

Chan Narratives about Death Premonitions and Avoidance of Fate

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Abstract

The article explores the scope, content, and function of prophecies and premonitions presented in Chinese Buddhist literature, with a focus on the Chan school and the late medieval period. It is especially concerned with Chan narratives that feature premonitions about an upcoming death or demise, either one's own or of another person. Additionally, that is related to prevalent notions about the possibility of changing individual fate (or destiny), mainly at the point of facing death or when coming to terms with the daunting prospect of a terrible afterlife. While these themes resonate with the broader Buddhist tradition, the Chan school's production of narratives that feature this kind of thaumaturgic elements were linked to changing conceptions of exemplary religiosity, in which the Chan masters' real supernatural power is ultimately based on their possession of superior wisdom.

Keywords

Chan School – prophecies – Tang dynasty – Chinese Buddhism – fate – wisdom – thaumaturgy – foretelling of death

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1 Introduction

Buddhist literature is replete with various prophecies, portents, and predictions, expressed in a variety of genres, and covering a broad range of canonical and non-canonical sources. This type of material conveys a *mélange* of implicit and explicit meanings. It is also deployed in a variety of contexts and is open to a range of interpretations. Some basic tropes, such as the Buddhas' prophecies about the future enlightenment of individuals or groups, are observable across a number of different Buddhist traditions. Others are reflective of sentiments, proclivities, or ideas that developed within the delimited contexts of specific times, places, or traditions. As such, they provide glimpses into the concerns and aspirations of particular individuals or groups of believers, or insights into localized expressions of Buddhist beliefs and practices. Often, they are set in relation to relevant socioreligious milieus or institutional strictures, even if lacunae in the extant sources may make it difficult to reconstruct all relevant frameworks.

In this article, I explore the scope and function of prophecies and premonitions that were articulated and transmitted within the Chan 禪 school of Chinese Buddhism, as it developed during the late medieval period. Specifically, I examine more closely a particular type of foretelling or prediction of forthcoming events, as recorded in Chan literature: a premonition about an upcoming demise, especially one's own. Additionally, I try to relate this peculiar type of religious phenomenon, which in general terms is not unique to the Chan tradition, to nascent ideas about the possibility of changing individual fate or destiny (*ming* 命), especially at the point of facing death or coming to terms with the prospect of a disagreeable afterlife. Given the main theme and readership of the present journal—which is not geared towards specialists in Buddhist studies, but involves scholars coming from a wide range of disciplines—the early part of the article provides introductory information about the relevant Buddhist backgrounds.

Chan literature is vast in scope, and there are notable differences among the Chan traditions that flourished during discrete historical periods. Consequently, here the discussion is primarily focused on a somewhat limited range of texts, especially those that purport to record the lives and teachings of Chan masters from the Tang 唐 era (618–907). The provenance of these and other classical Chan texts tends to be convoluted. Chan records are usually hybrid narratives that incorporate a variety of materials, whose origins can be traced to different times and places. They also often tend to incorporate elements of historical and fictional narratives, in ways that blur the

boundaries between them.¹ In the present context, we are not so much concerned with the veracity of events depicted in specific stories or episodes, as with modes of hagiographic representation and conceptions of paradigmatic religiosity.

2 Frames of Reference

When trying to make sense of Chan narratives that feature visionary and prophetic themes, especially predictions about upcoming death or other uncanny occurrences, it is sensible to frame the discussion primarily in terms of key elements of religious belief, doctrine, and practice that characterize the Chan movement as a whole, or a particular subset of it, if dealing with a specific text, person, or point of historical development. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the mythos of the Chan/Zen tradition's putative uniqueness—which has been promoted by scholars and adherents alike, especially in Japan—throughout the premodern period Chan was hardly hermetically sealed or radically disjoined from the rest of Buddhism, or from Chinese religious life more generally. In fact, most of the teachings and practices conveyed in early Chan sources exhibit unmistakable traces of varied inspirations and influences. That includes the Buddhist canon, as well as common monastic mores and philosophical outlooks shared by other schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as Tiantai 天台 and Huayan 華嚴.

Overall, Chan records involve the fusion and reframing of assorted elements, many traceable to outside the tradition, and their ingenious integration into particular Chan outlooks and modes of narration. Accordingly, to fully appreciate and understand the type of Chan stories I am concerned with here, it is helpful to keep in mind the direct and indirect influences of several overlapping frames of reference. That takes us past familiar Chan sources (narrowly defined) and beyond restricted notions of orthodoxy. Specifically, we can identify three main frames of reference that are relevant to the present analysis. They are each connected with different traditions or sources that feature prophetic leitmotifs: well-known canonical texts translated into Chinese, assorted sources composed by Chinese Buddhists, and native texts associated with other religious traditions, including Daoism.²

1 For a survey of the relevant Chan literature, see Mario Poceski, *The Records of Mazu and the Making of Classical Chan Literature*, especially Part 1.

2 Additionally, there is the possibility of fruitful engagement in comparative analysis of these themes, across a broader spectrum of religious traditions, geographical locations, and historical periods. That, however, will have to wait for another occasion.

Buddhist scriptures contain many passages that feature foresights, predictions, or related prophetic themes. Traditionally, prophecies (S: *vyākaraṇa*; C: *shouji* 授記) are among the twelve main sections included in the Buddhist canon. Prime examples of such narratives include the copious predictions of future enlightenment and attainment of Buddhahood featured in the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經), one of the most popular Mahāyāna scriptures that has had high currency in China (and the rest of East Asia) since the medieval period. Profuse predictions of Buddhahood play a notable role throughout the scripture, starting with the first chapter in Kumārajīva's (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什, 344–413) widely-used translation. There we find Maitreya (Mile 彌勒), the Buddha of the future, asking Mañjuśrī (Wenshu 文殊), the bodhisattva who personifies wisdom, about the possibility of the Buddha making predictions to the multitudes who have assembled to see him preach and manifest preternatural powers.³

In the scripture's chapters that follow, there is a wide assortment of predictions about the attainment of Buddhahood. They cover numerous accomplished bodhisattvas, as well as some of the Buddha's best-known historical disciples—who in Mahāyāna literature are typically associated with the so-called Small Vehicle—such as Śāriputra, Mahākāśyapa, Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, and Mahāmaudgalyāyana. The deluge of predictions also extends to a multitude of other beings, including disciples at various stages of spiritual development,⁴ in an expansive manner that is tantamount to a promise of universal Buddhahood. In all these cases, the prophecy of future enlightenment incorporates foretelling the ending of the present lifetime, and the unfolding of future lives (and deaths) during which the future buddhas single-mindedly cultivate the bodhisattva path.

Similar prophecies about forthcoming attainment of Buddhahood, rebirth in a Buddha-land, or other auspicious happenstance, appear in other Mahāyāna scriptures. One such example is the *Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra* (*Shengman jing* 勝鬘經), said to have been translated by Guṇabhadra (Qiunabatuoluo 求那跋陀羅; 394–468) in 435, which at the outset includes a prophecy about the future Buddhahood of Śrīmālā, its main heroine.⁵ Additionally, in the

3 *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 1, (CBETA) T 262: 9.3c7; translated in Kubo Tsugunari and Akira Yuyama, *The Lotus Sutra*, 12. All subsequent citations from the Taishō canon are based on the digital CBETA version. The same goes for other editions of the canon, such as *Xu zang jing* 續藏經 (reprint of *Dai nihon zoku zōkyō* 大日本續藏經).

4 For instance, see *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 4, T 262: 9.27b17–20, 9.28b23–27, 9.29c3–8, 9.30a16–20, and 9.30b29–c7; translated in Kubo and Yuyama, *The Lotus Sutra*, 139, 144, 151, 153, and 157.

5 *Shengman shizi hou yisheng da fangbian fangguang jing* 勝鬘師子吼一乘大方便方廣經, T 353: 12.217b11–22.

Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra (*Weimojie suo shuo jing* 維摩詰所說經), an evocation of the Buddha's prophecy about Maitreya's upcoming realization of Buddhahood—said to happen in his next lifetime—serves as an entry point into an extended discussion about the nature of reality.⁶ In the same scripture, we also find a prophecy about a multitude of beings (human and nonhuman alike) being reborn in a celestial realm called Joyous (S: *abhirati*; C: *miaoxi* 妙喜), which according to Buddhist cosmology is located in the east and is associated with Akṣobhya Buddha (Achu fo 阿閼佛).⁷ On the subject of Maitreya, the prophecy about his future coming—as the next Buddha of this world—is an important part of Buddhist cosmology and mythology. Traditionally, that is tied up with prevalent beliefs about the gradual decline and eventual demise of Buddhism, with the final age of the Dharma's regression (C: *mofa* 末法; J: *mappō*) being the last of the three main periods of Buddhist “history.”⁸

In addition to widely diffused scriptural prophecies and associated mythological motifs, Chinese Buddhists also created numerous narratives that depict unusual or miraculous events that supposedly took place in their country. While shaped by canonical models, such accounts also communicate native spiritual concerns and cultural predilections. Even as the putative presence and salvific potency of prominent buddhas and bodhisattvas remained central fixtures within the religious imagination, in medieval Buddhism there was also a tendency to ascribe similar thaumaturgic abilities to Chinese monastics, even to an occasional layman. Prime repositories of such materials include the hagiographies of eminent monks (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳), Buddhist encyclopedias, and the various collections of tales about miraculous events composed in medieval China, which contain many predictions about upcoming events.

Among the distinguishing features of these accounts are their intimate tone and sense of immediacy, as the focus of attention is usually directed towards specific events, supposedly experienced or witnessed by the main protagonists. Furthermore, a number of predictions exhibit utilitarian concerns or unambiguous preoccupation with worldly affairs, such as impending disasters,

6 *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 1, T 475: 14.542b1–3. For English translations of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, see Burton Watson, *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, and Robert Thurman, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (based on the Chinese and Tibetan versions, respectively).

7 *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 3, T 475: 14. 555c11–13.

8 For the prophecy of the Dharma's decline, see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*. For the broader impact of the Maitreya prophecy on Chinese religious history, especially beyond the confines of Buddhism, see Barend J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*.

military campaigns, political events, or commercial endeavors. Among the best-known examples of a thaumaturge recognized for these kinds of abilities is Fotudeng 佛圖澄 (d. 348/349). Originally from Kucha in Central Asia, he arrived in Luoyang 洛陽 in 310 and had notable impact on the growth of Buddhism in northern China. Among other things, he was well-known among his contemporaries for his magical powers and mantic expertise. That included his presumed ability to predict events with political and military relevance, including the outcomes of military battles, as well as the timing of his own death. That kind of thaumaturgic skill helped ingratiate him to the imperial court of the Later Zhao 後趙 dynasty (319–351), where he served as a royal advisor.⁹

Many stories depicting medieval monks having premonitions or foretelling future events are recorded in *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks), compiled by Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), *Shenseng zhuan* 神僧傳 (Biographies of Divine Monks), compiled in the fourteenth century, and other collections of monastic hagiographies. Other relevant sources are Buddhist encyclopedias such as *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 (Forest of Pearls in the Dharma Garden), compiled in 668 by Daoshi 道世 (d. 683?), and anthologies of miracles tales such as *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記, compiled by Wang Yan 王琰 (dates unknown) at the end of the fifth century. The central trope of a monk predicting his own death appears a number of times in these texts. For instance, there is a story about a monk called Fodiao 佛調, possibly of non-Chinese extraction, who lived during the Eastern Jin 東晉 dynasty (317–420). In addition to being able to predict the exact timing of his death, the mysterious monk is also described as being able to tame a tiger, as well as reappear among the living several years after his death.¹⁰

Another similar story features an obscure monk called Huiyuan 慧遠 (d. 455)—the same name as the famous prelate associated with Mt. Lu 廬山 and the quest for rebirth in Amitābha's pure land—who presciently foretold the time and place of his death. The next day, we are told, he quietly passed away in the course of an observance ceremony, held at the home of the layperson

9 John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*, 74; Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, 79–80; Eric Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, 181–83; and Arthur Frederick Wright, "Fo-t'u-Teng: A Biography," in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 11, 3/4 (1948), 321–371.

10 *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 9, T 2059: 50.387c16–388a15; Robert Ford Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China*, 91–92. The same account is also reproduced in *Shenseng zhuan* 神僧傳 1, T 2064: 50.954a26–b19.

to whom he communicated his prediction. Additionally, Huiyuan went on to manifest himself postmortem, during which he accurately forecasted the passing away of another monk.¹¹ This narrative also points towards a similar type of story found in monastic hagiographies, in which the main protagonist foretells the passing away of another monk. One such example, told by Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001) in his *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Song [Era] Biographies of Eminent Monks), is the premonition of Xuanjue 玄覺 (dates unknown), a disciple of the famous pilgrim and translator Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664). Xuanjue supposedly had an unusual dream, which foretold the impending passing away of Xuanzang.¹²

覺因夢、一浮圖莊嚴高大、忽然摧倒。遂驚起告奘。奘曰、非汝身事。此吾滅之徵耳。覺暗悲安做[仿?]。勸諸法侶競求醫藥。

Xuanjue had a dream, in which a tall and magnificent stupa fell down unexpectedly. After he suddenly woke up [in an alarmed state], he related [his dream] to Xuanzang. “That is not about you. [Rather,] it is only a portent of my pending demise,” said Xuanzang. Xuanjue was filled with sadness.¹³ He then urged his fellow monks to try to seek medical treatment [for Xuanzang].¹⁴

In some instances, the exceptional ability to foretell the future is extended to an inanimate object, which has been infused with supernatural power via its connection with a holy person. That is illustrated by the story about a pious layman called Teng Bing 滕並 from Nanyang 南陽 (in present-day Henan), who welcomed an anonymous monk with miraculous power to a vegetarian feast held at his home. After the food intended for the monks and the laity was

11 *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 97, T 2122: 53.1003c29–1004a19; Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 233. See also *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 19, T 2122: 53.428c29–429a10.

12 For more on dreams in medieval Chinese Buddhism, see Christopher Jon Jensen, “Dreaming Betwixt and Between: Oneiric Narratives in Huijiao and Daoxuan’s Biographies of Eminent Monks.”

13 The original Chinese text seems to have an error, as the two Chinese characters 安做 (or 仿) make little sense. Another version of the text, which reads better and makes more sense, has the same passage as 覺暗悲慟; see *Gujin tushu jicheng xuanji* 古今圖書集成選輯 161, (CBETA) B 88: 16.338b21.

14 *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 2, T 2061: 50.716c21–24. Here, as well in most other instances throughout the article, I have changed the punctuation of the CBETA version of the text. See also Ding Wang, “Xuanzang’s Helpers From Turfan: Some Notes Based on Mediaeval Chinese Manuscripts,” 364, which contains a translation of Xuanjue’s brief biographical entry (that I consulted in preparing this translation).

dropped unintentionally on the floor by a servant, the visiting monk was able to provide enough food to feed all those present from his alms bowl. Then, the mysterious monk departed in a dramatic fashion, not to be seen again, while leaving a lasting impact on Teng's household.

清淨既畢、擲鉢空中。翻然上昇、極目乃滅。並即刻木、作其形像。朝拜禮。並家將有凶禍、則此像必先倒路云。

After the cleaning was done, [the monk] tossed his alms bowl into the air. Suddenly, he ascended upward [towards the sky], until he completely disappeared out of sight. Bing then carved a wooden image of the monk. He always worshiped the image, morning and night. Whenever a misfortune was about to befall Bing's household, the image would [predict that] by toppling over.¹⁵

Finally, there are the numerous stories with similar tropes found in non-Buddhist sources, such as *Soushenji* 搜神記 (Records of Search for the Divine), attributed to Gan Bao 干寶 (d. 336),¹⁶ and *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Records from the Taiping [Era]), compiled in 977. These materials are parts of rich traditions of thaumaturgic lore and mantic expertise, some of which pre-date the introduction of Buddhism into China. They reflect prevalent beliefs about unseen realms, otherworldly beings, and mysterious forces, as well as a deep sense of fascination with all sorts of miracles, omens, visions, dreams, prophecies, and the like, which permeated traditional Chinese culture. Texts dealing with these phenomena are often placed in the category of *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of the strange), thus forming a distinct literary genre that blurs the boundaries between historical and fictional narratives.¹⁷

Many pertinent examples of such supernatural themes can be found in Daoist literature, especially the hagiographies of various seekers of immortality and purveyors of esoteric arts. Numerous such examples are contained in *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 (Biographies of Immortals), attributed to Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE), and Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283–343) *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Biographies

15 *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 42, T 2122: 53.616c8–11. See also Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 109, which I consulted in preparing this translation.

