Understanding Chan Kōan As a Literary Genre

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Abstract: Though we understand well the historical contexts in which kōan originated and to what rhetorical purposes they were put, relatively little attention has been paid to kōan as a literary genre. In this paper, I propose that our understanding of the rhetorical operation of kōan benefits from a genre studies approach. Specifically, after disambiguating the terms cases, kōan, and encounter dialogue, I will argue that this genre is best understood as a type of riddle, namely the neck riddle. Neck riddles create a hierarchical situation, suggest esoteric knowledge, create a contest of life and death, and bring the miraculous back to the everyday. To show that kōan were already understood to have such functions during the high point of Zen, namely the Song dynasty, I will close read commentaries from two of the most influential kōan collections: the *Wumen guan* and the *Biyan lu*. I will then compare these readings with contemporary interpretations in memoirs of American Zen practitioners to show that kōan are still understood to function as neck riddles today.

Keywords: Chan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, kōan, comparative literature, American Buddhism, genre studies

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Introduction

The title of the conference that gave rise to this paper was 'Thus Have I Heard', one with large and obvious references in Buddhist Studies. In any given text, 'Thus Have I Heard' announces that what follows is a discourse of the Buddha as recorded by his disciple Ānanda, who is the implied anthropomorphic narrator. This single statement classifies the whole text as a Buddhist scripture, a sūtra (Ch. *jing* 經). It was so influential that it was used in much writing that couldn't possibly be the words of the historical Buddha, written when Ananda, if he ever lived, was long dead.

Words have such performative power. In this paper, I want to follow along this thread for my own interest in Zen 禪 (Ch. *chan*) Buddhist dialogues, better known as kōan/Ch. *gongan* 公案. Though their generic characteristics are not as clear-cut as a single phrase, they too contain certain logics that allows us to identify what genre they belong to. I hope to show that kōan constitute an example of the comparative category of 'riddle'. More specifically, kōan show remarkable similarities to the subgenre of the 'neck riddle'. To isolate these similarities is far from a mere formalist exercise: if my proposal has some merit, kōan can be analysed within a powerful comparative literary category, and perhaps even as a type of world literature.

The discussion will be organised in the following manner: first, I will list some rejections by both scholars and practitioners of the current proposal to read kōan as riddles. Then, I will disambiguate 'kōan' from cognate terms such as 'encounter dialogue' and 'standards'. Afterwards, I move to a discussion of how kōan display several characteristics of riddles, more specifically of neck riddles. After this mainly theoretical discussion, I will look at some samples from classic and contemporary kōan collections to show how kōan are read as neck riddles, even if they are not explicitly identified as such.

Modern Rejections of Applying the Term Riddle to Kōan

My proposal goes against much received knowledge on kōan. Many Zen teachers writing in English reject the term 'riddle' to describe

kōan. Here are some examples:

- Robert Aitken, one of the most influential American Zen teachers, associates the word riddle with intellectualism, and thus rejects the term: 'Koans are not riddles but ways to open out one's bodhisattva nature'.[1] He repeats the point in his influential Zen manual *Taking the Path of Zen*:

  > Many suppose, for example, that koan, or Zen themes, are riddles designed to throw you into a dilemma, and that this sets up a psychological process that leads to a kind of breakthrough called realization. While it is true that you may feel frustration in koan work, and you do experience a release with realization, fundamentally the koan is a particular expression of Buddha nature and your koan work is simply a matter of making that expression clear to yourself and to your teacher.[2]

- Taizan Maezumi 大山博雄 (1931–1995), a Japanese Zen master who taught many prominent teachers in American Zen, thinks the term riddle still implies a dualism, whereas kōan do not: 'If you are practicing with a koan intellectually or as a riddle to solve, you are not doing koan practice. Why not? Because duality is still involved! Because division is still involved'.[3]

- Zen practitioners Susan Moon and Florence Caplow blame the famous Zen scholar and apologist D. T. Suzuki for the interpretation of kōan as riddles, and call this 'misleading'.[4]

Other Zen students like the Dutch adventurer and author Janwillem van de Wetering, on the other hand, have no trouble

1 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 212.
2 Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, 26.
3 Maezumi, *Appreciate Your Life*, 6.
4 Caplow and Moon, comps. and eds., *The Hidden Lamp,* 3.

describing kōan as riddles. Van de Wetering does so repeatedly in his Zen memoirs, especially in his last memoir *Afterzen*, where he describes kōan study as 'the solving of dharma riddles while facing a teacher at sanzen, the early morning meeting in the master's temple'.[5] More recently, the Zen priest Shozan Jack Haubner describes kōan as 'a metaphysical riddle' or 'the riddle of life'.[6]

Scholars of riddles have also rejected the application of the term 'riddle' to kōan, often without much explanation. John Frow distinguishes the 'true' form of the riddle (consisting of 'posing of a puzzle formed by the description of an unknown object which has to be guessed')[7] from other forms such as:

> [C]atechismic questions, where the answers are derived from bodies of doctrine rather than involving wit; the Zen kōan, the point of which is to achieve enlightenment rather than to find a solution; quiz questions about specialized bodies of knowledge like sport, where the answer involves recall rather than ingenuity; and the so-called 'neck riddle', a form in which the questioner's life depends on defeating his executioner with an unanswerable riddle—and where it is the impossibility of the answer, because of what seems like the arbitrariness of its relation to the question, that defines this as a variant form.[8]

Frow's distinction between kōan and other types of riddles does not hold very firmly: while within the Zen tradition kōan are

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5 van de Wetering, *Afterzen*, 3.

6 Haubner, *Zen Confidential*, 49, 56. Perhaps the reason the term 'riddle' is so contentious as a category to describe kōan has much to do with the shifting reception of riddles in the twentieth century, when, according to Annika Kaivola-Bregenhøj, they became mostly associated with (often racist and misogynist) jokes, a very different context than the sacred texts such as the Vedas, the *Mahābhārata*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* that riddles previously appeared in. Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 16ff.

7 Frow, *Genre*, 34.

8 Ibid., 35.

indeed seen to be about enlightenment, scholars have argued that this 'enlightenment' is not an internally realised quality but a performance where students and masters perform prepared answers 'derived from bodies of doctrine' such as kōan collections and kōan cheat books.[9] Other scholars of the riddle have adopted exactly this angle to deny that kōan are riddles altogether, because their answers are memorised in advance.[10]

Both rejections seem to be based on partial understandings of what kōan do and how they were read (certainly, many contemporary practitioners outside of Asia do not memorise their kōan answers in advance). The point, for scholars of riddles at least, seems to be that whereas riddles have a logical-intellectual component that allows one to independently arrive at the conclusion, kōan (either by memorisation, enlightenment, or both) do not. Yet these scholars do include other illogical questions and answers under the category of riddle. They often discuss religiously inspired questions as riddles, and often devote whole chapters to a discussion of the 'neck riddle' but not the kōan.

