also the issue of historicity. Namely, do the actions described in the story have anything to do with Nanquan, if he is understood as a real historical person rather than as a paradigmatic exemplar of a peculiar Chan ethos? Alternatively, do they solely point to the imaginary doings of a distinctive type of dramatic character, occupying a position in a form of fictional narrative that is conjoined with a specific religious ideal and the ideology that underpins it? By extension, do the contents of the story tell us anything about the teachings and practices of the Chan tradition with which the historical Nanquan was associated, namely the Hongzhou school, and Tang Chan in general?

On a basic level, Nanquan's act of killing the cat is a complete transgression of the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline, which as a leader of a monastic community he was supposed to embody and promote. The gruesome and gratuitous act of killing the harmless cat constitutes a gross infringement of the basic ethical principles that govern religious life. In fact, it is an indiscretion that contravenes even the most basic formulation of Buddhist morality, the five precepts observed by the laity.[5] Given that the proscription against taking life is one of the central cornerstones of Buddhist morality, Nanquan's uncalled-for act of killing the cat can be understood as a striking example of unconventional behavior that goes beyond a simple transgression of a monastic precept.

In effect, Nanquan's dramatic and violent act evokes a rejection of conventional morality. By extension, it entails a refutation, or radical reframing, of most traditional formulations of the Buddhist path to spiritual awakening. If that is the case, then what is the basic message or moral behind the story? What is its didactic function within the larger contexts of Chan teachings and practices? More broadly, what is the purpose of this kind of stories, and why do they form a central part of classical Chan lore?

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[5] The five precepts consist of prohibitions (or proscriptions) against taking life, lying, stealing, engaging in improper sexual acts, and consuming alcohol (and other intoxicating substances).

On the surface, the story contains several incongruous elements. First, there is the image of monks keeping cats (or other pets) in the monastic quarters, especially the main Sangha hall. Then there is the knife carried (and used) by the senior monk, which apparently was large and sharp enough to be able to behead the cat, or cut it into two pieces. More broadly, there is the sheer implausibility of the acts depicted in the story, especially in light of what we know about monastic life in Tang China (and elsewhere). That brings us back to the issues of historicity and veracity.

As I have shown in some of my earlier publications on Chan Buddhism, this and other stories composed in the encounter dialogue format, briefly described later on, have little or nothing to do with the lives, ideas, and teachings of the Tang-era protagonists who are featured in them.[6] In this case, we have a mid-tenth century story that, in an ostensible act of religious imagination or artistic license, ascribes the events depicted in it to Nanquan and other protagonists who lived well over a century before the story was first recorded. In that sense, the Nanquan story is an example of the kind of dubious textual evidence that is sometimes used to lend support to the widely-accepted but also misleading and historically inaccurate portrayals of the Hongzhou School as an iconoclastic tradition that discarded traditional forms of Buddhist practice, including the monastic mores and Vinaya regulations that had high currency in Tang Buddhism.

Unexplored Possibilities

While the basic account of the cat killing has little to do Nanquan and his Tang contemporaries, the story and the exegetical literature that grew around it perhaps tell us something important about the later Chan/Zen traditions that created, popularized, and interpreted this and other similar narratives. Overall, Chan/Zen is portrayed as a unique tradition that repudiates established orthodoxies and rigid dogmas, promotes spontaneity and freedom, and adopts inscrutable, progressive, and open-ended approaches to spiritual cultivation. It is my contention that the exegesis of the Nanquan story points in the opposite direction—towards a deeply conservative tradition, largely built around problematic narratives with questionable provenance. Generally speaking, (with some exceptions) from the Song era onward, we are dealing with an unadventurous and traditionalist brand of Buddhism, which for the

[6] Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way*; Poceski, *The Records of Mazu and the Making of Classical Chan Literature*.

most part seems to be unable or uninterested to move beyond established parameters of orthodoxy, or to critically reexamine entrenched ideological positions and the textual sources on which they are based.

Regarding Nanquan's story, this means that for the most part the Chan tradition has been reluctant to question the received notion that the story communicates some profound truth. In the same vein, there is a tacit assumption that Nanquan and Zhaozhou, being enlightened Chan masters whose every act manifests a rarefied vision of Chan enlightenment, can do no wrong. Because of that, virtually none of the traditional and modern commentators have suggested what—to me at least—seems to be at least a plausible, if not the most obvious interpretative possibility. Namely, there seem to be pervasive blindness to the possibility that we are confronted with a bad story that is largely devoid of deep meaning or spiritual significance, notwithstanding the numerous efforts to infuse it with higher purpose or give it a transcendental purport.

Additionally, we are dealing with a story that points towards a dangerous antinomian direction. Perhaps to makes matter worse, this and other similar stories also deflect attention from the actual ideas, teachings, and practices that characterized Tang Chan, which was an immensely rich and complex tradition. To put it a bit differently, in key respects Chan/Zen Buddhism, especially in its later forms, turns out not to be that different from other normative religious traditions, within and outside of Buddhism. That includes an inability to deal imaginatively, responsibly, and candidly with some of the questionable parts of its received heritage, including large sections of its canon.

The Encounter Dialogue Model

The story of Nanquan killing a cat is composed in the so-called encounter dialogue (*jiyuan wenda* 機緣問答; J: *kien mondō*) model of Chan discourse. This is arguably the best-known narrative form associated with the Chan tradition, and the numerous stories or vignettes composed in it constitute the most recognizable part of traditional Chan lore. I (and others) have written about the encounter dialogue model in some detail, so for the purpose of the present discussion I will only briefly summarize some of its salient features.[7]

[7] This summary is primarily based on Poceski, *The Records of Mazu and the Making of Classical Chan Literature*, esp. pp. 51–54.

At a basic level, this type of stories feature dialogues, exchanges, or encounters between Chan masters and their disciples. Normally there is central figure featured in the story—unusually a well-known monk such as Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (749–814), Nanquan, or Zhaozhou—but the number of disciples can vary, from a single monk (or less often a layman) to a large group of monks, as we have in the story about Nanquan killing a cat. Sometimes the secondary protagonist can be an anonymous monk in search of instruction, but often it is a leading disciple of the master, who eventually becomes a well-known Chan teacher in his own right.

Traditionally, stories of this kind have been understood to depict spontaneous or ingenious display of the Chan masters' superior wisdom and spiritual virtuosity, including their uncanny ability to respond to the specific spiritual needs of their disciples or interlocutors. To that end, time and again they deploy an array of seemingly radical or unconventional pedagogical techniques, such as shouting, hitting, and the making of strange utterances or paradoxical statements. At times, the stories claim to depict the circumstances or events that surrounded the experiences of awakening of noted Chan figures. Moreover, besides it being an emblematic rhetorical style and a peculiar method of instruction, the encounter dialogue model is occasionally mischaracterized as representing a unique path of practice, supposedly pioneered by Mazu and other great Chan masters from the mid-Tang period.

Well-known encounter dialogue stories are often quoted or debated in popular and scholarly discussions of Chan teachings and practices, and they continue to influence prevalent perceptions of the classical Chan tradition.[8] Nonetheless, recent research, especially my own publications, has shown that this literary format, along with the matrix of ideas and symbols associated with it, only appeared during the middle-part of the tenth century, as evidenced by its presence in *Zu tang ji*. On the whole, the materials composed in it have little to do with Tang Chan. Furthermore, while the inscrutable proclamations, clever word plays, enigmatic gestures, or idiosyncratic actions depicted in specific stories might appear to be the results of unique confluences of literary creativity and religious imagination, when analyzed in the aggregate, the materials belonging to this sub-genre tend to be filled with clichés, formulaic repetitions, and gratuitous platitudes. In the end, notwithstanding the iconoclastic ethos imputed to them, it is apparent that

[8] See, for example, the inclusion of numerous stories of that kind in Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China*. The same goes for the works of Japanese scholars, such as D. T. Suzuki and Yanagida Seizan.

these textual sources are products of a conservative tradition that, in the course of its growth and transformation during the Tang-Song transition, was keen to promote a particular version of Buddhist orthodoxy and secure its place as the main representative of elite Chinese Buddhism. To that end, it created a profusion of literary artifacts, including the texts examined in this chapter.