16 For an English translation, see Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J. I. Crump, *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record*.

17 For the *zhiguai* literature, see Robert Ford Campamy, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*.

of Divine Immortals).¹⁸ There, the ability to predict future events is a standard narrative feature, deployed as a common element within a repertoire of preternatural capabilities associated with accomplished Daoist adepts.¹⁹ On the whole, there is considerable similarity between Buddhist and Daoist narratives of this kind, which points to overlapping conceptions of sanctity.²⁰ However, the treatment of death in Daoist lore is somewhat different, as one of the primary goals of Daoist practice is the attainment of immortality (or a state of transcendence), which implies the avoidance of death. Consequently, it is more common to find predictions of the death of others, rather than the foretelling of one's own demise, although there are exceptions to that.

3 Premonitions about Impending Demise

As a general rule, visions, prophecies, and other thaumaturgic elements are not central features of Chan literature, especially as it pertains to the classical tradition. At times, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the prevalence of these kinds of phenomena in the context of Chinese Chan, especially as they pertain to the ritualization of death.²¹ On the flip side, there is a more prevalent tendency to ignore thaumaturgic concerns in discussions of Chan beliefs and practices. In any case, there are a number of stories about Chan masters foretelling their own demise or the death of another person, and it behooves us to try to make sense out of them. There are even some stories that attribute such abilities to female Chan masters.²²

As already noted, the premonition of one's own approaching demise is a common trope in the hagiographies of Buddhist monks. It is thus not surprising that similar elements can also be found in the hagiographies of prominent Chan masters. Knowledge of the time and place of one's own death is traditionally interpreted as a sign of high spiritual accomplishment, even if the

18 For an English translation of Ge Hong's collection, see Robert Ford Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's "Traditions of Divine Transcendents."*

19 Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*, 50, 163–64.

20 For the similarities between Buddhist and Daoist hagiography, see Mu-chou Poo, "The Images of Immortals and Eminent Monks: Religious Mentality in Early Medieval China."

21 For instance, see Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism*, 184–203. It may be true that there was a process of ritualization of death within Chan/Zen circles, as asserted by Faure, but it is a step too far to transpose Song-era or later developments, especially in Japan, back to a Tang milieu.

22 See Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China*, 72.

exact causes or mechanics that underline it are not spelled out with complete clarity. Additionally, such premonitions can be situated in the context of preparations for a good or exemplary death. If a monk can know the day and time of his death, then he can properly prepare for a demise worthy of a saint. That can include a ritual bath and assumption of a proper posture, as well as other elements sanctioned by tradition, such as the composition of a death poem.²³

A well-known example of this kind of hagiographic trope is the story about the passing away of Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788), the leader of the Hongzhou School 洪州宗 that came to dominate the Chan movement during the mid-Tang period. He is also one of the most prominent Chan masters of all time. There are several versions of the story. Below I present the earliest one, composed in 791 by Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818), the prominent Tang statesman and literatus. This excerpt is part of Mazu's stele inscription (*beiming* 碑銘), written by Quan only three years after Mazu's passing away.

化緣既周、趺坐報盡。時貞元四年二月庚辰。春秋八十、夏臘六十。前此以石門清曠之境、為宴默終焉之地。忽謂入室弟子曰、吾至二月當還、爾其識之。及是委化、如合符節。

When it was time for him to die, [Mazu] set cross-legged and passed away. That was the fourth year of the Zhenyuan reign (788), on the first day of the second month (March 17). He was eighty years old, and he had been a monk for sixty years. Before that, [Mazu] specified a clear and open area at Shimen as his final resting place. All of a sudden, he told his close disciples, "When the second month arrives, I will return [to be buried] here. You should remember that." When the time for his passing away had arrived, it was like putting together [the two halves of] a tally.²⁴

There is also another account of Mazu's premonition about his impending demise and his instructions to the surviving disciples, included in his biographical entry in *Song gaoseng zhuan*. The basic storyline is similar, although there are some differences between the two versions.

23 See Paul Demiéville, *Poèmes chinois d'avant la mort*.

24 *Tang gu hongzhou kaiyuansi shimen daoyi chanshi beiming bingxu* 唐故洪州開元寺石門道一禪師碑銘并序 (Stele inscription, with preface, for the late Chan teacher Daoyi, from Kaiyuan monastery in Hongzhou and Shimen, Tang era). There are three versions of the original text, which for the most part are quite similar: *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 501.5106a–7a, *Tang wen cui* 唐文粹 64.1058–59, and *Quan Zaizhi wenji* 權載之文集 28.167a–68a. Translation from Pocesi, *The Records of Mazu*, 186–87, with minor adaptations.

初於林中經行、座下開示、平等垂法、不標於四科。安恬告盡、刻期於二月。此明一終之先兆也。示疾云、逝俾葬遠山。

Formerly, while walking through the grove, Mazu instructed his disciples about equally transmitting the teaching, without distinguishing the four subjects. He became peaceful and calm after he had finished speaking, and set the date [of his own death] in the second month. This was a clear omen about his impending demise. Then, as he became ill, he told (his disciples) to bury him at the remote mountain after he had passed away.²⁵

Both versions follow a narrative structure that is representative of this type of story, even though they are embedded in texts that belong to different pan-Buddhist genres. The same can be said of the third version of this story, incorporated into Mazu's biographical entry in *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (Record of the Lamp's Transmission from the Jingde Era), which for the most part follows the *Song gaoseng zhuan* account.²⁶ They all convey a familiar conception of Mazu as an embodiment of readily identifiable religious ideal: an enlightened Chan master, a spiritual virtuoso who has achieved mastery over the fears, anxieties, and uncertainties that characterize everyday existence in samsara, the all-encompassing realm of life and death.

Overall, the story about Mazu's death prediction is not very different from other stories on the same theme found in non-Chan sources. Nonetheless, it is integrated into a larger hagiographical narrative that is representative of evolving Chan conceptions of sanctity and exemplary religiosity. In that sense, it resonates with similar stories told about other prominent Chan masters from the Tang era. A prime example is the well-known account of the events that purportedly surrounded the death of Huineng 慧能 (638–713), the reputed sixth Chan patriarch in China.

The story about Huineng's final days is told in *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 (Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch), one of the most celebrated classics of the Chan tradition, which exists in several versions. The relevant section of the text is rather long, as it incorporates a number of sermons, exchanges with disciples, and didactic poems, so presenting it in entirety will fill most of the remaining space in this article. Hence, here I am presenting only some of the main highlights that are relevant to the present discussion. We start with

25 *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 10, T 2061: T 50.766b25–28; translated in Poceski, *The Records of Mazu*, 272–73.

26 *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 6, T 2076: 51.246b29–c3; translated in Poceski, *The Records of Mazu*, 295. This influential text was compiled in 1004.

Huineng's announcement of his passing away, one month in advance, directed to his numerous disciples.