As for Zen studies, in his history of Chinese Zen, *Seeing Through Zen*, John McRae (1947–2011) repeatedly refers to kōan as 'riddles', without, however, engaging in a discussion of what that might mean. The most substantial discussion of kōan as riddle is found in Bernard Faure's *Chan Insights and Oversights*.[11] Faure uses the term riddle to understand kōan as oral literature, because 'it cannot be solved by rational thinking, a faculty derived from (or enhanced by) literacy'. Drawing on the work of Walter Ong, Faure goes on to suggest a possible avenue of analysis for kōan as a re-emergence of the oral and aural in the strongly literate culture of the Song (960–1279). Instead of logical discussions typical of literate discussions, kōan are deeply context-sensitive, and thus carry with them the immediacy of a direct interaction that can also be seen in their other generic form as dialogues. But Faure ultimately rejects this line of analysis: the

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9 The most important articles in this respect are Sharf, 'How to Think with Chan *Gong-An*', and *idem*, 'Ritual'.

10 Pepicello and Green, *The Language of Riddles.*

11 Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights*, 227.

sudden experience of seeing the self (the *kenshō* 見性 so important in the Japanese tradition) is the product of a literary tradition (where letters and meaning is 'seen'). Orality is merely a rhetorical effect Zen authors attempt to achieve.

A Sample Kōan

First, it's good to have a sample to orient the theoretical discussion to come. I will consider this sample 'typical', and this does carry with it some problems since we are dealing with a genre that has considerable internal variation. Nevertheless, as I explain further below, I believe it is possible to isolate some structural characteristics of kōan as a genre, and these characteristics are also on display in the sample below, what is perhaps the most famous kōan. Here is the first case of the *Wumen guan*/Jp. *Mumonkan* 無門關 [The Gateless Barrier] together with Wumen's commentary and verse, preceded by Sekida Kazuki's 関田一喜 (1893–1987) translation:

> [The kōan:] A monk asked Jōshū [Zhaozhou], 'Has a dog the Buddha Nature?' 趙州和尚因僧問，'狗子還有佛性也無'？
>
> Jōshū answered, 'Mu (no)'. 州云：'無'.
>
> MUMON'S [Wumen's] COMMENT: In order to master Zen, you must pass the barrier of the patriarchs. To attain this subtle realization, you must completely cut off the way of thinking. If you do not pass the barrier, and do not cut off the way of thinking, then you will be like a ghost clinging to the bushes and weeds. Now, I want to ask you, what is the barrier of the patriarchs? Why, it is this single word 'Mu'. That is the front gate to Zen. Therefore it is called the 'Mumonkan [Ch. Wumen guan] of Zen'. If you pass through it, you will not only see Jōshū face to face, but you will also go hand in hand with the successive patriarchs, entangling your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears. Isn't that a delightful prospect? Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier? Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and

joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word 'Mu'. Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of 'has' or 'has not'. It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try. All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream. Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth. It will be as if you snatch away the great sword of the valiant general Kan'u and hold it in your hand. When you meet the Buddha, you kill him; when you meet the patriarchs, you kill them. On the brink of life and death, you command perfect freedom; among the sixfold worlds and four modes of existence, you enjoy a merry and playful samadhi. Now, I want to ask you again, 'How will you carry it out?' Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this 'Mu'. If you hold on without interruption, behold: a single spark, and the holy candle is lit! 無門曰:參禪須透祖師關, 妙悟要窮心路絶. 祖關不透, 心路不絶, 盡是依草附木精靈. 且道, 如何是祖師關? 只者一箇無字. 乃宗門一關也. 遂目之, 曰, '禪宗無門關'. 透得過者, 非但親見趙州, 便可與歷代祖師, 把手共行, 眉毛厮結, 同一眼見, 同一耳聞, 豈不慶快? 莫有要透關底麼? 將三百六十骨節, 八萬四千毫竅, 通身起箇疑團, 參箇無字, 晝夜提撕. 莫作虛無會, 莫作有無會. 如呑了箇熱鐵丸相似, 吐又吐不出. 蕩盡從前惡知惡覺, 久久純熟, 自然内外, 打成一片. 如啞子得夢, 只許自知. 驀然打發, 驚天動地. 如奪得關將軍大刀入手, 逢佛殺佛, 逢祖殺祖. 於生死岸頭, 得大自在, 向六道四生中, 遊戲三昧. 且作麼生提撕. 盡平生氣力擧箇無字. 若不間斷, 好似法燭, 一點便著.

MUMON'S VERSE 頌曰:

狗子佛性	The dog, the Buddha Nature,
全提正令	The pronouncement, perfect and final.
纔涉有無	Before you say it has or has not,
喪身失命	You are a dead man on the spot.[12]

Kōan, Encounter Dialogues, Standards, or What?

I have been calling the genre examined in this article 'kōan', but not everyone would agree that this is the correct term. In Zen scholarship, the term kōan has a fairly specialised meaning: it refers to a specific text consisting of two parts: a dialogue between a Zen master and student (or an extract of one) and at least one commentary section (in verse or prose) on that dialogue by another Zen master.[13] In kōan, Zen masters saw themselves sitting in judgment of the achievement of students, much like a Chinese magistrate was authorised to judge the merits of a particular individual in a legal case. As kōan came to be collected in kōan collections and commented upon, the meaning shifted to denote a Zen master sitting in judgment of previous cases. The ultimate authority figure here is the Zen master evaluating the merits of his long-dead colleagues. Victor Hori has noted that the legal metaphor ought to only be used to describe the one-sided judgement of kōan commentaries, and not the repartee that goes on in kōan themselves.[14]

Another name for these dialogues is 'encounter dialogues', which is John McRae's translation of the Chinese *jiyuan wenda* 機緣問答, a term that was first used in Yanagida Seizan's 柳田聖山 (1922–2006) Japanese-language analysis of Chinese Zen literature. As McRae clarifies, the word *jiyuan* denotes 'the teacher's activity of responding to the needs (*yuan*, 'conditions') of the student... or more simply the perfect meeting of teacher and student'.[15] In a later publication, McRae defined the genre as follows:

> Encounter dialogue refers to the spontaneous repartee that is said to take place between master and student in the process of Ch'an training. This type of communication includes both verbal and physical

[12] Sekida and Grimstone, *Two Zen Classics*, 27–28; *Wumen guan*, *T* no. 2005, 48: 0292c22–0293a14.