Exegesis in the Main Gong'an Collections

Nanquan and Zhaozhou appear frequently in the influential *gong'an* collections that were compiled during the Song era. Nanquan is featured in four *gong'an* cases in *Wumen guan*, six cases in *Bi yan lu* 碧巖錄 (Blue Cliff Record), and three cases in *Cong rong lu* 從容錄 (Record of Serenity). The story of him killing a cat appears in all three collections: as cases no. 63 and 64 in *Bi yan lu*;[9] as case no. 14 in *Wumen guan*;[10] and as case no. 9 in *Cong rong lu*.[11] That attests to the story's enduring allure and its wide circulation within Chan circles. The popularity of these collections throughout East Asia, especially in Japan, further bolstered the wide diffusion of the story as a key component of traditional Chan/Zen lore. While for reasons of space I cannot present detailed analysis of its treatment in all three *gong'an* collections, in this and the next two sections I highlight some of the basic exegetical orientations and ideological suppositions observable in these texts, using *Bi yan lu* as the main example.

In *Bi yan lu* the story is divided into two parts: Nanquan killing the cat (case 63), and Zhaozhou's response to the incident (case 64). In the other two collections, the two parts are combined together as a single narrative. In all three texts, the central case follows the storyline introduced in the *Jingde chuan deng lu* version of the story, which also appears in other Chan sources from the Song era. In *Bi yan lu*, Yuanwu's 圓悟 (1063–1135) exegesis starts on a lofty, abstract, and rather obfuscating note. In the pointer section, which serves as an introduction to the whole *gong'an*, Yuanwu obliquely points to an arcane path that is beyond all mental constructs, where all verbal formulations and intellectual explanations cannot reach. Within the context

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[9] T 48.194c-95b. For an English translation, see Thomas Cleary and J. C. Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, pp. 406–11.

[10] T 48.294c.

[11] *Wansong laoren pinchang tian tong jue heshang song gu cong rong an lu* 萬松老人評唱天童覺和尚頌古從容庵錄, T 48.232b–33a.

of Chan literature from the Song era, that sort of pompous and abstruse rhetorical stance is standard fare, and in that sense the introduction breaks no new ground. Notwithstanding the recondite and flamboyant style of the opening section—which introduces the dramatic images of thunderbolts, shooting stars, and toppling mountains—there is little intimation about how Yuanwu's exegesis is related to the actual statements and acts depicted in the story, including the killing of the unfortunate kitten.

> 意路不到、正好提撕。言詮不及、宜急著眼。若也電轉星飛、便可傾湫倒嶽。眾中莫有辨得底麼。試舉看。
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> Where the pathway of ideas cannot get to, that is precisely what we should pay attention to.[12] Where words and explanations fail to reach, that is where we should urgently focus on.[13] If there are bolts of thunder and flying stars, then the stormy waves can topple mountain peaks. Is there anyone in the congregation that can make sense of that? Let us test that by citing (the *gong'an*).[14]

The main argument, it seems, is that the story has a profound meaning and immense import. It is primarily meant to point towards a rarefied realm of awakening that goes beyond all words and ideas. That is not a particularly new or innovative idea, especially within the religious and literary milieus of Song Chan. According to the Chan ideology espoused by Yuanwu and his contemporaries, the various *gong'an* are replete with sublime meaning(s) and point to the mysterious transcendence of awakening. As to the actual act of cutting the cat into two pieces, in the interlinear commentary to that particular sentence, Yuanwu exclaims:

> 快哉快哉。若不如此、盡是弄泥團漢。賊過後張弓。已是第二頭。未舉起時好打。
>
> How wonderful! How wonderful! If it was not like that, all of them would be like (a bunch of) foolish guys playing with mud. It is like drawing the bow

[12] Alternatively, the sentence can be read less literarily, to mean "when one arrives at the point where no thinking or discernment can reach, then he should be instructed (by an enlightened teacher)."

[13] Another possible reading is, "while it cannot be expressed via the medium of language, it can be perceived (directly)."

[14] *Bi yan lu* 7, T 48.194c4-6. The translation is loosely adapted from Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 358. See also Theodore Griffith Foulk, "The Form and Function of kōan Literature: A Historical Overview," in Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, p. 29.

> after the robber has already gone away.[15] That is already too late. It is better to strike before this whole thing is raised up.[16]

The last two sentences from the cited passage seem to indicate that all elocutions and intellectual explanations—which presumably should also include Yuanwu's exegesis—are secondary, inasmuch as they cannot reach the immediacy of Nanquan's words and actions, or grasp the essential purport they epitomize. Correct intuitive understanding, then, should precede all discussions and commentaries. If that is the case, one might ask, why bother with writing an intricate commentary on the story and the verse by Xuedou Chongxian 雪竇重顯 (980–1052), which supposedly illuminates the story? As is well known, Xuedou compiled the original *gong'an* collection, titled *Bai ze song gu* 百則頌古 (Verses on Hundred Ancient Cases), which consisted of verse commentaries on one hundred "cases" featuring ancient Chan masters. Later Yuanwu added elaborate layers of further exegesis to the original stories and Xuedou's verses.

We also encounter similarly evocative language and ostentatious oratory in the introductory section to the Nanquan story in *Cong rong lu*. This time we have Wansong Xingxiu 萬松行秀 (1196–1246), the author of the text, vexing poetically about an intense kick that overturns the ocean and causes dust to fly all over the earth, and the making of a shout that is so powerful that it shatters empty space into a multitude of small pieces.

> 踢翻滄海、大地塵飛。喝散白雲、虛空粉碎。嚴行正令、猶是半提。大用全彰、如何施設。
>
> A (forceful) kick overturns the vast ocean, and dust flies up (all over) the great earth. A (powerful) shout scatters the clouds, and the empty space shatters into pieces. Even if strictly following (Nanquan's) actual instructions, that still gets to half of the (main) point only. Regarding the complete manifestation of the great function, how do you establish that?[17]

The main concern, Wansong intimates, is to manifest the sublime activity or great function (*da yong* 大用) that, we might surmise, accompanies Chan enlightenment and reveals the essential frame of mind of great Chan masters such as Nanquan and Zhaozhou.

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[15] This sentence is repeated verbatim nine times in *Bi yan lu*. It also appears three times in Yuanwu's record of sayings, *Yuanwu foguo chanshi yulu* 圓悟佛果禪師語錄. Similarly, the following sentence appears four times.

[16] *Bi yan lu* 7, T 48.194c10-11; cf. Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 358.

[17] *Cong rong lu* 1, T 48.232b26-28. Cf. Thomas F. Cleary, *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues*, p. 37.