大師先天二年八月三日滅度。七月八日、喚門人告別。大師先天元年於新州國恩寺造塔。至先天二年七月告別。大師言、汝眾近前、吾至八月、欲離世間。汝等有疑早問、為汝破疑。當令迷者盡悟、使汝安樂。吾若去後、無人教汝。

The great master passed away on the third day, eighth month, second year of the Xiantian reign (August 13, 713). On the eighth day of the seventh month, he summoned his disciples to bid them farewell. During [the previous year,] the first year of the Xiantian era, he had a pagoda constructed at [the precincts] of Guoan Monastery in Xinzhou.²⁷ Then, in the second year of the Xiantian era, he [announced his departure] and bade his farewell. The great master said, "All of you, come close in front of me. Next month, I intend to leave this world. If you have any doubts [about my teaching,] ask them soon so that I can resolve your doubts. I ought to lead those who are confused to awakening and enable you to become peaceful and happy. Once I am gone, you will have no one to teach you."²⁸

The text goes on to provide a detailed description of the final interactions and instructions bequeathed by Huineng to his disciples. It includes his chiding of the disciples for their outward expression of grief, along with reflections on the nature of reality and the process of spiritual cultivation that leads to final liberation. Echoing standard doctrinal themes familiar to students of Chinese Buddhism, Huineng asserts that the true nature of each person, being identical with the buddha nature, is beyond birth and death. In the same vein, transcendence of samsara implies insight into the true nature of reality, which is fully revealed in each instant and infuses all phenomena. Huineng also adds a fairly extensive discussion of the "history" of the Chan lineage, which was a major issue in Chan polemics over orthodoxy and legitimacy. His lengthy instructions are expressed in both verse and prose formats, the latter as short homilies and dialogues with his disciples.

27 The monastery is located in the vicinity of present-day Yunfu 雲浮, Guangdong province. It is one of the three main monasteries in Guangdong associated with Huineng.

28 T 2007: 48.343c14–19; translation based in part on Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 174.

Finally, after several goodbyes punctuated by a number of verses and speeches, Huineng delivers his final death verse, followed by his final sermon. In the last instructions, he extols the disciples to forsake wordily sentiments and dedicate themselves to the pursuit of higher truth, thereby continuing his legacy. Then, at midnight, just after he has finished speaking, he quietly passes away as predicted, in a manner befitting an enlightened Chan master. For good measure, that is followed by a series of miraculous events, including the appearance of strange fragrance at the temple, an earthquake, and solar and lunar eclipses.²⁹ This links the story about Huineng's prediction of his death and his final hours in this world with another common hagiographic trope: the manifestation of miraculous or uncanny occurrences, including strange natural phenomena, in the aftermath of the death of a great monk, especially in the context of his burial.³⁰

4 Retroactive Prophecy

In the course of delivering his final instructions, Huineng is recorded in the *Platform Scripture* as also making a prophecy about the future transmission of his teaching and, by extension, the identity of the rightful heir to the orthodox Chan lineage. Even though the exact quote attributed to him is somewhat vague and does not reveal the precise identity of his true successor, the text makes it clear that he is referring to Heze Shenhui 荷澤神會 (684–758). Here is the relevant passage, which constitutes Huineng's response to a question—posed by Fahai 法海, the head monk at his monastery—about the rightful inheritor of Huineng's robe (*yi* 衣)—the external symbol of his religious authority—and his teaching (*fa* 法).

大師言、法即付了、汝不須問。吾滅後二十餘年、邪法撩亂、惑我宗旨。有人出來、不惜身命、定佛教是非。豎立宗旨，即是吾正法。

The great master said, “The teaching has already been entrusted [to Shenhui], so you need not question that. Twenty years after my passing away, heterodox teachings will cause confusion, obscuring the essential purport of my teaching. There will be a person who, without concern for danger to his own physical existence, will ascertain right from wrong in

29 T 2007: 48.345a25–27; Yampolsky, *The Platform Sūtra*, 182.

30 For relevant examples of such uncanny occurrences in the records of Mazu, see Poceski, *The Records of Mazu*, 188.

the Buddhist teachings. As he establishes the essential purport, that will be my true teaching.”³¹

A prominent champion of the putative orthodoxy of Huineng’s Southern School (Nanzong 南宗), Shenhui became well-known for his virulent—and largely self-serving—attacks against the so-called Northern School (Beizong 北宗), which was the main representative of Chan orthodoxy at the time, especially in the main imperial capital.³² In such a factional and polemical context, this kind of retroactive prophecy served to bolster Shenhui’s stature and legitimize his sectarian agenda, which came to be criticized by many within the broader Chan movement as being misguided and divisive. As has been established by modern scholarship, the actual connections between the *Liuzu tanjing* (the text) and Huineng (the historical person) are tenuous at best.³³ While the historical Huineng was a relatively obscure monk, the seminal text attributed to him became immensely influential and was crucial in establishing his stature as a Chan patriarch par excellence. The text has a strong polemical angle and ideological agenda, which point to notable fissures and tensions that existed within the broader Chan movement during the eighth century, in the decades after Huineng’s death.

Liuzu tanjing and other similar texts are indicative of the manner in which prophecies involving noted Chan monks were used to bolster the authority of later monks or factions. That resulted in giving a boost to existing beliefs or claims about the later monks’ stature as rightful inheritors of the true line of Chan transmission. In such instances, the past and the present are brought together, as a story that purports to relay ancient prophecy is used to explain and legitimize a present (and future) state of affairs. Namely, the primary role of the prophecy is to establish or reiterate the lofty standing of a given Chan master and, by extension, the importance of a religious community or lineage constituted by his disciples.

31 T 2007: 48.344a18–21; translation based in part on Yampolsky, *The Platform Sūtra*, 176.

32 Shenhui’s background and his attacks of the Northern School are discussed in John R. McRae, “Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment,” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory, 227–78. For the history and literature of the Northern School, see John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*.

33 For more on the contents and convoluted textual history of the “scripture” attributed to Huineng, see Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, *Shoki zenshū shisho no kenkyū* 初期禪宗史書の研究, 253–78, Yampolsky, *The Platform Sūtra*, 89–110, and the essays in Morten Schlütter and Stephen F. Teiser, eds., *Readings of the Platform Sūtra*.

There is also a similar prophecy in which Huineng foretells the appearance of Mazu, who was his second-generation disciple. In some records, that is linked with yet another prophecy, attributed to Prajñātāra (Boreduoluo 般若多羅), which also foretells the future emergence of Mazu as a leader of the Chan school.³⁴ According to the well-known Chan genealogy that postulates a lineage of twenty-eight Indian patriarchs—which has no basis in historical reality—Prajñātāra is the twenty-seventh patriarch in Chan's line of transmission.³⁵ He is also said to be the teacher of Bodhidharma (Putidamo 菩提達摩, ca. late fifth or early sixth century), the seminal monk who according to legend transmitted Chan from India to China. Accordingly, the retroactive prophecy placed in his mouth links Mazu and, by extension, his Hongzhou school, back to India, the Buddha's birthland and the original cradle of Buddhism.

The significant connection with India is also made in two prophecies about Huineng himself, recorded in his biographical entry in *Song gaoseng zhuan*. First, there is a putative prophecy made by the Indian monk Guṇavarman (Qiunabamo 求那跋摩, 367–431), predicting Huineng's appearance at an ordination platform, originally built during the Southern Song 南宋 dynasty (420–479). That is supposedly the same place where the young Huineng received his monastic precepts, at the grounds of Faxing Monastery 法性寺. That is the present-day Guangxiao Monastery 光孝寺, a major Buddhist establishment and pilgrimage site in Guangzhou 廣州, the capital of Guangdong province.

The second prophecy is linked with the same place but is attributed to Paramārtha (Zhendi 真諦, 499–569), the famous translator and exponent of Yogācāra philosophy. According to the text, Paramārtha planted a *bodhi* tree at the same site and predicted Huineng's coming a hundred-twenty years later. According to his prediction, Huineng will “explain the [teaching] of the supreme vehicle and liberate untold numbers of beings.”³⁶ The prophecy turned out to be true, we are told, as Huineng went on to preach under the very bodhi tree that was planted by Paramārtha. Interestingly, the two Indian monks who are said to have prophesied Huineng's birth and rise to greatness are both famous translators. That provides a good contrast to the legendary

34 *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 6, T 2076: 51.245c28–246a1; Poceski, *The Records of Mazu*, 282–83.

35 For the historical process of constructing the Chan lineage, see Mario Poceski, “Bo Juyi's Memorial Inscription for Chan Teacher Weikuan,” *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 31 (2018), 49–60, and Elizabeth Morison, *The Power of Patriarchs: Qisong and Lineage in Chinese Buddhism*, 51–87.

36 *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 8, T 2061: 50.755a4–10.

image of the young Huineng as an illiterate country person, hailing from the southern margins of Chinese civilization.