[13] Foulk, 'The Form and Function of Kōan Literature', 16–26.

[14] Hori, *Zen Sand*, 41ff.

[15] McRae in Yanagida, 'The "Recorded Sayings" Texts of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism', 204, note 25.

> exchanges that are often posed in the form of sincere but misguided questions from Ch'an trainees and perplexing, even enigmatic, responses from the masters.[16]

Yanagida/McRae's take on encounter dialogue has several problems. First, as mentioned earlier, much of recent scholarship indicates that these 'repartees' were anything but spontaneous: throughout a good deal of Zen's history, both students and masters were familiar with the questions and answers before the conversation even began. Though this does not necessarily mean the questions were not 'sincere', I would object to calling them 'misguided'. When a student asks a Zen master one of these stereotypical queries, both parties would be very familiar with the generic form being introduced, whatever their ultimate goals might be (goals that can vary from a sincere quest for insight to a—perhaps equally sincere—quest for spiritual authority). Second, there are a good number of encounter dialogues that suggest that the respective positions of 'Zen trainees' and 'Zen masters' is anything but stable: a student might prove more insightful than the master he is questioning; and masters sometimes find themselves outmatched by old ladies selling cakes on the side of the road. Finally, this definition does not contain the significant formal features of encounter dialogue that McRae notes in a later analysis of the genre: their composition in the vernacular, their lack of what the French structuralist literary critic Roland Barthes calls indices,[17] and their representation of a 'golden age' of Zen.[18]

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16 McRae, 'Encounter Dialogue', 340–41.

17 Barthes describes indices as small units of information that are not essential for the progression of the narrative. They are contrasted with 'functions', which require resolution and therefore propel the narrative. A sentence like 'James Bond shot his gun' is usually a function (someone will die, the police need to be called, etc.), whereas 'James Bond's bowtie was red' is an index (unless the reader later discovers that the redness of Bond's bowtie attended an evil mastermind to his presence, in which case this sentence is a function). As my parentheses to the sentence above indicate, these categories are anything but stable, as Barthes is well-aware. Barthes, 'Introduction', 91–97.

In a much more recent contribution Morten Schlütter has proposed the following 'stipulative' definition for encounter dialogue:

> Encounter dialogue must first of all take place between a Zen master (or in a few cases, someone similarly accomplished) and an interlocutor, typically a student, whose insight as a general rule is not up to the level of the master. Secondly, the interlocutor functions as a foil for the Zen master and usually starts by asking a question to which the master responds; there may be several back-and-forth exchanges, but, lastly, the Zen master usually delivers the punchline and has the final word (although sometimes an enlightened interlocutor gets the last word, which then typically is acknowledged by the Zen master). The punchline is to be understood as an expression of the enlightened Buddha mind, no matter how strange, disturbing, or enigmatic it may seem, and is also a challenge to the audience, and the readers of the dialogue, to see their own Buddha minds for themselves.[19]

Schlütter's definition has the advantage of emphasising the generic nature of the exchange. Compared to McRae, it is no longer a 'spontaneous' or 'sincere' exchange—value judgements that we can do without. It also takes into account the audience beyond the participants in the dialogue itself, which points to the didactic and performative functions of the genre.

There's a third alternative to the terms kōan/encounter dialogue. Jeffrey Broughton has proposed the term 'standard' for the encounter dialogues that are the basis of kōan, and 'standards with comments' for kōan, asserting that the Chinese terms for 'encounter dialogue' and 'kōan collection' only appear very rarely in the corpus.[20] What

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[18] McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*, 75–100.

[19] Schlütter, 'Rhetoric in the *Platform Sūtra*', 68.

[20] Broughton 'Chan Literature'. Though I think Broughton's proposal is a good one, and though he is right the term 'kōan collection' does not appear in the Chinese corpus, the term kōan by itself appears in the corpus quite frequently. The preface to the *Blue Cliff Record* opens by triumphantly stating that 'The hundred public cases [kōan] are pierced through on one thread from the begin-

we do find in the corpus is the term *ze* 則. Translated as 'standard', Broughton proposes that this term is much more appropriate than its alternatives. Moreover, 'standard' has the additional advantage of resonating with the very different context of jazz music. Just like jazz musicians, Zen masters commenting on kōan or acting out kōan improvise on an already known tune. Broughton's playful approach is helpful to understand some of the twentieth-century aesthetic interpretations of Zen kōan: for the Beat Generation of American writers, Zen embodied freedom of expression just like jazz music does.

Broughton's proposition moves us away from the task of disambiguating 'encounter dialogue' and 'kōan', and instead gives us a two-fold set that is logically coherent. Yet in its simplicity lies its disadvantage: the word 'standard' is so common in English that it is hard to set apart from the text. This problem might be averted by marking the word as a specialised term (by italicising or using quotation marks). Another disadvantage is that most scholarship has thus far not seen fit to follow Broughton's suggestion, and that introducing a new term might confuse things more than it fixes. Moreover, for most modern practitioners of Zen in the west, kōan remains the go-to term for this genre. Therefore, when speaking generally, I will use the term 'kōan'. But when focusing on the encounter-dialogue component of kōan, I will use 'encounter dialogue'.

What is Genre?

If we want to understand what kōan are, we need to first understand what genre is. As Schlütter notes, part of the importance of studying kōan as a genre lies in the fact that genres condition expectations.[21] In

ning; the whole crowd of old fellows are all judged in turn' (百則公案, 從頭一串穿來; 一隊老漢, 次第總將按過). Cleary and Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, xxxiii; *Biyan lu*, *T* no. 2003, 48: 0139a11–12. I therefore hesitate to dismiss the term 'kōan collection' on this basis.

[21] Schlütter, 'Rhetoric in the *Platform Sūtra*', 68–69.

doing so, they performatively affect how we approach and comprehend reality.[22] A scientific article or a religious scripture, for example, tries to convince us that its vision of the world is authoritative and correct. A stand-up comedy performance does not make such claims, but instead does the opposite in that we rarely take what someone in such a performance says as fundamentally true.

Genre shapes its own interpretations. This is obvious when genre is misunderstood. In the detective novel *Zen there was Murder*, a Zen Buddhist teacher called Mr. Utamaro visits Dublin and sees the following announcement in a post office: 'The postmaster is neither obliged to give change nor authorized to refuse to do so'.[23] Utamaro declares that this is 'very good Zen' because 'Zen does not deny the existence of God. Neither does it affirm it'.[24] For an Irish person familiar with the generic conventions though, this announcement would likely be a sample of bureaucratic rhetoric designed to avoid responsibility. As a genre, it only says something about the administration of post offices. But for Utamaro, who is not Irish and who is not aware of what genre this text belongs to, the sentence captures the essence of reality.