Wumen's Commentary

While in *Bi yan lu* the basic story is divided into two cases, as previously noted the two parts are brought together in *Wumen guan*. Wumen's comments are very brief and characteristically vague, and overall he does not break any new ground. The most important point is his choice to include the story in his collection, as one of the forty-eight important cases that embody the peerless wisdom and sublime way of the ancient Chan masters. A striking feature of his pithy exegesis is that he shifts the focus to Zhaozhou, especially to the act of putting the sandals on the top of his head. At a basic level, Nanquan's famous disciple emerges as the main protagonist of the story. As for the first part of the story, which features the killing of the cat, Wumen addresses it only obliquely. He merely points out that Nanquan's act was not entirely pointless, presumably because it serves as a framing device or pretext for Zhaozhou's edifying demonstration of enlightened conduct. Here is the prose part of Wumen's exegesis of the *gong'an*:

> 且道、趙州頂草鞋意作麼生。若向者裏下得一轉語、便見南泉令不虛行。其或未然險。
>
> Tell me, what is the meaning of Zhaozhou putting the straw sandals on the top of his head? If you can say something meaningful in response to it,[18] then you will realize that Nanquan's act was not pointless.[19] If you cannot do that, (then there is real) danger.[20]

Nanquan's action, we are told, was not pointless or in vain, because it precipitated Zhaozhou's enlightened response, which was there for all to see (and read about). In a sense, the actions of the two masters perfectly complement each other. When taken together, they constitute a set of exemplary acts of inspired teaching. Wumen's brief commentary on the *gong'an* is followed by a four-line verse, which reiterates Zhaozhou's main role in the story:

> 趙州若在、倒行此令。奪却刀子、南泉乞命。
>
> If Zhaozhou was present, he would have turned around the whole situation.

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[18] The compound *zhuanyu* 轉語 (lit. turning word/phrase) denotes a special kind of word or phrase uttered by a Chan adept, usually in repose to a question posed by a Chan master. It is said to indicate proper understanding, or to resolve an existential status quo, i.e. turn around conventional situation or understanding into a Chan insight or experience of some sort.

[19] A more literal—but perhaps a bit awkward—translation would be "Nanquan's order (to say something) was not pointless."

[20] T 48.294c17-19. For a Japanese translation, see Hirata Takashi 平田高士, *Mumon kan* 無門関, pp. 62-65.

> He would have grabbed away the knife, and Nanquan would (have been forced) to beg for his life.[21]

Basically, Wumen jumps on a previously established exegetical wagon by assuming that the story communicates some sort of profound truth or deep meaning. There seem to be little indication of any attempt to look at it with fresh eyes, without the burden of ideological suppositions and traditionalist rationalizations. Putting aside the dramatic flair and shock-value that make it memorable, the story assumes the conventional meaning(s) imputed to it by Yuanwu, Wansong, and Wumen only when it is placed within the larger context of traditional Chan lore and interpreted in light of the literary and exegetical conventions that demarcate the *gong'an* collections as a distinctive genre of Chan literature.

Normative Assumptions and Unquestioned Orthodoxies

Going back to the *Bi yan lu* narrative, the operative assumption made by Yuanwu—articulated at the beginning of the main commentary on the *gong'an*—is that Nanquan is a genuine Chan master (*zongshijia* 宗師家), which presumably means that he is an enlightened person who has plumbed the depths of reality and has achieved a state of spiritual perfection. Accordingly, every instance of his movement and stillness, coming and going, is grounded in some sort of profound inner purport (*yizhi* 意旨), which we are supposed to ponder or reflect on.[22] In the same vein, he asserts that Nanquan "had the eye to determine heaven and earth; had the sword to determine heaven and earth" (有定乾坤底眼。有定乾坤底劍。).[23] Namely, he had the capacity to discern accurately things and situations, and the ability to solve quickly and efficiently various problems. In his comments on this parts of Yuanwu's commentary, Qu Ruji 瞿汝稷 (*ca.* 1575–1602), the author of *Zhi yue lu* 指月錄 (Pointing to the Moon Record, published in 1595), further asserts that this exchange makes it possible for us to see Nanquan's "complete potency and great function" (*quanji dayong* 全機大用).[24]

The normative notion that the core story depicts the exemplary doings and exalted wisdom of a perfected being—someone who has realized a profound

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[21] T 48.294c20-21.

[22] *Bi yan lu* 7, T 48.194c12-13.

[23] *Bi yan lu* 7, T 48.194c16-17.

[24] X 83.486a12-b6. Similar comments also appear elsewhere in the same text; see X 83.486b15-18, where the author cites Dahui's passing comment on the Nanquan story.

truth and is able to manifest it via his words, gestures, and actions—is a basic assumption that is shared by virtually all subsequent commentators. Nanquan supposedly possesses superior skillful means (*upāya*), in part because he is able to spontaneously respond to situations correctly and lead others to awakening. Accordingly, we should not interpret his words and actions from a conventional point of view. This credulous belief or unexamined supposition shapes the story's interpretation and guides its exegesis. By extension, it also imposes limits on the interpretative possibilities. Namely, it superimposes the straightjacket of a certain type of Chan orthodoxy. That, presumably, is reflective of accepted beliefs and heartfelt pieties that permeated certain Chan milieus, but is also indicative of distinctive institutional agendas and ideological suppositions. All of that, in the end, is tied up with specific power structures and nodes of authority.

At the center of such nexuses of power, influence, and authority are Chan masters such as Yuanwu, whose exegesis of the ancient cases bolsters their status as prime arbiters of orthodoxy and living embodiments of the mystical Chan lineage that supposedly transmits the live flame of the Buddha's awakening. In that sense, the fictional events depicted in the story open up for Yuanwu the possibility of establishing or reinforcing his own social standing and religious authority—in addition to impressing the sociopolitical elites of Song China, especially the literati supporters—with his literary skill, mental dexterity, and spiritual acumen. In light of that, it is not surprising that Yuanwu's commentary on the Nanquan story—like the commentaries on the other stories included in the collection—is presented in a convoluted and ostentatious literary form that echoes the cultural predilections and esthetic sensibilities of the intended elite audience. In that sense, Yuanwu comes across as a steadfast cultural conservative, as well as a member of the establishment and an upholder of the socioreligious status quo, notwithstanding the iconoclastic rhetorical posture he routinely deploys in his exegesis.

These kinds of ideological constraints and clerical agendas, in turn, impel commentators such as Yuanwu and Xingxiu to deploy a limited range of interpretative strategies—ingenuous or hackneyed, depending on one's point of view—as they try to tease some sort of profound meaning, potent message, or edifying spiritual guidance from the Nanquan story and the other *gong'an* they comment on. Within tradition-bound milieus, that kind of exegetical paradigm continues to operate without serious challenges. That remains the case even though a sober analysis—unburdened by normative suppositions and entrenched dogmas—might lead the critical scholar (and perhaps the

discerning practitioner) to see the story in a very different light: as some sort of religious nonsense, for instance. Consequently, the basic notion that this and other similar stories are depictions of enlightened acts performed by perfected beings—which supposedly serve a higher purpose or point to some sort of rarefied truth—is not up for scrutiny or questioning, notwithstanding the lack of any compelling evidence, empirical or otherwise, to back that up. Basically, we are dealing with received articles of faith, reinforced by a cumulative tradition and embedded in specific institutional structures.

Paradoxically, by adopting the straightjacket of a certain type of Chan orthodoxy, Yuanwu gains considerable exegetical freedom and poetic license, albeit within certain ideological strictures. If Nanquan is an enlightened Chan master and can do no wrong, then all his statements and actions—regardless of how vague, pointless, or cartoonish they might seem—must point to an ineffable and mysterious truth that is beyond conceptual understanding. Consequently, Yuanwu can come up with all sorts of oblique, abstruse, or even fanciful interpretations, without having to be unduly concerned with the specificity of the acts and locutions depicted in this and other similar stories. For instance, while Yuanwu makes mention of the act of killing, the central motif in the story, he glosses over it and quickly shifts the attention to the timeless quest for self-actualization and true knowledge. Here are, for instance, some key parts of his commentary on the main case:

> 畢竟是誰斬猫兒。…. 其實當時元不斬。此話亦不在斬與不斬處。此事軒知。如此分明。不在情塵意見上討。若向情塵意見上討、則辜負南泉去。但向當鋒劍刃上看。是有也得無也得。不有不無也得。…. 南泉恁麼提起。不可教人合下得甚語。只要教人自薦、各各自用自知。
>
> In the final analysis, who beheaded the cat? …. In fact, at that time there was no actual beheading. The point of the story is not whether there was or there was not any beheading. That is something that is understood widely. That much is clear. (The meaning) is not to be sought in (the realm of) worldly emotions and opinions. If it is to be sought within (the realm of) worldly emotions and opinions, then one betrays Nanquan. One should simply direct the gaze at the (sharp) edge of the knife. Then, existence and nonexistence are both acceptable. Neither existence nor nonexistence is also acceptable. …. When Nanquan held up (the cat and the knife) in such a manner, it cannot be that he was instructing people to say immediately something special. He was only concerned with instructing people to come forward, so that each person can act by himself and arrive at (true) knowledge by himself.[25]

[25] T 48.194c17-27; cf. Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, p. 359.

