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Zen Encounter Dialogues as Utopian Narrative: the Ideal World of the Song Dynasty

Record of Linji

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that Zen Buddhist encounter dialogues can be analyzed as utopian narratives. Though encounter dialogues have been the subject of significant attention in recent scholarship, analyses of the genre tend to limit themselves to sketching the historical and polemical contexts in which the authors of these texts intervened. By instead paying attention to the worlds these texts create, I take serious the philosophical contents of encounter dialogues. The argument proceeds by examining perhaps the most popular Chinese collection of encounter dialogues, the *Record of Linji*. Instead of isolating individual dialogues within that work, the paper instead takes the collection seriously as a unified “book” portraying an ideal but fictional Zen world, two aspects that the *Record* gestures towards. The methodology to explore the *Record* in this fashion will be drawn from utopian studies within literary theory.

PROPOSAL

This paper proposes that Zen Buddhist encounter dialogues can be analyzed as utopian narratives. Better known under their abbreviated form as *kōan*, “encounter dialogue” is perhaps the most recognizable of all (Zen) Buddhist genres. These texts portray mysterious verbal sparring bouts between Zen masters and students, with the former

often besting the latter by answering complicated doctrinal questions in an illogical manner. One of the most famous examples is no doubt Zen master Zhaozhou's answer to the question why Bodhidharma, one of the supposed founders of the Zen school in China, traveled from India to China. Not intimidated by his questioner, Zhaozhou simply replies: "The oak tree in front of the hall."

In using the lens of utopian narrative to look at encounter dialogue, this paper helps solve the central hermeneutical question haunting western scholarship on Zen: how do we make sense of these texts? Thus far, responses to this question have fallen into two categories: either the dialogues are analyzed as historical constructions representing the concerns of the Zen school at a given point in time; or they are seen as expressing a profound insight that cannot be put in words (but that one understands if one possesses the proper spiritual capacity).

The paper proposes a third option. Encounter dialogues can be placed within the tradition of Chinese utopian thinking that finds the perfect place for the future in the past. For Zen Buddhism, such a place is characterized by "a separate transmission outside of the scriptures, not relying on words and letters." The "separate transmission" aspect refers to an individual (the master) who transmits an insight to a student. It is no wonder then, that encounter dialogues present interactions rather than monological treatises. These interactions, however, are nonsensical. Literary form here serves the philosophical idea that true knowledge cannot be verbally communicated, but can be communicated by physical presence (the master wordlessly transmitting the teaching to a student).

The theoretical foundation to examine encounter dialogues as utopian narrative is drawn from literary studies, where utopia has recently enjoyed significant attention, particularly as it relates to science fiction. Work in this field, however, can also be applied to the study of Zen Buddhist literature. Take Darko Suvin's classic definition of narrative utopias

The verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis. (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 49)

Suvin's definition here applies well to encounter dialogues, which not only feature "an alternative historical hypothesis" (the true teaching of Shakyamuni was transmitted not through words, but through lineage) that leads to "an estrangement" (the strange answers to questions), but also portray a "more perfect world" (for Zen Buddhists) that is nevertheless "verbally constructed."

Using this foundation, I look at one of the most famous collections of encounter dialogue, the so-called *Record of Linji* (*Zhenzhou Linji Huizhao chanshi yulu*). Instead of insisting on the editorial nature of the work by analyzing the encounter dialogues it contains as semi-independent texts, this paper studies the whole *Record* as one consistent articulation of a perfect but non-existent past Zen world. It wonders how the recurrence of characters apart from Linji, such as Prefect Wang and the equally strange monk Mayu, sketch a better world than ours, but also how certain textual markers of the *Record* reveal this ideal world to be an illusion.

Fitting this construction is the usage of the dialogue form. As mentioned above, this form fits the Zen conviction that truth can only be transmitted without words but within presence. But in choosing dialogues to articulate an ideal community, the editors of the *Record* also echo other Chinese philosophical texts, such as the *Analects*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the Daoist *New Account of Tales of the World*. It is against such other philosophical dialogues that the *Record* and other texts of its type make the most significant intervention, by reinventing dialogues as not the genre *par excellence* for the exchange of ideas, but rather as the locus where ideas are declared irrelevant.

The *Record* takes this world beyond the Linji's own monastery, as Linji travels around and meets with wise old women, trickster monks, and other masters, who all behave as quirkily as Linji does, asking strange questions and giving strange answers. This demonstrates that Linji's understanding of language and physical presence—language as non-communicative and presence as essential—is shared by the larger world, even as signs of the wars that characterized the late Tang dynasty are registered as well.

By considering the *Record* as a text articulating a Zen utopia, we can see how this seemingly nonsensical text articulates a rich philosophy of language and presence, allowing us to explain the continuing popularity of this text today.