5 Foretelling the Demise of Another Person

In addition to assorted records of prominent Chan teachers foretelling the time and place of their own death, there are also similar predictions about the upcoming death of another monk. Usually the monk in question is a disciple or associate of the prominent monk who makes the prediction. One such example involves Puji 普寂 (651–739), one of the principal Chan masters associated with the Northern School. He was the most prominent disciple of Shenxiu 神秀 (606?–706), the reputed leader of the Northern School. Active in the two Tang capitals, Chang'an 長安 and Luoyang 洛陽, Puji was a recipient of imperial patronage and high approbation in elite social circles.

In Puji's hagiographic record, we find a short account of him predicting the death of Yixing 一行 (683–727), who was among the most famous monks at the time.³⁷ During his formative years, Yixing was a disciple of Puji. Later, he went on to study Esoteric Buddhism (Mijiao 密教) with Śubhākarasimha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735), a prominent Indian master and translator of Tantric texts. Yixing is also celebrated for his scientific expertise, especially his contributions to astronomy and mathematics, as well as for his knowledge of divination based on the *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Change). Here is a relevant passage from Puji's biographical entry in *Song gaoseng zhuan*:

一日詣寂。寂懸知弟子一行之亡。

One day, [Pei Kuan] went to visit Puji. [At that time,] Puji announced his premonition about the demise of his disciple Yixing.³⁸

Additionally, there is a much more detailed account that adds to Puji's premonition of Yixing's death and its aftermath, in the latter's biographical entry in *Song gaoseng zhuan*. According to it, one day Yixing took a bath in scented water, put on his robe, and with a mindful and joyous countenance made an

37 For Yixing's life and historical impact, both as a monk and scientist, see Jeffrey Kotyk, "Yixing and Pseudo-Yixing: A Misunderstood Astronomer-Monk," *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 31 (2018), 1–37. For his family background, see Jinhua Chen, "The Birth of a Polymath: The Genealogical Background of the Tang Monk-Scientist Yixing (673–727)," *Tang Studies* 18–19 (2000), 1–39.

38 *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 9, T 2061: 50.760c26–27.

announcement about his forthcoming death. At the time, he was residing in Chang'an, where he was a recipient of royal patronage and public adulation. He then took leave from Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–756), his main patron, and headed to Songshan 嵩山, in the vicinity of Luoyang, where Puji was residing.

The primary purpose of Yixing's trip was to pay his final respects to Puji, whom Yixing still considered to be his original teacher. At the time, Pei Kuan 裴寬 (681–755), a high official and prominent lay disciple,³⁹ was also at Puji's monastery. The text goes on to describe the final meeting between the two celebrated monks, during which Yixing worshiped his teacher, whispered secret words in his ear, and on the whole behaved in a very respectful manner. Puji responded with a simple nod. Later, sometime after Yixing's departure, Puji called his attendant and instructed him to sound the monastery bell, to announce Yixing's passing away.⁴⁰ In the end, we find both Puji and Yixing making accurate predictions about Yixing's death.

6 Attitudes towards Prophecy and Thaumaturgy

At this point, it might be helpful to pause and consider the status of prophecy, prediction, and other forms of thaumaturgy within the overall context of the Chan school, as well as medieval Buddhism more generally. As noted above, Chan records tend to downplay the role and importance of thaumaturgy. Even so, there are many instances in which we find thaumaturgic elements in the hagiographic accounts about the lives and teachings of prominent Chan monks. That is especially true of the nascent Chan movement during the first half of the Tang era, as can be seen from the records of prominent Chan figures such as Bodhidharma, who is said to have crossed the Yangzi river floating on a reed leaf on his way north to Shaolin Monastery 少林寺.⁴¹ The same is true of Huineng and leading Northern School monks such as Shenxiu and Puji,⁴² as

39 Pei Kuan was among the leading lay disciples of Puji. A member of the higher echelon of Tang officials, he was a scion of a prominent aristocratic family, originally from Hedong 河東 (present-day Shanxi), which was known for its Buddhist piety. For more on the Pei clan and its connections with Chan Buddhism, see Mario Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism*, 89–90.

40 *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 5, T 2061: 50.733c6–19.

41 See Charles Lachman, "Why Did the Patriarch Cross the River? The Rushleaf Bodhidharma Reconsidered," *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 6, no. 2 (1993), 237–67.

42 Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 98–100.

well as Wuxiang 無相 (684–762), a prominent Chan master born in Korea who was highly influential in Chan circles in Sichuan.⁴³

The extant sources indicate fairly widespread acceptance of certain forms of thaumaturgy, including prediction of the future, within early Chan circles. Typically, they are deployed to showcase the religious charisma of individual masters and the potency of their teachings. As we move to later Chan sources, such as those dealing with the Hongzhou School and its later offshoots, there is a relative paucity of thaumaturgic elements. That seems to be indicative of a rationalistic turn in Chan discourse and self-representation, which includes efforts to demythologize the lives and teachings of prominent Chan teachers.⁴⁴

It is also true that thaumaturgic elements continue to creep into Chan records, even if with a reduced frequency. That seems to be indicative of their continuing appeal, within both the monastic and lay communities, especially as we move away from the main or normative expressions of Chan rhetoric. Nonetheless, there is a general tendency to downplay miracles, mystic abilities, and the like. While such efforts to lessen the importance of supernormal powers is not without parallels in the Buddhist rhetorical tradition—exemplified by a tendency to mention them in passing and then to downplay their importance—there is a new set of outlooks and attitudes at play that marks the Chan school's ascendancy as a major representative of elite Buddhism. That is accompanied by a growing trend towards deemphasizing popular beliefs and practices, including prevalent ritual activities—such as the ordination platform rites featured in earlier Chan texts—along with an accelerated critique of reliance on the external salvific agency of various buddhas and bodhisattvas.

A prime example of such a critical attitude is the passage below, excerpted from a sermon by Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866). There he questions the popular practice of going on pilgrimage with an expectation of getting in contact or receiving grace from an external divinity—such as a celestial bodhisattva—associated with a specific sacred site. In traditional (as well as present-day) China, such devout practice was usually undertaken with a hope of gaining specific worldly or spiritual benefits, ideally by coming in contact with the divine being and eliciting some sort of miraculous response (*ganying* 感應). In this instance, Linji chides pious Buddhists who travel on pilgrimage to the famous Wutai mountain 五臺山 in Shanxi 山西, traditionally considered to be the sanctuary of Mañjuśrī, the popular celestial bodhisattva who personifies wisdom.

43 Wendi Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and Its Contexts*, 215.

44 Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way*, 68.

有一般學人、向五臺山裏求文殊。早錯了也，五臺山無文殊。爾欲識文殊麼？祇爾目前用處、始終不異、處處不疑、此箇是活文殊。

There is the [familiar] kind of practitioner [of Buddhism] who goes to Wutai Mountain searching for Mañjuśrī. That is wrong from the very beginning. There is no Mañjuśrī at Wutai Mountain. Do you want to know [the real] Mañjuśrī? Your [innermost] activity, as it unfolds before our eyes—which does not change from beginning to end and leaves no place for doubt—that is the living Mañjuśrī.⁴⁵

According to Linji, it is misguided to go to Wutai Mountain in order to catch a glimpse of the great bodhisattva and try to harness some of his spiritual potency and salvific power. Rather, he urges the disciples to follow a direct and minimalistic Chan path, in which the sole focus of practice is on inner reflection, at the expense of external devotions, rituals, and other familiar elements of traditional Buddhism. In another passage in Linji's record, which echoes similar critiques articulated in the record of other Chan teachers from the late Tang era, there is a direct criticism of supernatural powers (S: *abhijñā*; C: *shen-tong* 神通). Even as he downplays the importance of thaumaturgic proficiency, as conventual understood, Linji also redefines supernatural powers in terms of overcoming the main obstacles that hinder direct insight into reality.