However, if the story is not about the beheading of the cat, then why bring that up? After all, Nanquan was not able to elicit a proper response from the assembled monks, who apparently remained as clueless as ever. In that sense, the cat's sacrifice seem to have been in vain, given that in the story nobody becomes awakened because of Nanquan's violent act, unconventional pedagogical style, or sagacious instruction. The disciples' ignorance and haplessness is reiterated in Xuedou's verse on the main case, in which he calls the assembled monastics "choking Chan monks" (杜禪和), namely inexperienced monks who have not realized the basic truth of the Chan teaching. He also adds that they are ignorant and only aimlessly "stir up smoke and dust, to no real avail" (撥動煙塵不奈何).[26]

In his comments in *Cong rong lu*, Xingxiu even goes as far as to blame the monks for the cat's demise. If they could have responded by grabbing Nanquan by his chest and saying something along the lines of "your reverence need not bother to pay any attention to this" (却勞和尚神用), the cat would most likely have been saved. Unfortunately, the weak-minded monks were like "a den of dead rats, without any breath whatsoever" (這一窟死老鼠、既無些子氣息). Accordingly, Nanquan had no choice but to carry on with his initial threat and kill the cat.[27] The same point about the monks' lack of intelligence and spiritual acumen, made painfully obvious by their inability to grasp Nanquan's main point, is also made in other sources. That includes a verse by Hu Anguo 胡安國 (1074–1138), a noted Song scholar, cited in *Wu deng hui yuan*五燈會元 (Compendium of the Five Lamp [Chronicles]).[28] However, if no real pedagogical purpose was accomplished by Nanquan's words and actions, then it seems that the primary reason for bringing up the story is to highlight the uncommon wisdom and unimpeded activity of Nanquan and Zhaozhou, and (perhaps more importantly) to showcase the religious insight and literary talent of later commentators such as Xuedou and Yuanwu.

Nonetheless, if for some reason there is a need to grab the readers' attention by introducing a novel dramatic element, then why not make Nanquan do something else—perhaps cut his own hand, if gore and violence are a must—and leave the poor animal alone? Furthermore, if the main point

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[26] *Bi yan lu* 7, T 48.195a1-2. See also Cleary and Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, pp. 359-60.

[27] *Cong rong lu* 1, T 48.232c10-13. See also Cleary, *Book of Serenity*, p. 38.

[28] X 80.382c22-383a5. Hu Anguo, who wrote an influential commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals,* was the father of the Confucian philosopher Hu Hong 胡宏 (1105–1161). For additional comments on Hu Anguo's verse, written by Xue Guan, see *Xueguan chanshi yulu* 雪關禪師語錄, CBETA, J 27.475a19-24.

is that the truth is not to be found in worldly emotions and dualistic views, or that the realm of realization transcends the dichotomy of existence and nonexistence, those ideas have already been presented countless times in other Chan texts, as well as in various canonical sources. What exactly is gained by echoing or reiterating these familiar themes, this time in reference to the grisly details of a seemingly unnecessary act of violence and animal cruelty? Is there anything meaningful to be gained—philosophically, soteriologically, or pedagogically—by killing the cat, especially given that the story opens up a Pandora's Box of ethical issues and raises the familiar specter of Chan antinomianism? Is the questionable moral example set by the main character's superfluous violence really offset by the realization of a meaningful educational goal or didactic objective that could not be achieved in a tamer and less melodramatic fashion?

On the surface, Yuanwu's exegesis does not seem to be concerned or constrained by the concrete elocutions or events described in the story. Nor does it concern itself with the ethical issues raised by it. In effect, he declines to turn the story into a morality play of any sort. Instead, he indicates that it has little to do with morality. If it is all about nonduality and transcendence, then what does it matter, after all, if there is a depiction (or justification) of violence and the like? On the other hand, if that is truly the case—we might ask again—then why bother with the story, or write a convoluted commentary that supposedly explains its meaning and significance, but ends up being a collection of vague statements and regurgitated homilies?

When looking at this kind of exegesis, we are essentially dealing with normative articles of faith, grounded in an established tradition and shaped by rigid literary conventions. In light of that, the meaningfulness and sanctity of the acts depicted in the story is not really something that is open for serious debate or discussion, inasmuch as any new perspectives or interpretations might deviate from the established parameters of orthodoxy. That remains the case even though the story was presumably concocted by an unknown tenth-century author—or perhaps several authors—and in all likelihood it has nothing to do with Nanquan, Zhaozhou, and the Chan tradition they were associated with. From what we known, the story's provenance might takes us back to an overeager, clueless, or unduly imaginative tenth-century individual, whose identity and motives remain a mystery.

Of course, that does not make the story and its exegesis unimportant and uninteresting. Quite to the contrary. The story points to important facets of

Chan Buddhism, as it developed from the Song era onward.[29] It also raises a number of thought-provoking questions. For instance, how and why this and other stories became canonized as prime examples of inscrutable Chan wisdom? Furthermore, why was there a lack of challenge, from within the tradition, to their established status as linchpins of Chan orthodoxy and focal elements of Chan lore? I will come back to these issues later on, but let us first have a look at some other examples of conventional Chan exegesis centered on the Nanquan story.

Other Examples from the Song and Yuan Eras

While the classical *gong'an* collections from the Song era contain the best-known and most influential exegetical treatments of the story about Nanquan killing a cat, the story is also commented on or cited in many other Chan/Zen texts from the Song and later eras, in China as well as in other parts of East Asia. For the most part, these sources do not stray much beyond the exegetical paradigms and ideological suppositions examined above. Namely, they accept the notion that Nanquan and Zhaozhou are enlightened Chan masters whose acts and words communicate profound truths and ageless meanings. These, in turn, need to be unlocked and explicated by a wise and experienced teacher or commentator, who typically situates himself within the celebrated Chan lineage, and by extension at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The stories and the commentaries are also intended, we are told, to open up compelling soteriological vistas and provide guidance for a potent Chan path of practice and realization, which ultimately leads to the realization of Buddhahood.

To illustrate these trends, below I briefly introduce several representative examples of this sort of exegesis. It is possible to find many other similar examples of traditionalist comments, allusions, or explanations of the Nanquan story, scattered in a number of Chan texts. Pertinent examples include:

- *Zong jian fa lin* 宗鑑法林, citing Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1263–1323);[30]

[29] See also the Korean commentary of the same story, included in *Seonmun yeomsong seolhwa*, a huge compilation of *gong'an*, where it is case no. 207. Translated in John Jorgensen and Juhn Y. Ahn, *The Collected Works of Korean Buddhism 7/1: Gongan collections*, pp. 351-68.

[30] X 66.347a10-12.