Even though it does not present itself as such, this power of genre to shape its own interpretations is then historically and socially determined, something that becomes particularly obvious when one considers the history of any single genre. Frow demonstrates this for the elegy: from a Greek genre defined by its meter, the elegy becomes first an ironic love poem with ancient Roman poets, then any type of verse concerned with mourning, and finally any text (poetry or prose) concerned with mourning. He concludes: 'Genres have no essence: they have historically changing use values'.[25] This last statement seems rather radical—one can, without much trouble, discern communalities in the diverse historical 'use values' of elegy that Frow enumerates—and Frow modifies it two pages later when he admits that one can

[22] Frow, *Genre*, 3.

[23] Keating, *Zen There Was Murder*, 170.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Frow, *Genre*, 145.

study 'both the continuities and discontinuities' of genres, together with the historical context in which the genre acts and is acted upon.[26]

In this paper, I take the position that it is possible to identify the continuities of kōan as a genre. This is a considerable assumption, deemphasising the many differences between kōan across time and space, between, say, the Song and the Ming (1368–1644), or between China, Japan, and the United States. Doing this also largely ignores the various contexts in which kōan were read. Non-academic accounts of kōan usually do not problematise this and compare and collect samples of this genre regardless of when they were produced.[27] Such a presumption often relies on what Steven Katz has called 'perennialism', the presupposition that all kōan speak of one core experience that remains constant over time and manifests in more or less the same manner for any human being that attains it.[28] Such an assertion is not modern but can already be found in Song kōan collections. As we've seen above, Wumen assures us that once we pass the barrier of no gate, 'you will not only see [Zhaozhou] face to face, but you will also go hand in hand with the successive patriarchs, entangling your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears' (非但親見趙州, 便可與歷代祖師把手共行, 眉毛廝結, 同一眼見, 同一耳聞).[29] I do not mean to replicate such an ahistorical approach, but I am interested in how individuals from vastly different time periods and places identify kōan as a special type of literature distinct from other types of literature. I feel that they do so partly based on underlying, structural features of this genre. When

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[26] Frow, *Genre*, 147.

[27] One such collection is Caplow and Moon, comps. and eds., *The Hidden Lamp*.

[28] Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*.

[29] Elsewhere, in a discussion of the generic characteristics of kōan during the Song, I have suggested that this passage also means that kōan practitioners are meant to visualise the scene portrayed in kōan. The approach in the present article is complementary to that one. I think the generic characteristics of kōan as neck riddles cause us to visualise the kōan, and create a desire to solve it. Van Overmeire, 'Reading Chan Encounter Dialogue during the Song Dynasty'.

Eihei Dōgen 永平道元 (1200–1253) uses kōan in the *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼蔵 [Treasury of the True Dharma Eye], his massive and dazzling account of Buddhism, he seizes on a certain quality that these texts convey, and this quality is conveyed through their literary form.

What Genre is It?

Did you know that one thing kōan collections classic and modern have in common is that the word 'like' (in its meaning of comparison, Ch. *ruo* 若 or *ru* 如) appears frequently? This, to me, is one clue to solve what McRae calls 'the riddle of encounter dialogue'.[30] Metaphors, which always imply a 'like', such as 'life is like a journey', make sense of the world and order it. At the heart of any metaphor is a small riddle, one that is easily solved: how is life like a journey? Well, it involves continuous changes of scenery.[31] But what to do with Yunmen's 雲門 (ca. 862–949) explanation, as featured in the *Biyan lu* 碧巖錄 [Blue Cliff Record], of Bodhidharma's (Ch. Putidamo 菩提達磨) interaction with Emperor Wu 武 (r. 502–549): 'It is like flint struck sparks, like flashing lightning'.[32] What is being expressed here requires much deeper thought and gets at the very limit of what words can express, and perhaps gestures at something beyond language.

Riddles work this way. Anthropologists and folklorists have associated the riddle with carnival-like rituals because they upset our mind's ability to make sense of things. Here's an example: 'Backwards arching, it rocks in summer, it loafs on its nose in winter'.[33] Trying to solve this riddle, our mind races in all kinds of directions. Is this an animal? Or a particular type of person? Is it a physical process?[34] The riddle opens the creative ability of the human mind to create

30 McRae, 'The Riddle of Encounter Dialogue', Chapter 4 in *Seeing Through Zen*, 74–100.

31 Abrahams, *Between the Living and the Dead*, 13–17.

32 Cleary and Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, 7.

33 Quoted in Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 15.

34 It's a boat.

meaning out of everything, and that is a vista that is as exhilarating as it is frightening.[35] This makes us not the passive recipients of pre-cooked wisdom, but active meaning-makers. It is no wonder that riddles are often part of a performance. They can be part of formal competitions, legal disputes, encounters between teachers and students. They can be used during courtship and used to kill time.[36]

Kōan study as it continues today is also often done in a performance, the ritual encounter between master and student, where the student can demonstrate his nonverbal understanding with a little theatre piece (such as putting his shoes on his head like Zhaozhou does in another famous kōan).[37] But even when a kōan is not performed, when it is just read, it engages its audience: we wonder, what does Zhaozhou really mean when he bluntly denies the dog its Buddha-nature? By making us wonder what the answer could be, kōan become 'writerly' rather than 'readerly' texts.[38] We cannot just passively consume a kōan as we would a pulp fiction novel. Instead, kōan continuously make us reflect on the limits of our own thinking: they interrupt the escapism that Marxist critics aver is the ideological function of certain types of popular literature.

Northrop Frye's discussion of riddles helps bring together kōan as performance and performative language. Key in Frye's discussion is the contrast between riddles and charms. Whereas charms exert power by their incomprehensibility, riddles are:

> [E]ssentially a charm in reverse: [the riddle] represents the revolt of the intelligence against the hypnotic power of commanding words. In the riddle a verbal trap is set, but if one can 'guess', that is, point to an outside object to which the verbal construct can be related, the something outside destroys it as a charm, and we have sprung the trap without being caught in it.[39]

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35 Abrahams, *Between the Living and the Dead*, 17.

36 Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 94–96.

37 Nansen kills the cat; *T* no. 2005, vol. 48: 0294c12–22.

38 For the difference between writerly and readerly texts, see Barthes, *S/Z*, 27.

39 Frye, *Spiritus Mundi,* 137.

Whereas charms take us into the supernatural, riddles reverse direction and force us to see the everyday.[40] This is evident in the riddle cited above: 'Backwards arching, it rocks in summer, it loafs on its nose in winter' seems very puzzling, but the plain answer 'a boat' returns us to the 'normal' world.