爾道佛有六通、是不可思議。一切諸天、神仙、阿修羅、大力鬼亦有神通。應是佛否。... 如山僧所舉、皆是業通、依通。夫如佛六通者不然、入色界不被色惑、入聲界不被聲惑、入香界不被香惑、入味界不被味惑、入觸界不被觸惑、入法界不被法惑。所以達六種、色聲香味觸法、皆是空相，不能繫縛。

You may talk about the buddhas' possession of six supernatural powers and consider that to be incredible. [However,] all gods, [Daoist] transcendents, asuras, and powerful ghosts also have supernatural powers. Should we assume they are all buddhas? ... [All the supernatural powers] that I just brought up, they are powers produced by karma, as well as powers that are dependent on something else. They are not like the six [true]

45 *Linji yulu* 臨濟語錄 1, T 1985: 47.498c26–29. See also the translation in Thomas Yūhō Kirchner and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Record of Linji*, 15, which I consulted for some parts of the present translation.

powers of a buddha: entering the realm of form,⁴⁶ without being confused by forms; entering the realm of sound, without being confused by sounds; entering the realm of scent, without being confused by scents; entering the realm of taste, without being confused by tastes; entering the realm of touch, without being confused by tactile objects; and entering the realm of mental objects, without being confused by mental objects. Therefore, when one realizes that the six types [of sense objects]—forms, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, and mental objects—are all empty [of self-nature], [such person] cannot be bound by anything.⁴⁷

This sort of downplaying or ambivalence towards thaumaturgy is evident in a number of classical Chan sources, especially those associated with major Chan figures from the late Tang era.⁴⁸ Such an attitude stands in contrast to the pervasive interest, even obsession, with all sorts of portents, visions, and miracles, observable throughout most of Chinese Buddhism, not to mention Daoism and popular religion. It also diverges from the unescapable sense of ritualism that pervades Chinese religious life, which (among other things) includes belief in the efficacy of ritual procedures and mantic techniques in predicting events, manipulating karma, and altering destiny.

Nonetheless, that kind of critical stance is not entirely new. For instance, in many Indian and Chinese sources, there is a marked ambivalence towards the cultivation and display of supernatural powers. According to canonical sources, these include a variety of special or paranormal abilities, such as the ability to predict the future, know the karmic destiny of others, and multiply the body. Among the most-cited classificatory schemes of this kind are the “six supernatural powers”: assorted magical powers (S: *ṛddhi*), clairvoyance, clairaudience, remembrance of past lives, knowledge of others’ minds, and knowledge of the obliteration of defilements.⁴⁹

Buddhist sources often exhibit equivocal or two-sided attitude towards these kinds of powers and related occult phenomena. On the one hand, miracles and supernatural powers are closely associated with established conceptions of sanctity. As such, they are commonly attributed to various buddhas,

46 Here Linji is deploying the well-known conceptual scheme of six data fields (*liu chen* 六塵), associated with the six sense faculties.

47 *Linji yulu* 臨濟語錄 1, T 1985: 47.500a2–12. See also Kirchner and Sasaki, *The Record of Linji*, 20, which I consulted for the present translation.

48 For instance, see *Huangboshan duanji chanshi chuan xin fa yao* 黃檗山斷際禪師傳心法要 1, T 2012A: 48.380c28–381a2.

49 There is a variety of other lists of supernatural powers, presented in a number of canonical texts, included in the Theravada and Mahāyāna canons.

bodhisattvas, and saints. At the same time, these kinds of exceptional powers are primarily portrayed as by-products of genuine practice, especially meditation, not as something to be sought after for its own sake, not to mention used for the procurement of worldly benefits. They might be potentially useful for impressing or edifying assorted audiences, as well as for asserting religious authority or propagating the Buddhist teaching. But then again, they can also be detrimental to the authentic quest for spiritual transcendence, especially if they become sources of attachment, or if they are misused in the pursuit of utilitarian objectives and self-centered agendas. Moreover, in the context of a singular Chan path of practice and realization, they are largely irrelevant to the higher purpose and real goal of religious life, even if they might be ascribed to individual Chan masters.

7 Changing One's Fate

Keeping in mind the aforementioned ambiguities towards thaumaturgy and its place within the entire edifice of Buddhism, what are we to make out of the stories about Chan masters' prediction of future events, including their own death and the demise of others? From a Buddhist perspective, the special ability to foretell human destiny is tied up to a larger understanding of the fundamental processes that shape life in samsara, including the workings of the law of karma. Such a general outlook about the human predicament implies a sense of determinacy, inasmuch as individual fortune and destiny are, to a large degree, controlled by the accumulated karma. At the same time, there is a degree of agency and freedom, predicated on the possibility of changing one's karma by the proper application of spiritual practices and the cultivation of wisdom. In that sense, changing fate or controlling destiny involves gaining control over one's own karma, or circumventing the ordinary workings of the law of karma.

Within the present context, Chan masters' thaumaturgic power seems to be based, primarily or solely, on their insight into reality. That encompasses clear discernment of the mysterious workings of the law of karma, especially as it pertains to the process of dying and the afterlife. Accordingly, Chan masters seem to have no use for conventional methods of divination or prognostication—such as the reading of dreams (oneiromancy), interpretation of assorted natural phenomena (e.g., palmistry, astrology), communication with spirits, or sortilege—to determine the time of death and other important events. We can even go a step further and surmise that the pertinent Chan records implicitly downplay or deny the efficacy of traditional divinatory techniques, which

were widely used in medieval China. Basically, the Chan masters' attainment of wisdom implies the perfection of intuitive knowledge of individual fate or destiny, one's own as well as that of others. But how about going a step further, namely changing destiny, especially as it pertains to the key issues of death and the afterlife?

The possibility of wielding active agency in the natural process of dying—and, by extension, changing fate—is suggested by the two Chan stories presented in this and the next section. They feature two leading Chan masters: Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良介 (807–869), the reputed founder of the Caodong School 曹洞宗 of classical Chan, and Mazu, who already appeared in the preceding pages. Dongshan's story suggests the possibility of postponing one's own death. In contrast, Mazu's story depicts the peculiar occurrence of a Chan master saving another individual from imminent death and the horrific karmic recompense that accompanies it.

The account of Dongshan's final days and his passing away appears towards the end of his record of sayings. This text is of a fairly late provenance, incorporated into *Wu jia yu lu* 五家語錄 (Records of Sayings of Five Families), a large collection of Chan records compiled in 1632.⁵⁰ There we find Dongshan, at a time when he is about to enter his final repose (*yuan ji* 圓寂, lit. "perfect quiescence," i.e., Nirvana). After engaging in a short verbal exchange with an anonymous novice, presumably in front of the congregations at his monastery, Dongshan recites his death verse. He then goes on to embark on his final journey, entering the afterlife in a manner familiar to readers of Chan literature.

乃命剃髮、澡身披衣。聲鐘辭眾。儼然坐化。時大眾號慟、移晷不止。

Dongshan then ordered [his attendant] to shave his head, took a bath, and put on his robe. After the sound of a bell, he took a leave from the congregation. Solemnly, he passed away in a sitting posture. At that point, the assembled monks started to cry and grief, and they could not put an end to [their outward expression of sadness] for a while.⁵¹

⁵⁰ There is also an earlier version of the same story, preserved in the thirteenth-century *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元 (fascicle 13); X 1565; 80.263c17–22.

⁵¹ *Ruizhou dongshan liangjie chanshi yulu* 瑞州洞山良价禪師語錄 1, T 1986B: 47.526b15–17. Translated in William F. Powell, *The Record of Tung-Shan*, 68, which I consulted in preparing this translation.

After Dongshan's apparent departure from this world, his disciples react in a very human manner: they are overcome with sadness and start to weep. Under the circumstance, that is an understandable reaction, even if it can be deemed inappropriate for monks whose whole life is supposed to be dedicated to a quest for detachment and transcendence. Then something unexpected happens: Dongshan comes back to life, in order to teach his monks a valuable lesson.