- *Wanfeng heshang yulu* 萬峰和尚語錄, citing Wanfeng Shiwei 萬峰時蔚 (1303–1381);[31]
- *Baiyu chanshi yulu* 百愚禪師語錄, citing Baiyu Chanshi 百愚禪師 (1610–1665);[32]
- *Dahui pujue chanshi yulu* 大慧普覺禪師語錄, citing Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163);[33]
- *Wu deng huiyuan* 五燈會元, citing Jueyin 覺印 (d. 1018) and Weishang 惟尚 (1074–1140);[34]
- *Wu deng quan shu* 五燈全書, citing Qingyu 清欲 (1292–1367). [35]

A common exegetical strategy is to read the Nanquan story in symbolic terms. For instance, one could postulate that Nanquan was not really slicing the flesh of a living creature, but was cutting off the delusions and attachments of his monks (and all other beings), which are grounded in dualistic thought and fundamental misapprehension of reality. According to the doctrine of emptiness, all phenomena are like dreams and illusions. Since there is no self or other, there is nobody to do the killing or be killed. With a single sleight of hand, or a simple exegetical gesture, and presto—everybody is absolved of any responsibility, moral or otherwise.

In that sense, Nanquan's gesture of holding a knife can be likened to Mañjuśri (Wenshu 文殊), the celestial bodhisattva who embodies the perfection of wisdom, wielding the sword of wisdom that cuts off the ignorance and delusion of all beings. This kind of approach, which makes use of well known Buddhist concepts, themes, and symbols, is common in Chinese commentarial literature. Parenthetically, one of the problems with this kind of nonliteral and over-interpretative reading of the Nanquan story is that it fails to deploy the concept of emptiness in conjunction with the related doctrine of two truths (relative and absolute). This sort of interpretative strategy is sometimes adopted in order to skirt attention away from (or gloss over) some of the problematic ethical ramifications arising from stories that depict morally questionable acts.

A pertinent example of this sort of interpretation can be found in the record of Linquan Laoren 林泉老人 (1223–1281), also known as Linquan

[31] CBETA, J 40.489c11-19.

[32] CBETA, J 36.683a14-20.

[33] T 47.891a7-10.

[34] X 80.348c15-24.

[35] X 82.176a19-23.

Conglun 林泉從倫, who lived during the late Southern Song and early Yuan eras. Linquan, a leading disciple of Wansong who is associated with the Caodong school 曹洞宗, is primarily known as the compiler of *Xu tang ji* 虛堂集 (Empty Hall Anthology, complied in 1295) and *Kong gu ji* 空谷集 (Empty Valley Anthology, preface dated 1285). *Kong gu ji*, quoted below, is in six fascicles and features commentaries on a hundred *gong'an* cases. Linquan's treatment of the Nanquan story reads in part as follows:

> 此乃路見不平。當機不讓。便以本分事相為。剗除妄想、屏當狂情、要教於空劫已前威音之始。頓除人我等執、空一切法、頓絕諸緣。
>
> This is like not missing an opportunity to help when one encounters someone in trouble. Thus, (Nanquan) did what was appropriate in that situation. Wiping out false thoughts and getting rid of extreme emotions, (Nanquan) taught (the disciples) about the original (state of mind, which is like) when Mighty Sound (Buddha) appeared before the beginning of the empty eon.[36] In an instant, one eliminates the attachment to self; in regard to the emptiness of all phenomena, in an instant one puts an end to all causal conditions.[37]

Linquan goes on to relate the well-known story about Mañjuśri wielding a sword as he moves aggressively towards the Buddha, which appears in the *Da bao ji jing* 大寶積經 (Collection of Great Treasures Scripture).[38] Once upon a time, the story goes, five hundred monks attained the supernatural power of being able to see their past lives. Consequently, they were able to perceive the numerous crimes and unwholesome actions they have committed in their past lives, including the killing of their parents. The monks found that very disturbing, and started to doubt their capacity to attain awakening. Inspired by the supernatural power of the Buddha, Mañjuśri tried to help them. He took out his sword and came forward towards the Buddha, in a gesture indicative of an intention to kill the Enlightened One. The monks were initially shocked by the dramatic gesture, but then they had a profound realization: they apprehended that everything is empty, being like a dream or an illusion. Here is the end of Linquan's retelling of the canonical story:

> 如夢如幻。於夢幻中無有我人。乃至能生所生父母、皆如夢幻。於是五百比丘既得無生法忍。同讚嘆曰、文殊大智士、深達法源底。自手握利劍、馳逼如來身。如劍佛亦爾、一相無有二。無相無所生、是中云何殺。
>
> (The monks realized that mind and phenomena) are like dreams, like illusions. In dreams and illusions, there is no real self or person. Furthermore, giving

[36] According to Buddhist mythology, Wei yin wang fo 威音王佛 (S: Bhiṣmagarjitasvararāja) is a celestial Buddha who first appears at the beginning of the empty eon.

[37] *Linquan laoren pingchang tou zi qing heshang songgu kong gu ji* 林泉老人評唱投子青和尚頌古空谷集, X 67.281b13-16.

[38] For the original story, see *Da bao ji jing* 大寶積經 105, T 11.590b4-18.

> birth and being born, fathers and mothers, they are all like dreams and illusions. At that point, the five hundred monks all attained acceptance (of reality based on cognition) of the uncreated nature of things (S: *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*). They all exclaimed in unison, "Mañjuśri, the great bodhisattva of wisdom, has profoundly realized the ultimate source of truth. Clenching a sharp sword in his hand, he moved forcefully towards the body of the Tathāgata. As is the sword, so is the Buddha: they are equally (of the nature of reality), without any duality. Since everything is without any attributes and is unborn, how can there be any killing?[39]

Having thus established canonical justification for this line of interpretation, Linquan goes on to equate Nanquan's act of killing the cat with Mañjuśri's theatrical gesture towards the Buddha, as can be seen in the next quotation. As a result, Nanquan is free from any wrongdoing, and his action does not carry any moral connotations. Perhaps needless to say, this kind of interpretation raises serious ethical issues. Among other things, it can serve as a pretext for various sorts of abuses or questionable behaviors, as has often happened in the history of Buddhism, in China and elsewhere.

> 是知南泉大用不減文殊。不可以狹劣之見、僻執之心、誣謗古人。
>
> It should be known that Nanquan's great function is not inferior to that of Mañjuśri. It is impermissible to slander the ancients (like Nanquan) by holding onto narrow and inferior views, or by having a mind filled with biased attachments.[40]

At the end of the passage, we have a clear attempt to insulate Nanquan—or rather the anonymous writer of the story—from any kind of meaningful critique. We are told that nobody can censure or criticize Nanquan for his violent action—or anything he does, for that matter. To do so would be tantamount to an unwarranted slander. A person daring to articulate any sort of meaningful criticism can simply be dismissed as being an unenlightened ignoramus whose mind is filled with shallow views and one-sided attachments. So much for intellectual freedom and the need to question established authority.

This kind of argument, often accompanied with the charge that the critic lacks genuine Chan experience and insight—which presumably are possessed by the Chan master commenting on the *gong'an*—is often deployed in Chan/Zen circles to deflect potential critiques, disapproval, or challenges to authority, all the way down to the present. For instance, Zibo Zhenke 紫柏真可 (1543–1603), an influential Chan master from the late Ming era, argues that having doubts about this and other similar stories that

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[39] *Kong gu ji* 2, X 67.281c1-5.

[40] *Kong gu ji* 2, X 67.281c5-7.

feature violent acts is indicative of a lack of genuine understanding of Chan. That can apparently happen even to a bodhisattva who has reached the tenth (and highest) stage of the bodhisattva path, let alone to ordinary readers of these stories.[41] That, by extension, confirms the sectarian notion that Chan is vastly superior to canonical Buddhism.