Frye's description of the operation of riddles could describe what happens in kōan, which also turn a charm into a riddle: the answer by Zhaozhou to the question pertaining to the dog reduces the supernatural (the almost metaphysical idea of Buddha-nature) to the plain denial of the everyday. At the same time, the solution constitutes a new riddle: why is Zhaozhou contradicting the common idea that animals do indeed possess Buddha-nature?[41] While being similar to Frye's riddles in that their solution points back to the everyday present and away from the supernatural world of the charm, the 'solutions' to kōan immediately re-enchant their readers with a new question, one that cannot be solved rationally, and thus maintain the charm-like qualities of these riddles. The riddle is never solved, and thus it never ceases to enchant. This unceasing enchantment is linked to a game that maintains mastery. Zhaozhou's answer shows him to be someone who does not rely on words and letters—a Zen Buddhist master.

Victor Hori's understanding of kōan has centred on their nature as 'games', and this draws on a different aspect of the riddle: riddles are fun, and often circulate among children. Hori has traced kōan back to the 'Chinese literary game'. The first feature of this game is the importance of allusion and analogy: any given statement becomes a puzzle, and defines the line between those who understand the allusion (or who grasp the analogy) and those who do not.[42] Using the word 'game' here, of course, also suggests the idea of a competition: one wins by being 'able to turn the tables against one's opponent'.[43] In this context, Hori rephrases the classical Zen idea of mind-to-

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[40] Frye, *Spiritus Mundi,* 141.

[41] For a deeper discussion of this kōan within the Buddha-nature debate, see Sharf, 'How to Think with Chan *Gong-an*', 224–26.

[42] Hori, *Zen Sand*, 44–48.

[43] Ibid., 55.

mind transmission 'not based in words and letters' as follows: once one deeply understands literature, one can read into one's words a meaning that goes much beyond what the words actually denote.[44] For Hori, working with kōan is a constant game of guessing intentions and misleading opponents.

But kōan are not just any riddle. Scholars have defined the 'true' form of the riddle in various ways. Here are two examples:

> the posing of a puzzle formed by the description of an unknown object which has to be guessed.[45]

> a traditional, fix-phrased verbal expression containing an image and a seeming contradiction. It consists of two parts: an image and an answer.[46]

This description is fine for classical riddles that have everyday answers, such as 'Take away, it increases, put back, it decreases. – A space in a fence'.[47] But as scholars of Zen, we might make various objections to classifying kōan as such a 'true' riddle. Often, kōan do not contain their answer, or if the answer is given, we can't make sense of it. Kōan certainly do not point to 'an unknown object which has to be guessed'; what they are seen to point at is beyond objectivity altogether. So, if we were concerned with the 'true form' of the riddle, we would be in trouble. Scholars of riddles, as we have seen, themselves exclude kōan from the true form of the riddle, as well as from an exceedingly long list of other riddle-type stories. That list also includes the so-called 'neck riddle' that I want to propose kōan resemble.

Why analyse kōan as neck riddles? Because to isolate 'kōan' as a unique genre does not really get us anywhere. It seems to imply that the form is unique to Zen, whereas in fact it has a lot of communalities with other forms of narrative. To privilege kōan as unique is to indulge

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44 Hori, *Zen Sand*, 60.

45 Frow, *Genre*, 34.

46 Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 10.

47 Ibid., 39.

in a form of reverse orientalism that would render the mystical secrets of the East inaccessible to Western understanding.

What is a neck riddle? The most famous example in western literature is featured in Sophocles' Greek play *Oedipus Rex*. The Sphinx, a half-human, half animal being that plagues the city of Thebes, asks everyone it meets the following question: 'What kind of animal is it that stands on four legs in the morning, two in the day, and three in the evening?' When people give the wrong answer, they die. Only Oedipus answers correctly by mentioning 'a man who crawled on all fours as a baby, stood on two feet as an adult and was forced to walk with a stick in old age.' Oedipus' answer leads to the death of the Sphinx. But our hero will not remain pleased with himself for very long, because the prize he gains in Thebes, the woman he will marry, will turn out to be his own mother.[48]

Kaivola-Bregenhøj understands Oedipus's encounter with the Sphinx as a 'neck riddle', which stages a contest between life and death. In his study of the genre, Roger D. Abrahams asserts that this type of riddle does not provide any clarity. Instead, it is an exercise in obfuscation, in defeating an opponent by misleading him.[49]

Here's another example of the genre, this time from the Indian epic poem *Mahābhārata* (Neck riddles are old, appearing in classic texts deeply associated with religious traditions). Five brothers are dying of thirst, and they want to drink from a pond. However, a Yakṣa spirit will only allow them to drink if they answer his questions, one sample of which is the following:

> Still, tell me what foeman is worst to subdue? And what is the sickness lasts lifetime all through? Of men that are upright, say which is the best? And of those that are wicked, who passeth the rest?

The brothers, however, drink anyway and are punished with death. Only one brother, Yudhiṣṭhira, can answer the spirit satisfactorily, and in doing so brings his brothers back to life.

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[48] Story in Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 10.

[49] Abrahams, *Between the Living and the Dead*, 19–23.

> Anger is man's unconquered foe; The ache of greed doth never go;
> Who loveth most of saints is first; Of bad men cruel men are worst.[50]

As these two examples demonstrate, riddles often deal with taboo subjects, such as death, excrement, (incestuous) sex, and the violation of the border between the human and animal. All these aspects are very clear in the Sphinx example, whereas the *Mahābhārata* example does not deal in sexuality, but does relate to death and the crossing of boundaries.

Though classic kōan contain less sexuality (although the casting of sexual encounters with a teacher as a form of this genre is not unheard of in contemporary American Buddhism), they often also indulge in taboo behaviour and subjects. One koan in the *Wumen guan* for, example, portrays a Zen master who has been turned into a fox because he denied the workings of karma.[51] The encounter dialogues of Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866) compare a perfect man to a shitstick, and implore us to kill the Buddhas and patriarchs. As we saw from Wumen, who refers to Linji's rhetorical adventures in this respect, referred to awakening in similarly violent terms:

> Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth. It will be as if you snatch away the great sword of the valiant general Kan'u and hold it in your hand. When you meet the Buddha, you kill him; when you meet the patriarchs, you kill them. On the brink of life and death, you command perfect freedom; among the sixfold worlds and four modes of existence, you enjoy a merry and playful samadhi. 驀然打發, 驚天動地. 如奪得關將軍大刀入手, 逢佛殺佛, 逢祖殺祖. 於生死岸頭, 得大自在, 向六道四生中, 遊戲三昧.