師忽開目、謂眾云、出家人、心不附物、是真修行。勞生惜死。哀悲何益。復令主事、辦愚癡齋。眾猶慕戀不已、延七日。食具方備、師亦隨眾。齋畢乃云、僧家無事大率。臨行之際、勿須喧動。遂歸丈室、端坐長往。

All of a sudden, Dongshan opened his eyes and addressed the congregation, "When it comes to monks, their minds should not attach to things—that is true practice. [People] toil in life and begrudge death. What is the point of grieving or being sad?" Then he instructed the head monastic official to organize a vegetarian feast for the stupid and the foolish. However, as the congregation's feelings of love and attachment did not change, [the feast] was extended for another week. Dongshan also joined his monks in setting up the tables. At the conclusion of the feast, he said, "Generally, monks should not concern themselves [with trivial matters]. When I depart [from this world], there should be no fuss or commotion." Then he returned to the abbot's quarters and passed away while sitting upright.⁵²

Such temporary extension of one's lifespan contrasts with a more common trope: the Chan master refusing medicine or other means of prolonging life. For instance, there is the story about Xuefeng Yicun 雪峰義存 (822–908) refusing medical care, offered by the local governor in Fujian, after he announces his final illness. Instead, he chooses to let nature take its course. Dedicating his remaining time on earth to composing a death verse, he then passes away quietly in the middle of the night.⁵³

In Dongshan's dramatic story, his death is transformed into a teaching moment. He apparently comes back from the dead in order to edify his monks about the true meaning of life and death, as well as the grand purpose of their

52 *Ruizhou dongshan liangjie chanshi yulu* 瑞州洞山良价禪師語錄 1, T 1986B: 47.526b17–21. See also Powell, *The Record of Tung-Shan*, 68.

53 *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 16, T 2076.51.328b9–13.

religious vocation. When his initial instructions turn out to be unsuccessful, he extends his life for another week, in a final effort to enlighten his disciples. Finally, he dies sitting upright, in a manner fitting for an enlightened Chan master. Such an image of a Chan master passing away in a sitting posture, usually after he has left his final instructions or death verse, is a common element of Chan literature.⁵⁴

8 Changing the Destiny of Another Person

The story about Mazu saving the abbot of abbot at Da'an Monastery takes the theme of changing fate a step further. Here we find a narrative about a Chan master's apparent ability to alter the natural course of events, as well as subvert the law of karma, by saving a corrupt monk who seems to deserve little sympathy. The somewhat unusual story is only preserved in *Zutangji* 祖堂集 (Hall of Patriarchs Collection), a Chan chronicle compiled in 952. This important Chan source was lost for many centuries until, in the early twentieth century, a copy was discovered at Haein Monastery 海印寺 in Korea. The story is quite long—especially for a Chan story—and I have already translated it in its entirety.⁵⁵ Consequently, here I will only quote the opening and closing parts and briefly summarize the much longer middle part.

At the surface, the main protagonist in the story is not Mazu—who only makes a silent appearance at the very end—but an unnamed abbot from the nearby Da'an (Great Peace) Monastery 大安寺, in the city of Hongzhou 洪州 (present-day Nanchang 南昌, Jiangxi 江西). The elderly abbot is not a nice person or an exemplary monastic: although erudite in Buddhist doctrine, he is highly hypocritical and lacking in moral character. This kind of contrast, between an enlightened Chan master and a learned but spiritually deficient Buddhist lecturer, is a common trope in Chan literature. Above all, it is meant to highlight the superiority of Chan teachings, along with the preeminence of the religious ideal that embodies them.

有洪州城大安寺主、講經講論。座主只觀(管)誹謗馬祖。有一日、夜三更時、鬼使來搥門。寺主云、是什麼人。對云、鬼使來取寺主。寺

54 For instance, there is the record of the final moments of Deshan Xuanjian 德山宣鑑 (782–865), as recorded in *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 15, T 2076: 51.318a24–25. For additional examples from the same text, see T 2076: 51.229b11, 333a10–11, 368c7, and 402.b8.

55 Poceski, *The Records of Mazu*, 208–16. The quoted passages presented here are from this translation, with minor adaptations.

主云、啟鬼使、某甲今年得六十七歲。四十年講經講論、為眾成持。只觀(管)貪爭論、未得修行。且乞一日一夜、還得也無。

There was an abbot at Da'an Monastery in the city of Hongzhou, who lectured on the Buddhist scriptures and treatises. The abbot persistently slandered Mazu. One day, during the middle of the night, the demon's envoys came,⁵⁶ pounding at his door. The abbot asked, "Who is it?" "We are the demon's envoys. We have come to fetch you, abbot," came their reply. The abbot said, "I wish to inform you, demon's envoys, that this year I reached the age of sixty-seven. For forty years, I have lectured on the Buddhist scriptures and treatises, concerned with the growth of my congregation. I have merely been indulging in disputations. [Consequently,] I have not yet engaged in actual practice. I beg you to give me one more day and one more night."⁵⁷

As the corrupt abbot suddenly faces the frightful prospect of unanticipated death, he becomes acutely aware of the great danger posed by the bad karma he has accumulated over decades of duplicitous and inauthentic monastic life. The demon's envoys have even worse news for the scared monk: because of his grave misdeeds, he is going to be reborn in the hell of knife hills and sword trees (*dao shan jian shu* 刀山劍樹). There, as a punishment for his deceit and duplicity, he will be subjected to horrid tortures, such as his tongue being cut off repeatedly, without an opportunity to escape the dreadful predicament. Here the text reinforces a common theme that runs through assorted critiques of monastic hypocrisy and dereliction: the heavy karmic burden accrued by insincere or fraudulent monks. Namely, they face severe postmortem punishment for not making any effort to live up to the lofty ideals of their vocation, especially by deceiving others and failing to engage in genuine self-cultivation. Among Chan sources from the Tang era, this pan-Buddhist theme is addressed most fully in *Guishan jingce* 為山警策 (Guishan's Admonitions), attributed to Mazu's second-generation disciple Guishan Lingyou 為山靈祐 (771–853).⁵⁸

In the course of critically explaining abbot's transgressions—which primarily revolve around the fact that he has wasted his life pretending to teach

56 The "demon" in question is King Yāma (C: Yanluo wang 閻羅王), a deity featured in both Buddhist and popular Chinese mythology. He is said to preside over the netherworld and adjudicate the destiny of the dead.

57 *Zutangji* 祖堂集 14, (CBETA) B 144: 25.558b4–9; Poceski, *The Records of Mazu*, 209.

58 For a translation and study of this text, see Mario Poceski, "Guishan jingce and the Ethical Foundations of Chan Practice," in *Zen Classics: Formative Texts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale Wright, 15–42.

the Dharma, while not engaging in actual practice—the envoys of death engage in long discussions about Buddhism, replete with extensive scriptural quotations.⁵⁹ Eventually, the envoys decide to accede to the abbot's request for a day-long reprieve from his cruel destiny. At this point, the abbot is frantic as he faces the impossibility of neutralizing his heavy karmic burden—and thus changing his destiny—within such a short timeframe. Petrified, he runs to Mazu's monastery in the middle of the night, looking for help in avoiding the impending disaster. That brings us to the last part of the story.

門士便開門。寺主便去和尚處。具陳前事后、五體投地。禮拜起云、生死到來、作摩生即是。乞和尚慈悲、救某甲殘命。師教他身邊立地。天明了、其鬼使來大安寺裡、討主不見。又來開元寺、覓不得、轉去也。師與寺主即見鬼使、鬼使即不見師與寺主也。

The gate warden opened the gate. The abbot then went to Mazu's quarters. After he gave a complete account of what had transpired before, the abbot threw himself to the floor and made a full prostration [in front of Mazu]. After he showed his respects, the abbot got up and said, "Birth and death have come along—what can be done about it? I beg for your reverence's mercy. Please save me from my cruel destiny!" Mazu instructed the abbot to remain standing by his side. After the arrival of dawn, the demon's envoys came back to Da'an monastery to look for the abbot, but they could not find him. After that, they also came to Kaiyuan monastery,⁶⁰ but not being able to find him there either, they went back (to the netherworld). Although Mazu and the abbot were able to see the demon's envoys, the demon's envoys were unable to see Mazu and the abbot.⁶¹

According to the conventional understanding of the law of karma, the abbot could have neutralized his heavy karmic burden by engaging in practice and ideally secured release by realizing sudden awakening (*dunwu* 頓悟).

59 Most of the scriptural quotations, some of which are fairly extensive, are from the *Huayan Scripture* 華嚴經.

60 Kaiyuan is the name of Mazu's monastery in Hongzhou, which was part of a state-supported system of official monasteries with the same name. For more on the monastery, see Pocski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way*, 31.