In an interesting twist, at times Nanquan's *gong'an* also becomes an integral part of short vignettes or exchanges composed in the encounter dialogue format, which appear in a variety of texts composed from the Song era onward. Below I give three examples, from *Zhi yue lu*, *Tiansheng guang deng lu* (compiled in 1029), and *Miyun chanshi yulu* 密雲禪師語錄 (Recorded Sayings of Chan Master Miyun). The first text, compiled in 1595, features two prominent Chan masters from the late Tang era, who were Nanquan's contemporaries: Deshan Xuanjian 德山宣鑒 (782–865) and Xuefeng Yicun 雪峰義存 (822–908). The main protagonist in the second example is Lushan Xinglin 廬山行林 (aka Luohan Xinglin 羅漢行林), a disciple of Guizong who lived during the ninth century, while in the last quote we have Miyun Yuanwu 密雲圓悟 (1566–1642), a prominent Chan master from the late Ming era associated with the Linji lineage.

> 雪峯問德山、南泉斬猫意如何。德山以拄杖便打趁出。復召云、會麼。峯云、不會。山云、我與麼老婆心、猶自不會。
>
> Xuefeng asked Deshan, "What is the meaning of (the story about) Nanquan killing a cat?" (In response,) Deshan hit him with his stick and chased him away. (Deshan then) summoned him to come back and asked him, "Do you understand?" Xuefeng said, "I do not understand." Deshan said, "My heart is like that of an old woman.[42] But you still do not understand."[43]
>
> 師上堂、因貓兒跳上身。師乃提起示眾云、昔日南泉親斬却、歸宗重顯示玄徒。如今賣與諸禪客、文契分明要也無。師遂抛下貓兒、便歸方丈。
>
> Xinglin ascended the hall to preach, when a cat jumped on him. He then grabbed and raised (the cat), showing it to the assembled monks, and said, "In the past, Nanquan personally went on to behead (the cat); Guizong again demonstrated it to his disciples (by killing the snake).[44] Now, I am selling this to you all, Chan practitioners, without charging you anything for it." Xinglin then threw down the cat, after which he returned to the abbot's quarters.[45]

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[41] *Zibo zunzhe quan ji* 紫柏尊者全集, X 73.205a22-24.

[42] Having a heart like an old woman denotes a kind and caring attitude. In this context, the master tells the disciple that he cares deeply about him and is trying hard to educate him.

[43] X 83.486a3-5.

[44] This is a reference to an often cited story about Guizong, a prominent disciple of Mazu, killing a snake while working in the garden.

[45] X 78.556a22-24.

> 問、殺生是大戒。為甚麼南泉斬貓、歸宗斬蛇。師云、汝實恁麼問麼。云、是。師云、汝當懺悔去。
>
> (A monk once) asked (Miyun), "Killing represents a grave breach of the monastic precepts. Why did Nanquan kill a cat and Guizong kill a snake?" Miyun said, "Do you really want to ask that?" The monks said, "Yes, I do." Miyun (send him away,) saying, "You should go to repent (for asking such question)."[46]

Here we seem to have come a full circle, back to the encounter dialogue format, which as we saw was featured in the original story about Nanquan and the cat. That also takes us back to the familiar uses (or misuses) of these stories: to amuse or edify, to elucidate or obfuscate, to show off or deflect. In addition, the Nanquan story is also featured in many Chan/Zen verses and poems. Most of them are not of a highly literary quality, although their poetic presentation and didactic function point to pertinent aspects of the later Chan tradition that produced them, especially in the interlinked spheres of literary production and cultural exchange. Nonetheless, on the whole it seems fair to say that these kinds of poetic elocutions do not break any new ground, or bring additional clarity to the main issues discussed here.[47]

Modern Examples

The story about Nanquan killing a cat remains popular to this day, as can be seen from its discussion or mention in a number of modern publications on Chan/Zen.[48] In addition to the pertinent references and comments in scholarly (or semi-scholarly) publications, the Nanquan story is also featured in a number of popular books on Zen published in East Asia and the West. Overall, the tacit assumptions and interpretative templates evidenced in these publications tends to stay within the confines of the ideological suppositions and traditionalist strictures set by the classical sources discussed above. Nanquan remains an enlightened Chan master, while his violent act—along with Zhaozhou's eccentric response—is supposed to be pointing to some sort

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[46] CBETA, J 10.32b8-9.

[47] For examples of such poems, see *Chanzong zheng mai* 禪宗正脈, X 85.531a18-20; *Wuqu laoren yulu* 無趣老人語錄, CBETA, J 25.47c4-8; *Tianan sheng chanshi yulu* 天岸昇禪師語錄, CBETA, J 26.689c8-11; *Sanfeng cang heshang yulu* 三峰藏和尚語錄, CBETA, J 34.174c27-29; *Fushi chanshi yulu* 浮石禪師語錄, CBETA, J 26.605c11-13; *Hanshan laoren meng you ji* 憨山老人夢遊集, X 73.724b23-c1; *Zhi yue lu* 指月錄, X 83.486b18-22.

[48] For Japanese scholarly treatments of Nanquan's story, see Harada Norio, "Nansen zanmyō," in *Kyōtō joshi daigaku jinbun ronsō* 23, pp. 86–97; Ishii Shūdō, *Chūgoku zenshū shiwa*, pp. 260–66; Okimoto Katsumi, "Zen shisō keiseishi no kenkyū," in *Kenkyū Hōkoku* 5, pp. 410–22.

of inscrutable truth or timeless wisdom. The whole *gong'an* is said to represent a profound paradox infused with meaning, which intimates the essential ground of human existence. We are thus confronted with a subtle mystery that, notwithstanding its emotional pull, intellectual appeal, or metaphysical resonance, in the end needs to be unlocked via dedicated Zen practice, undertaken under proper spiritual guidance.

A noteworthy element of many modern interpretations is a tendency to reframe traditional modes of exegesis in light of Japanese sectarian readings of the classical texts, as promulgated by the major Zen factions in modern Japan, as well as their apologists and missionaries active elsewhere. The common tendency to stick uncritically to conventional lines of exegesis might be a bit disappointing to some, inasmuch as it is indicative of a failure to critically examine normative traditions and challenge some of the problematic or untenable suppositions that underline them. Then again, it is not that surprising, given the nature and scope of most modern adaptations and appropriations of Chan/Zen teachings and practices, as well as the dominant patterns of their global diffusion within and outside of their East Asian homelands, including Europe and America.

A telling example of modern interpretation of the story, which is perhaps most remarkable for its banality and superficiality, is the passage below from the writings of D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966). While Suzuki's writings are less influential these days, he was arguably the most important popularizer and interpreter of Zen, especially for Western audiences, during most of the twentieth century. His writings continue to influence common perceptions of Zen, especially outside of academic circles. In a book chapter that discusses the essential character of Zen, which he defines as a supreme form of "higher affirmation" of reality, after retelling the familiar version of the story, Suzuki lauds the earnestness of Nanquan (Nansen) and Zhaozhou (Joshu). After a brief philosophical musing regarding the basic non-difference between "absolute denial" and "absolute affirmation," Suzuki goes on to assert that the cat was not killed in vain. He even hints at the cat's eventual realization of Buddhahood, presumably in connection with its evocative sacrifice at the altar of truth.