All this sounds extremely martial and violent. Wumen, at least, seems to have understood kōan as a struggle for life and death, dramatising a similar situation to the neck riddle.

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50 Quoted in Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles*, 11

51 This is the second kōan of the *Wumen guan*, found at *T* no. 2005, 48: 293a15–b09.

Neck riddles are in part a struggle for power and authority. The Yakṣa claims dominion over the drinking water, and the Sphinx claims dominion over Thebes. In Zen, the contested territory is that of spiritual mastery: those who understand kōan possess more insight than those who do not, and a Zen master tests whether students have understood a kōan or not.

When readers make sense of Zen through its kōan, these different generic components interlock to create a variety of readings. As explained by Frow, genre is not innocent: it is a force that conditions a certain interpretation. To not recognise the genre is not to be subject to this force. But once a kōan is identified as such, a number of things happen. First, we are enchanted, puzzled, enticed to solve the riddle. We want someone with knowledge to tell us the solution. To interpret kōan, then, always implies this hierarchical division, a contest for the right to speak for or against 'Zen', always an essentialist construct of the historical tradition whose content varies across time.[52] When kōan are seen to be understood, they stand in for an insight that is otherwise seen to be inexpressible. The difficulty in examining this genre remains to 'think together these two aspects of language, as simultaneously symbol and function, signifying and performative'.[53]

To conclude this theoretical section, seeing kōan as (neck) riddles accomplishes the following objectives:

It focuses on the authoritative situations kōan generate: there is always someone who is superior (the master) and someone who is challenging that superiority (the student). Understood as neck riddles, descriptions of kōan as struggles of life and death begin to make a lot of sense.

At the same time, we can see this literary genre as a game with its own rules, written and unwritten.

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52 Faure, *The Will to Orthodoxy.*

53 Faure, 'Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen', 176.

Riddles always have a performative component, or at least engage the reader in an active role.

Riddles are subversive, confusing the metaphorical categories we use to make sense of the world. They enchant the world, making it new and incomprehensible.

Studying kōan as neck riddles allows us to compare kōan to other riddles in literatures and folklore around the world.

Alternative Possibility: Religious Biography

Because they ultimately depend on interpretative communities, genres are tricky. The task for the comparative scholar is to show that a generic application has resonance to different interpretative communities. In the remainder of my paper, I will show that both medieval Chinese kōan commentators and contemporary American Zen practitioners both read this genre as a riddle, even if they do not always use this term. To make this leap in time is to show that ultimately, there is something to the structure of a literary piece that forces its interpretations despite a difference in contexts.

In the case of kōan, we could also classify this genre as a type of religious biography. They demonstrate the spiritual prowess of the Zen patriarchs that participate in them, and thus appear in so-called 'records of sayings' (Ch. *yulu* 語錄) that sketch the lives of these masters. It creates the possibility that Zen authors saw the lives of their saints as riddles to be solved. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, the very act of biography makes abstract ideas coherent and gives them a human form (an allegorical process that is nevertheless, I would claim, inherent in all forms of narrative).[54] It makes very abstruse ideas like emptiness or Buddha-nature appear in the form of vivid and likeable old men, who are and are not like ourselves, just like Christian saints.

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[54] Van Overmeire, 'Buddhism and Biography'.

Classic Kōan Collections

The different dimensions of neck riddles return in kōan collections. Not only is the encounter dialogue situation usually one of a riddler (the master) confronting an audience (one or multiple monk-students), but there is also a commentary that itself riddles the reader. I will discuss these riddles thematically to bring out some generic features that I think also tell us things about the literary identity of the Zen tradition more generally.

The Chinese character for 'riddle' (*mi* 謎) is not found in these kōan collections. We do, however, find descriptions of what is going on, like as follows in the *Blue Cliff Record*:

> Hsueh Tou commented, 'Completely exposed'. Here he makes an effort and sees through the Ancients' ultimate riddle; only thus could he be so extraordinary. 雪竇著語云: 勘破了也. 是他下工夫, 見透古人聱訛極則處, 方能恁麼不妨奇特.[55]

What Cleary translates as 'riddle' here seems a highly idiomatic formulation, combining characters meaning 'unfocused speech deception extreme standard place' (聱訛極則處). Xuedou 雪竇 (980–1052), Deshan's 德山 (782–865) interlocutor in the kōan under discussion, is the target of mockery here: his comment is cast as showmanship, designed to impress others with his knowledge. The struggle for authority is very evident in this passage.

Though no equivalent term for 'riddle' appears in classic kōan collections, the most obvious feature of commentaries in these collections is the incessant claim to authority through obfuscation. Zen masters are Zen masters because they speak incoherently, and only Zen masters can understand what they mean. This claim to understanding functions as a marker of authority and creates an in-group. However, this in-group then claims to be not special, to be ordinary. In the *Wumen guan* for example, Wumen claims the kōan

[55] Cleary and Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, 27; *T* no. 2003, 48: 0144a25–27.

collection came about quite by accident: 'I recorded these cases and thus, without my intending it, they have become a collection' (竟爾抄錄, 不覺成集).[56] This is a well-understood convention that Alan Cole has criticised, one that claims ordinariness while at the same time maintaining an elitist exclusivity: you can only be a member of our club when we say so.[57]

Kōan are deeply intertextual, matching broader scholarship that sees riddles within a broader textual tradition. This is particularly obvious in kōan commentaries and verses, something that has led scholars to understand kōan practice as a 'language game' first and foremost.[58] The game played in these commentaries can be paraphrased as: what passage am I referring to here and how is it 'like' the kōan? At the same time, such commentaries also feature the denial that words can get at the truth at all, amplifying the enigma and further baffling the reader. Consider the following passage from the *Blue Cliff Record*:

> You should know that the jewel of Zhao was flawless to begin with; Xiangru brazenly fooled the king of Qin. The ultimate path is in reality wordless; masters of our school extend compassion to rescue the fallen. If you see it like this, only then do you realize their thoroughgoing kindness. If, on the other hand, you get stuck on the phrases and sunk in the words, you won't avoid exterminating the Buddha's race. 次第總將按過. 須知趙璧本無瑕纇. 相如謾誑秦王. 至道實乎無言. 宗師垂慈救弊. 儻如是見. 方知徹底老婆. 其或泥句沈言. 未免滅佛種族.[59]

The ingenuity of this passage is, of course, that the wordlessness of ultimate reality is asserted through ingenuous references that

[56] Aitken, *Gateless Barrier*, 3. *T* no. 2005, 48: 0292b18.