61 *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 14, (CBETA) B 144: 25:559b5–12; Pocski, *The Records of Mazu*, 214.

Apparently, that was not the case, according to the story. There is not even a mention of any spiritual instructions given by Mazu to the scared monk, who does not seem to be in a good frame of mind. Simply put, the abbot's salvation is not due to any action of his own. Instead, from what we can deduce, he is rescued from his unpleasant destiny by his proximity to Mazu, who is able to extend his spiritual power and salvific agency to the errant monk.

These and other stories of that kind are full of implicit and explicit meanings. They point towards various aspects of monastic life and religious imagination, as they unfolded in the religious context of medieval China. For the present purpose, the main questions coalesce around the putative source(s) and mechanisms that underline the thaumaturgical ability alluded to in these hagiographic accounts. What is the basis of Dongshan's ability to postpone his own death, or Mazu's power to save the wayward abbot from his horrid karmic recompense? Both stories, especially the second one, seem to suggest the possibility of subverting or undermining the law of karma, which, according to mainstream Buddhist doctrine, is supposed to be impersonal and immutable. The stories themselves are not entirely clear on these points. Nonetheless, we can arrive at preliminary conclusions about their treatment of thaumaturgic prowess on the basis of contextual analysis, which takes into account relevant teachings and practices communicated in a broader range of relevant Chan texts.

9 The Power of Wisdom and Insight

While the stories discussed above feature extraordinary faculties or supernatural abilities—particularly predicting future events and altering fate—they contain no clear explanations about the source, nature, and scope of Chan masters' thaumaturgic powers. Contextually, they are parts of a rich and expansive Chan lore, where we find tacit acknowledgment of miracles, otherworldly beings, and unseen realms. Nonetheless, such stories tend to be sprinkled across a large body of Chan literature, in which they do not occupy a central position. Instead, the main thrust of classical Chan rhetoric is towards the abandonment of all signs and forms, including most of the common elements of religious life. That implies eschewing all conventional suppositions about the true character of reality—which, by definition, is ineffable—within the context of a singular spiritual quest that centers on radical detachment and transcendence. And yet, such stories reveal important facets of Chan spirituality, as experienced by ordinary devotees or (re)constructed by the writers of Chan records and chronicles.

The relatively marginal position of narratives centered around thaumaturgic themes within the total Chan oeuvre points, I think, to the implied source of the Chan masters' special power and charisma: their direct insight into ultimate reality. According to traditional interpretations, that is grounded in their perfection of the faculty of wisdom, which underlines and supersedes all spiritual disciplines. The supposed mastery of birth and death, or at least of key aspects of them, is predicated on the Chan masters' transcendence of dualism and unmediated discernment of the real nature of reality. Formless and signless, beyond words and impossible to fully express via familiar conceptual frameworks, yet close at hand, reality is said to permeate all phenomena in the universe.

By virtue of his insight into reality, an awakened Chan master achieves putative mastery over the everyday workings of the law of karma and, by extension, over some of the basic processes that shape life and death. That sets him (and occasionally her) apart from ordinary people and serves as a marker of a particular type of exemplary religiosity. This kind of interpretation tallies with a general Buddhist understanding of supernatural powers as by-products of practice and indicators of an advanced spiritual state. In that sense, we seem to be dealing with Chan variations on a common Buddhist theme, even though they are integrated into a rarefied imagery representative of the Chan School, with its own conception of embodied sanctity.

Going back to the story about the abbot of Da'an monastery, apparently he was saved simply by his proximity to Mazu, not by any special effort or action on his part. On the surface, that seems to contradict the conventional doctrine of karma, according to which the abbot's destiny should be determined by his own actions, including his own cultivation of virtue and insight. In the story, the abbot is a passive agent, with the possible exception of his decision to ask for Mazu's help. It is as it were that Mazu provides an invisible protective field around himself and the abbot, which makes it impossible for the messengers of death to see them. The idea of an enlightened Buddhist adept being untraceable and, by extension, invisible to others, is attested in a few canonical sources.⁶² However, here that is extended to include another person. Moreover, it is done in an unusual manner, which brings about the avoidance of an unpleasant fate by a person who does not seem to be deserving of such a sudden reversal of (mis)fortune.

62 John Ross Carter and Mahinda Palihawadana, *The Dhammapada: The Sayings of the Buddha*, 11; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 100; and Pocski, *The Records of Mazu*, 75.

10 Concluding Remarks

Stories that feature prophecies, forebodings, visions, and other examples of psychic power or preternatural occurrence are diffused across a wide spectrum of religious traditions. The Chan examples discussed in this article, which center on the Chan masters' presumed capacity to predict death and alter destiny, represent a specific subset of such religious phenomena. They need to be interpreted in terms of the specific soteriological templates and conceptions of sainthood developed within the pertinent Chan milieus. They also should be considered in relation to wider frames of reference, especially pan-Buddhist notions about thaumaturgic power and their parallels in non-Buddhist traditions, or Chinese culture more generally.

The Chan School's production and use of narratives that feature thaumaturgic themes suggest an embedded assumption: that the primary, or perhaps even only, source behind true supernatural power is the Chan masters' possession of superior wisdom. Based on his realization of insight into reality, it is the ownership of such wisdom that sets the Chan master apart from ordinary persons and endows him with unique abilities. In that sense, these kinds of stories need to be set against the backdrop of distinctive ideas about the nature and function of Chan teachings and practices, and the primary religious ideal that embodies them. We also need to keep in mind that all these elements were not static, but evolved considerably during the Tang and the subsequent periods.

Nonetheless, it is also instructive to note what tends to be missing from the Chan accounts, which often blur the boundaries between history and fiction. For instance, there are hardly any mentions of the power or active agency of an external divinity. That stands in sharp contrast to the Jewish and Christian traditions. There prophecies and miracles are ultimately traceable back to an all-knowing and all-powerful God. Accordingly, the prophet's role is to serve as a divine proxy or messenger, merely interpreting and communicating the will of God.

In a Chan context, the main protagonists receive no inspiration or help from any buddha or bodhisattva, not to mention the gods of Daoism and popular religion. Additionally, Chan records lack references to any type of ritual or technical expertise, along the lines of those associated with the *fangshi* 方士 (masters of occult techniques). The same goes for the masters of Esoteric Buddhism, whose tradition was experiencing a popularity boom in Tang China. That extends to other prevalent Chinese methods of prognostication, interpretation of signs, and the like, associated with the varied purveyors of mantic arts. In a sense, there seem to be two levels of power and charisma: an

inferior one that relies on knowledge or mastery of techniques and methods, and a superior one that dispenses with all of that and is simply a manifestation of an inner state of mind.

Beyond enriching our general understanding of the role and scope of thaumaturgy in medieval Chinese Buddhism, this kind of analysis also helps refine our understanding of some of the basic factors and variables that marked the Chan School's formative growth, which culminated in its ascent to the status of prime representative of elite Buddhism. That includes a nuanced understanding of the basic relationship between Chan and the rest of Buddhism. In key respects, Chan was not as radically disjoined from the surrounding Buddhist milieu, as assumed by many scholars in the past. Among other factors, such a sense of continuity is illustrated by the incorporation of prediction and prophecy in the religious repertoire of prominent Chan masters. At the same time, in classical Chan texts there is a conspicuous absence, glossing over, or outright critique of central aspects of popular Buddhism. That includes reliance on the salvific potency of various buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as belief in the efficacy of rituals (or other external techniques) in altering destiny or bringing about other desirable outcomes.

That brings us back to the creative tensions and balancing acts that shaped the Chan School's growth, and negotiated its position within the larger Buddhist landscape. Even though from its inception Chan was very much an integral part of the religious mainstream, it also forged a unique identity as a distinct tradition, with its own narrative styles and idioms, ideological orientations, and conceptions of sainthood. Within that overarching framework, there was still some space for thaumaturgy, even as its nature and role were (to some degree) reimaged. Nonetheless, its importance and scope were increasingly restricted, especially as we move into the late Tang era (or later), at least as far as the "official" Chan records are concerned.

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Abbreviations

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