> What does all this mean? Why was a poor innocent creature sacrificed? What has Joshu's placing his sandals over his head to do with the quarrelling? Did Nansen mean to be irreligious and inhuman by killing a living being? Was Joshu really a fool to play such a strange trick? And then "absolute denial" and "absolute affirmation"—are these really two? There is something fearfully earnest in both these actors, Joshu and Nansen. Unless this is apprehended, Zen is, indeed, a mere farce. The cat certainly was not killed to no purpose. If

> any of the lower animals is ever to attain Buddhahood, this cat was surely the one so destined.[49]

Unlike Suzuki, some modern writers and commentators have expressed some degree of unease or ambivalence regarding the moral tenor of the Nanquan story. For instance, in his widely read history of Zen Buddhism, Heinrich Dumoulin mentions the "grotesque note sounded" by the story.[50] Nonetheless, he chooses not to explore the story's grotesqueness or its ethical ramifications. Instead, he quotes it at face value, as the only record of Nanquan's teachings, featured in a section that celebrates "the strange words and extraordinary actions" of the great Tang masters who followed in the footsteps of Huineng 慧能 (638–713), which on the whole tends to misrepresent the basic character of Tang Chan.[51] A vague sense of moral sensibility is also brought to the fore in the interpretations offered by modern Taiwanese monks, such as Xingyun 星雲 (1927–) and Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009)—the founding masters of Foguang shan 佛光山 and Fagu shan 法鼓山, two of the largest Buddhist organizations in contemporary Taiwan, respectively—although they are also keen to absolve Nanquan of any kind of ethical lapse or karmic culpability.

One way of doing that is to deploy the familiar strategy of glossing over the moral angle of the story. The main point of the *gong'an*, we are told by a modern Taiwanese commentator, is Nanquan's earnest attempt to put an end to the monks delusory attachments. In that sense, his action represents a "sublime function" in response to a specific circumstance.[52] Along the same line of reasoning, Xingyun asserts that the central point of the story is not about killing, but about instructing people how to put an end to their desires, attachments, and antagonisms (主旨不在於殺生，它主要是在斬斷大家愛的葛藤).[53] Elsewhere he suggests that, given that the story is really about showcasing Nanquan's great potency and great function (大機大用), in all probability he raised his hand in a demonstrative gesture and only pretended to kill the cat, in order to obliterate the desires and attachments of his disciples (其實，南泉斬貓或許以手作勢斬貓，為的是斬斷大眾的物欲和

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[49] D. T. Suziki, *An Introduction to Zen*, p. 71. For another somewhat forced (and perhaps even fanciful) interpretation, which is primarily focused on Zhaozhou's withy response and is a bit critical of Nanquan for "overdoing his Zen," see Yoel Hoffmann, *Radical Zen: The Sayings of Joshu*, p. 16.

[50] Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China*, p. 167.

[51] Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism*, pp. 166-70.

[52] Chen Wenxin 陳文新, *Chanzongde rensheng zhexue* 禪宗的人生哲學, p. 146.

[53] Xingyun 星雲, *Xingyun chan hua* 星雲禪話 (老鼠做大); online citation.

執著).[54] We are left in the dark, however, as to how exactly such a trivial gesture, which seems very easy to replicate, is supposed to bring about that kind of marvelous result. The ending of desires and attachments might be desirable, but it is also very difficult to achieve, given the high degree of deluded self-centeredness and stupidity that characterizes the human condition. If Nanquan can bring about that kind of profound transformation by a simple gesture, that is nothing short of miraculous indeed.

A number of modern commentaries on the Nanquan *gong'an* are based on lectures given at various Zen temples or centers. In part, these kinds of publications are geared towards general readers interested in learning about Zen literature, doctrine, and practice. On occasion, they are incorporated into series of lectures centered on one of the classical *kōan* collections, such as *Wumen guan* or *Bi yan lu*, presented in a modern idiom and adapted to the horizons of expectation of contemporary audiences of Zen practitioners and aficionados. A pertinent example are the series of lectures on *Wumen guan* given by Shibayama Zenkei 柴山全慶 (1894–1974), the late head of Nanzenji 南禅寺, one of the major Zen temples in Kyoto.

On the surface, Shibayama's commentary is quite unremarkable and unoriginal, even boringly predictable. He follows traditional exegetical models, with some minor twists, such as an invocation of Jesus Christ.[55] Nevertheless, that also makes his commentary a good illustration of the conventional and conservative character of modern Zen, notwithstanding the occasional penchant for iconoclastic bravado and theatrical posturing, or the deployment of vivid symbolism and pretentious rhetoric.

Shibayama's commentary starts with a critique of unspecified scholars. They cannot understand the *kōan* correctly, he asserts, unless they have undergone proper Zen training. Among their wrongdoings, scholars tend to interpret the story solely from an ethical perspective or from a "common-sense point of view." That apparently is unavoidable, since they lack "the authentic Zen eye and experience to grasp the essence."[56] It is not exactly clear who are the scholars targeted by this critique. If they are to be criticized for anything, most scholars are guilty of the opposite: their failure to critically

[54] Xingyun, *Xingyun chan hua* (鋤草斬蛇); online citation. Similar sentiments are also expressed in Wu Rujun 吳汝鈞, "Wo dui yu chan de yanxi yu tiyan de xinlu licheng" 我對於禪的研習與體驗的心路歷程, *Zheng quan zazhi* 正觀雜誌 50 (2009): 161-212. See also Zhang Shengzhen 張勝珍, "Chanzong de piyu" 禪宗的譬喻, *Wutaishan yanjiu* 五臺山研究 (2004), pp. 31-37.

[55] Shibayama Zenkei, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, p. 111.

[56] Ibid., p. 108.

explore the story's ethical ramifications or probe behind the smokescreens conjured up by traditional forms of exegesis. Shibayama then reiterates a familiar theme: this and other *kōan* are direct expressions of a deep Zen experience, which belongs to an entirely different dimension of reality than the prosaic realm of ethical concerns and practical activeties.[57]

After offering commonplace discussions of Nanquan, Zhaozhou, and the story itself, Shibayama exports his audience to "be no-self," as they undergo the "actual training and experience" that are the essential elements of Zen. As for Nanquan, we are told that he performed the gruesome act with a "bleeding heart" and "tears in his eyes," as there was nobody to say a word that could save the cat.[58] The last statement is quite remarkable, as it implies that Nanquan did not have a choice but to kill the innocent creature, even though his gratuitous act did not enlighten anyone in the audience—or in the whole history of Zen, I would venture to guess.

As for the models and guides to follow along the Zen part of spiritual exploration, Shibayama cites a number of Chinese and Japanese masters, but also talks about his own training under a qualified Zen master.[59] That is a telling passage, I think, as it harkens back to the central issues of orthodoxy and authority in Zen. It is the modern master, such as Shibayama, who serves as the prime arbiter of value and meaning, since he is an authentic inheritor of the ancient Zen tradition. He is thus poised to function as a gatekeeper to the sublime "world of reality, or truth, which transcends provisional names and labels, where everything is born anew with creative freedom."[60]

This, once again, brings us back to the intertwined fields of social relationships, institutional structures, and ideological constructs. From a sociological perspective, these are all very important in the life of a community of believers. At the same time, the actual contents of the community's beliefs and ideas, exemplified by the story and its commentaries, can be deemed to be of secondary importance. Namely, according to this line of sociological interpretation, the main point is the establishment of a sense of truth and orthodoxy that brings the community together, and the perpetuation of religious institutions that safeguard it, whose members incidentally tend to derive tangible benefits by virtue of their status as guardians of truth and tradition. However, was it not the case that Chan/Zen was supposed to take

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., p. 109.

[59] Ibid., p. 110.

[60] Ibid., p. 112.

us in an entirely different direction, away from the familiar intersections of knowledge and power? Wasn't it supposed to blow away archaic ideological smokescreens and obliterate all forms of conceptual posturing, rather than conjure or shore them up? Perhaps not, or so it seems.

Comparative Frameworks

The "sacred" canons of the world's major regions tend to be complex and multilayered mélanges of disparate elements. The major canons of Buddhism, especially the Chinese Buddhist canon, are quite astounding in terms of their size and complexity. But even within the more limited canons of other religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, there are still elaborate assortments of different narrative styles and a multitude of textual layers, many (or most) of them with complex provenance. That includes all sorts of stories, sermons, poems, legends, and other types of mythical or historical materials, which may convey a multiplicity of meanings and be open to manifold interpretations.