[57] Cole, 'Healthy Skepticism, and a Field Theory for the Emergence of Chan Literature'.

[58] Faure, 'Fair and Unfair Language Games in Chan/Zen'; Hori, *Zen Sand*.

[59] English translation adapted from Cleary and Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, xxxiii; *Biyan lu*. *T* no. 2003, 48: 0139a12–15.

require an education in the classics of Chinese literature.[60] This back-and-forth movement, typical of much Song dynasty Zen literature, seems to take Frye's definition of the riddle (as a reversed charm), but displays it in a movement between charm (mystery) and riddle (solvable). The masters of kōan collections revel in the usage of metaphor to allude to but not disclose what it is they want to talk about. As mentioned earlier, words for 'like' (*ruo* and *ru*) are among the most prominent in the three collections examined here.

Accompanying these literary references (Ch. *wen* 文), moreover, we find martiality (*wu* 武). Martial images pervade both the kōan themselves as they describe cut off arms and fierce battles, and the commentary, which hails masculine virtues such as cutting through. The *Wumen guan* has it as follows:

> The person of courage unflinchingly cuts straight through the barrier, unhindered even by Nata, the eight-armed demon king. In the presence of such valor, the twenty-eight Indian ancestors and six Chinese ancestors beg for their lives. 若是箇漢不顧危亡. 單刀直入. 八臂那吒攔 他不住. 縱使西天四七. 東土二三. 只得望風 乞命.[61]

This martiality is paired with a particular interest in the human body, that again seems to move away from the literary and can be understood as a movement between charm and riddle. Body parts pervade the vocabulary of both the kōan and commentary, and bodily effusions play a role in the most famous of Zen sayings. These features of kōan are those of the neck riddle as well: clearly here we find an interest in the taboo, in death, and in crossing boundaries.

Finally, like riddles, kōan are fun, revelling in misunderstandings and the ambiguity of words themselves. This is particularly clear in Deshan's well-known encounter with an old woman in the *Blue Cliff Record*:

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60 More specifically, the story referred to here is the 'Lian Po Lin Xiangru liezhuan' 廉頗藺相如列傳 [Biography of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru] chapter of the *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian].

61 Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, 3; *T* no. 2005, 48: 292.b21.

> When he first got to Li Chou (in Hunan), he [Deshan] met an old woman selling fried cakes by the roadside; he put down his commentaries to buy some refreshment to lighten his mind. The old woman said, 'What is that you're carrying?' Te Shan (i.e., Deshan) said, 'Commentaries on the Diamond Cutter Scripture'. The old woman said, 'I have a question for you: if you can answer it I'll give you some fried cakes to refresh your mind; if you can't answer, you'll have to go somewhere else to buy'. Te Shan said, 'Just ask'. The old woman said, 'The Diamond Cutter Scripture says, "Past mind can't be grasped, present mind can't be grasped, future mind can't be grasped": which mind does the learned monk desire to refresh?' Te Shan was speechless. The old woman directed him to go call on Lung T'an. As soon as Te Shan crossed the threshold he said, 'Long have I heard of Lung T'an ("Dragon Pond"), but now that I've arrived here, there's no pond to see and no dragon appears'. Master Lung T'an came out from behind a screen and said, 'You have really arrived at Lung T'an'.
> 初到澧州路上見一婆子賣油糍．遂放下疏鈔且買點心喫．婆云：所載者是什麼. 德山云: 金剛經疏鈔. 婆云: 我有一問爾若答得布施油糍作點心, 若答不得別處買去. 德山云: 但問. 婆云: 金剛經云: 過去心不可得, 現在心不可得, 未來心不可得, 上座欲點那箇心. 山無語. 婆遂指令去參龍潭．纔跨門便問．久嚮龍潭，及乎到來，潭又不見，龍又不現. 龍潭和尚於屏風後引身云: 子親到龍潭.[62]

The old woman's wordplay here is a little bit more subtle than Cleary translates: she's selling dim sum (*dianxin* 點心 ['point-mind']) and she's asking him with what mind he will do the pointing, repeating the phrasing of the very snack that she's selling. Deshan, who has apparently picked up a thing or two from her, reproduces this type of word-game interaction when he meets Longtan and asks where the dragon or pond is. Kōan here become a game with language, that makes the familiar (a snack) a strange thing. At the same time, the struggle for authority typical of the neck riddle is also very obvious: the old woman contests Deshan's knowledge of

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[62] Cleary and Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, 24; *T* no. 2003, 48: 143. c1–10.

Buddhism, and Deshan in turn challenges Longtan (who will not be so easily defeated as the former was earlier).

Contemporary Kōan Interpretations by American Practitioners

That today kōan continue to be interpreted as neck riddles can be demonstrated by an example from the most famous of all American Buddhist novels: *The Dharma Bums*. Written by the 'king of Beats' Jack Kerouac, this autobiographical novel was immensely influential in how Americans came to think of Zen. It describes how a character called 'Ray' (Kerouac himself) interacts with Japhy Ryder (the equally famous Beat poet Gary Snyder) who has up to that point mainly studied Zen through books. During a wild night out in San Francisco, Ray asks of a nameless Chinese cook: 'Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?' The Chinese cook's answer to Ray's query is straightforward: '"I don't care", said the old cook, with lidded eyes, and I told Japhy and he said, "Perfect answer, absolutely perfect. Now you know what I mean by Zen".'[63]

Of course, Japhy never explains what, exactly, he means by Zen, and this maintains his authority as someone who understands, whereas Ray does not.[64] Japhy, the novel's Zen master, consistently exerts authority over Ray by asking him nonsensical riddles drawn from kōan collections. A particularly telling instance of this is early in the book, when Ray rejects Japhy's imposition of authority by rejecting the ritual framework of Zen altogether. Talking about his friend Warren Coughlin, Japhy remarks:

> 'He's a great mysterious Bodhisattva I think maybe a reincarnation of Asagna [sic] the Great Mahayana scholar of the old centuries.'
> 'And who am I?'
> 'I dunno, maybe you're Goat.'
> 'Goat?'

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[63] Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 9.

[64] Rouzer, *On Cold Mountain*, 173–95.

> 'Maybe you're Mudface.'
>
> 'Who's Mudface?'
>
> 'Mudface is the mud in your goatface. What would you say if someone was asked the question "Does a dog have Buddha nature" and said "Woof!"'
>
> 'I'd say that was a lot of silly Zen Buddhism.'
>
> This took Japhy back a bit. 'Lissen Japhy', I said, 'I'm not a Zen Buddhist, I'm a serious Buddhist, I'm an oldfashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism', and so forth into the night, my contention being that Zen Buddhism didn't concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect to make it perceive the illusion of all sources of things. 'It's *mean*', I complained. 'All those Zen Masters throwing young kids in the mud because they can't answer their silly word questions.'[65]

Although Ray immediately afterwards admits that he nevertheless was drawn to Japhy and would continue to follow his guidance until the end of the book, his critique of kōan as 'silly word questions' shows Kerouac's awareness of the authoritative situation that characterises kōan as riddles. At the same time, he also admits that kōan can make us see the world in a new way.

Such an awareness also characterises the Zen memoirs of the Dutch adventurer and detective fiction author Janwillem van de Wetering. *Afterzen*, a memoir he published near the end of his life, opens with the phrase 'koans are vastly overrated'.[66] This assertion does not prevent van de Wetering from deeply engaging with kōan throughout the book. In doing so, he is riffing on many of the standard kōan, but also changes them in the process. Satirising a master he calls 'Dipshit', whose signature treatment of students is to answer all their questions with silence, he composes the following kōan:

> A monk inquired, 'What is the meaning of Daruma going out to preach Buddhism to the Chinese?' The abbot was silent. Another

65 Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, 14–15.

66 van de Wetering, *Afterzen*, 1.

> monk asked another teacher, 'What was the meaning of the abbot being silent?' 'Maybe he didn't know', the other teacher said.[67]

Here two genre cliches of kōan (the question about Bodhidharma, and the silence in responding) are being used to contest the authority of the teacher. Instead of the so-called 'noble silence', that we find in many kōan as well as the influential *Vimalakīrti* Sūtra (Ch. *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經), what we have here is an ignorant silence.

The generic repetitiveness of kōan is also noticed by a much more recent voice in American Buddhism, Claire Gesshin Greenwood. Training in Japan, she notices that the famed Dharma combat of kōan is 'usually a rehearsed set of phrases, not something spontaneous', and the question asked by the master should be prepared in advance using literary allusion.[68] By the end of the memoir, Greenwood has composed a template for her interactions with her teacher, drawing formal attention to the fact that what is commonly considered spontaneous is perhaps not so:

> I've narrowed down the teacher-student dynamic to an equation that goes something like this:
> Student/teacher: Absolute!
> Teacher/student: Relative!
> Student/teacher: Okay, middle way…[69]

Greenwood comes to understand that Zen transmission, instead of being a descriptive marker testifying to the attainment of immense insight, is instead prescriptive: 'you grow into the role'.[70] She reads this as the actualisation of Dōgen's unity of practice and realization and summarizes it in her book title *Bow First, Ask Questions Later*, which implies that bodily actions are primary. For Greenwood, kōan hide their meaning because we need to perform them. Instead of a sudden insight, and a sudden solution, kōan are performative scripts.

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[67] van de Wetering, *Afterzen*, 175.

[68] Greenwood, *Bow First*, 102–03.

[69] Ibid., 181.

For Grace Schireson, an older woman practitioner and teacher, kōan are alive. They are keys to solving any situation, especially ones involving authority, and they are always solved through bodily performance. At various crucial moments, particularly in Japan where she keenly feels discriminated against, Schireson's finds a solution to the problem facing her by delegating the decision to her body. One example of this strategy is when she is slapped by the head monk in the temple where she is staying. The monk's slap activates powerful trauma from her violent childhood, and she decides she needs to act. She cannot tell her Zen master, because that would be violating an unspoken loyalty in the Zendō.[71] But she also realises she needs to stop the bully because else he will abuse other people. To solve this issue, she calls to mind Linji Yixuan's maxim, as translated in D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*:

> If you encounter the Budda [as merely a mind object], slay him; if you encounter the Patriarch, slay him; if you encounter the parent or the relative, slay them all without hesitation, for this is the only way to deliverance. Do not get yourself entangled with any object, but stand above, pass on, and be free.[72]

The question, which becomes 'my personal kōan' becomes: 'What does a feminist do to stand up for herself and other women in this abusive situation? … I would let my body decide what to do'.[73] And so, the next time the monk bullies her by saying that she needs to get into a cross-legged position, something that Schireson does not feel comfortable with, sitting in *seiza* instead, she directly answers him by shaking her head 'no'. For Schireson, then, releasing all entanglements means returning to the body. Solving a kōan means taking action, actively intervening in narratives (such as gendered narratives of authority) that are imposed on her, and standing up and fighting if necessary.

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70 Greenwood, *Bow First*, 38.

71 Schireson, *Naked in the Zendo*, 71.

72 Schireson's parentheses. Schireson, *Naked in the Zendo*, 72.

73 Ibid.

Van de Wetering goes further than Schireson in sketching a life-and-death struggle involving kōan. With a Zen monk called Bobbie, he takes a boat ride, but suddenly finds himself in a violent storm. Fearing for his life, he says:

> 'This is bad', I shouted in Bobbie's ear. 'Think of something helpful', Bobbie shouted in my ear. I told him I was too scared to think of a thing that could save us from doom. 'Not one single thought?' Bobbie shouted. I saw the reference. This was indeed a time to quote koans. 'Mount Sumeru!' we shouted together.
>
> > Once a monk asked Master Ummon [Yunmen], 'When not one thought rises, is there any error?' Ummon said. 'Mount Sumeru!'
>
> Going beyond thinking made us steer a safe course.[74]

Van de Wetering eventually arrives home safely, only to find that the storm is gone when he arrives. Here, the life-and-death struggle of the kōan is literalised: van de Wetering needs to get rid of conceptual thoughts or drown.

All these stories demonstrate that even though not all of these authors would call kōan a riddle, their understanding of kōan nevertheless falls into the category of 'neck riddle': the kōan can be a battle that strongly involves the body and its wellbeing, is performed in battles over authority, features taboo subjects such as death and sexuality, and for which the answer is not clear or explainable.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that the outright rejection of understanding kōan as riddles is unwarranted. On the contrary, reading kōan as riddles would do much to demystify how kōan work,

[74] van de Wetering, *Afterzen*, 169.

making them comparable. It allows us to describe the authoritative situations they generate, the performativity they demand, and the intertextual contexts within which its players make their moves. By confusing the metaphorical categories that we use to make sense of the world, moreover, kōan as riddles can undermine ideology, making us doubt whether things are indeed the way that we've always believed them to be. This, to me, explains why so many Buddhist practitioners attest to having had transformative experiences after solving kōan.

Bibliography

Abbreviations

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. See Secondary Sources, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.

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