Some of these scriptural materials might be controversial or problematic in some way. Once they become canonized, however, the followers of particular religious traditions have to engage or come to terms with them, in part by somehow integrating them into larger systems of meaning and value. There is also the challenge of interpreting the dramatic storylines, implicit messages, or focal viewpoints embedded into canonical narratives in accord with established beliefs and dogmas. That is a potentially precarious and demanding process that may necessitate reliance on a peculiar hermeneutical strategy, or adherence to a preset theological template.

For instance, what are pious believers or biblical exegetes to make of the *Song of Songs*, ostensibly a love poem infused with explicit erotic imagery, which for some mysterious reason is included in the sacred canons of Judaism and Christianity? One possible reading observable in Judaism, which tries to deal with the poem's embarrassingly overt exultation of human sexuality, is to interpret the song's celebration of love and passion as an allegory for the close relationship between God and Israel.[61] Unsurprisingly, the dominant Christian interpretation of the some song tends to be a bit different. There, in addition to an acknowledgment of the basic meaning (of erotically suffused love between a married couple), the song is read as a

[61] Weston W. Fields, "Early and Medieval Jewish Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Grace Theological Journal* 1/2, pp. 221-31.

different kind of allegory: a coming together of Jesus Christ (represented by the man or bridegroom) and the Church (represented by the woman or bride).[62]

Biblical scholarship provides many examples of exegetical strategies for dealing with scriptural passages that are morally disturbing or perplexing, including many stories that depict God, the main character in the *Hebrew Bible*, in an unflattering light. The same goes for passages that seem to be superficial, mean-minded, or pointless, or which might indicate the presence of evil in the *Bible*. For instance, how is one supposed to deal with passages that seem to depict God as a petty, jealous, and vindictive person who prohibits the worship of other deities and asserts, "I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20: 4–6)?[63] How about the God who decides to "blot out from the earth the human beings I have created" (Genesis 6: 6–8) after becoming grieved by his creation (with the exception of Noah),[64] and who commands Abraham to kill his only son Isaac and offer him to God as a sacrifice (Genesis 22: 2)?[65]

Are potentially troubling passages such as these to be interpreted literally or allegorically, or in some other fashion, perhaps by the application of a historical-grammatical method or contextual analysis? Alternatively, perhaps they are to be ignored or glossed over. The last seems to be a common strategy, used by many religious people when it comes to dealing with many of the morally reprehensible, unpopular, or impractical tales or injunctions presented in their sacred texts.

While the Buddhist canon is relatively devoid of the kind of brimstone rhetoric, violence, and gore we can find elsewhere, it is of course possible to find numerous passages, or even whole texts, that might be deemed by a critical observer to be objectionable, unwise, bizarre, or inane. Like their Christian counterparts, Buddhist thinkers and exegetes have wrestled with these kinds of materials. They have also deployed a number of hermeneutical strategies, aimed at translating, interpreting, and ordering the varied materials presented in the vast Buddhist canon. Additionally, they have developed methods and procedures for retrieving—or imputing—assorted

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[62] J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154/613, pp. 23-46. The article also summarizes several alternative interpretative strategies.

[63] Dan Barker, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction*, p. 16. See the whole section where the quote appears, which deals with God's jealousy.

[64] Barker, *God*, p. 136.

[65] Barker, *God*, p. 143.

meanings to passages or teachings contained in the scriptures and other types of canonical texts.

Nonetheless, there are also important differences among the major religious traditions that, to a large degree, pertain to the distinct origin, status, and function of their "sacred" texts. Among other things, Christian scripture is deemed to have divine origins, being the result of supernatural revelation that can be traced back to the all-powerful and all-knowing creator of the universe. In contrast, notwithstanding the presence of otherworldly elements in certain Mahāyāna scriptures, the Buddhist canon is primarily conceived to be of human origin. In that sense—and for a number of other reasons that have to do with Church history, philosophical outlook, ecclesiastical structure, and notions of authority—the Christian exegete tends to be under greater pressure to find some kind of valid or profound meaning in everything that is included in his canon.

In contrast, the burden to affirm traditional interpretations or conform to a canonically-centered orthodoxy seem to be relatively light in the context of the Chan tradition. On the surface, at least, Chan teachers and exegetes might be expected to have more leeway when it comes to canonical interpretation, and greater freedom to be creative or think independently. After all, the texts in question are unquestionably of human origin, and are primarily meant to serve as conventional tools that point to an ineffable realm of detachment and transcendence. They are also closely related to specific forms of traditionalist creeds and temporal institutions, all of which (in theory, at least,) are eminently contestable. In light of that, the apparent failure of dominant segments within Chan/Zen Buddhism to question entrenched dogmas, or come to terms with some of the potentially unsavory or problematic aspects of received texts and traditions—as can be seen from the brief survey of the interpretation of Nanquan's story presented in this chapter—raises a host of apposite questions about the scope and character of Chan beliefs, doctrines, practices, and institutions, especially during the post-Tang era.

Concluding Remarks

By presenting and analyzing an array of exegetical materials centered on the story about Nanquan killing a cat (and Zhaozhou putting sandals on his head), the chapter points toward central aspects of the ways the Chan/Zen tradition(s) remembered or reimagined its past, and interpreted key parts of its literary canon. That sheds light on significant facets of the tradition's literature, practice, and history, including the prevalent notions of authority and orthodoxy, the nature and tenor of ideological constructs, and the impact of institutional strictures. In that sense, the materials presented here can potentially serve as a window for taking a fresh look at some of the main developmental trajectories of Chan during the post-Tang period, in part by making us rethink key parts of normative narratives and received wisdoms, perpetuated in varied Chan/Zen milieus as well as within academic circles.

A simple premise that underscores the critical analysis presented in this chapter it that, perhaps, the emperor does not have any clothes after all. Or at least the clothes he has put on are not what we think them to be. Accordingly, in the preceding pages I suggested an alternative way of looking at the Nanquan story and its commentaries, in the hope that it might shed somewhat different light on the social contexts and religious traditions that produced and disseminated them. Some of my arguments might be perceived as being somewhat polemical, inasmuch as they challenge or contravene conventional notions about Chan literature, doctrine, and practice, as they evolved during the Song and subsequent eras. Even so, I hope that the chapter can make a modest contribution towards the expansion and refocusing of Chan discourse, both within and outside of scholarly circles.

I propose that the general treatment of the Nanquan story, while representative of significant themes and trends in Chan/Zen history, can be perceived as being indicative of a general lack of critical acumen, intellectual rigor, and religious vitality, which tend to characterize much of the later Chan/Zen traditions in China, Japan, and elsewhere. In part, this sort of predicament stems from a manifest unwillingness or inability to challenge entrenched dogmas, and to consider alternative perspectives or interpretations. That includes the possibility that this and other similar stories are "little more than nonessential ramblings, a peculiar type of religious gibberish," prime examples of "mass produced textual materials that tend to

highly formulaic, numbingly repetitive, and ostensibly pointless." If that is the case, at the onset they were artificially manufactured by "a tradition that has run out of any good and compelling ideas, whose ascendancy, along with other related factors, marked the long-term decline of Chinese Buddhism."[66]

The failure to consider this sort of interpretative possibility—along with the unconscious tendency to uncritically rehearse normative interpretations—is unfortunate, I think. Perhaps the ability to think outside the box, along with a willingness to critically reexamine received narratives and (if needed) repudiate entrenched creeds can turn out to be helpful, on several levels. That might especially be the case in regard to an ongoing effort towards refining or reframing our understanding of the larger religious themes and development trajectories—as well as present-day realities—of East Asian Buddhism, along with a critical rethinking of the place of the various Chan/Zen traditions within it.

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