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Popular Religions and the Dialectic of Supernaturalism in Chan Historiography

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This paper focuses on a recurring theme in Chinese Buddhist biographies, namely the confrontation between monks and local gods. A diachronic study of Chan historiographies from its early history to the Song period will be carried out to show the sinuous development of the Chan attitude towards supernaturalism: while the Early Chan bore the marks of the absence of miracles and underlined doctrine and dharma transmission, from the 9th–10th centuries on, it caught up with the mainstream of Chinese Buddhist hagiography by generously producing accounts of the Buddhist conquest of indigenous cults. Lastly, I will show how a syncretic model arose in Song Chan miscellanea in the form of the “encounter dialogue”. Being grounded in a typical conversion narrative, it attempted to refute, in a deliberately obscure manner, the *upāya* represented by idolatry.

Keywords: Chan Buddhism; Buddhist biography; supernaturalism; popular religion

From late antiquity and the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), popular deities began to emerge in China. In temples devoted to their worship, local inhabitants would pray and present offerings, so that the gods would bring about rain, cure illnesses, remove plagues, or guarantee success in the civil service examination. The pantheon of these popular beliefs is composed by a variety of supernatural beings, including ghosts, natural spirits (such as river and mountain gods), anthropomorphic animals (such as fox and snake spirits), and also historical figures manifesting extraordinary power, whose cult formed after their death or even during their lives (for example, General Guan Yu 關羽 from the Three Kingdoms period).¹ Until the Five Dynasties (907–960), the central government, which respected the

Confucian worship ritual, did not acknowledge these gods. Most of them therefore had only a limited regional popularity. But from the end of the 11th century, as the State of the Song (960–1279) started to attribute name plaques and official titles to local temples, a considerable expansion of their influence at a national scale occurred throughout the following centuries.

For two millennia, between these vernacular beliefs and two institutionalized religions, that is to say Buddhism and Taoism, there has certainly been continuous reciprocal permeation, but these have gone hand in hand with exclusions and conflicts. For Kristofer Schipper, for example, Taoism always fiercely denounced popular cults, thereby displaying a fundamental uneasiness about its origins.² In the case of Buddhism, a profusion of materials reflecting the tension between local gods and the Buddhist clergy is contained in biographical collections, such as the tradition of the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳), or writings specialized in miracle stories, including the *Biographies of thaumaturge monks* (*Shenseng zhuan* 神僧傳) and various types of *Records of spiritual resonance* (*Ganyin zhuan* 感應傳). This documentation of prime importance has already drawn attention from scholars interested in inter-religious relations in China. For example, John Kieschnick notes that “the spirits of the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* remain for the most part one-dimensional stock characters.”³ In his overview on the representation of mountain spirits in Chinese Buddhist writings, Tsai Tsong-hsien 蔡宗憲 teases out the diverse origins, characters, morphologies and acolytes of these most common gods.⁴ From the viewpoint of narrative, the scenarios of encounter stories between

¹ For the cult of Guan Yu 關羽 (?–220), see for example ter Haar, *Guan Yu*.

² Schipper, ‘Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism’. See also Stein, ‘Religious Taoism and Popular Religion’.

³ Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, 107.

⁴ Tsai, ‘Fojiao wenxian zhong de shanshen xingxiang chutan’.

monks and local deities are mostly carried out in a manner that the supernatural being is to be deposed and substituted. This framework could thus be summarized as a “taming” process. It bears vivid witness to Buddhism’s interest in spaces of non-Buddhist beliefs while Buddhism was expanding, as well as the accent it puts on the assimilation of vernacular religions.⁵ After this brief overview of the mode of interaction between Buddhists and local gods depicted in the writings of Chinese Buddhism in general, I would like to focus on the biographical collections of one school, the Chan, since some of its accounts on the subject of extraordinary beings seem to represent significant diachronic variation, which does not always converge with the “taming” model presented above. A thorough examination of Chan discourse on local cults could shed light on the singular position of this school towards supernaturalism, as well as the narrative strategy it develops for this purpose.

Bernard Faure is one of the few scholars who have ever ventured into this topic. Mainly focusing on Ming-Qing writings, such as the *Biographies of thaumaturge monks* and the *Comprehensive Mirror of gods and extraordinary beings* (*Shenxian tongjian* 神仙通鑒), he asserts that “thaumaturgy played indeed a dominant role in the Northern Chan,” as many of the wonder-working Buddhist monks mentioned in those works belonged to that school, including Shenxiu 神秀 (606?-706) and his disciple Puji 普濟 (651-739). Some monks, such as Xuanzong 玄宗 (682-767), owe their renown especially for converting local spirits and their manifestations as wild animals.⁶ However, if we look into Chan’s inner writings⁷, it seems to

⁵ Gernet, *Les aspects économiques du bouddhisme*, 246, cited by Robson, ‘Buddhism and the Chinese Marchmount System’, 356. Stevenson, ‘Protocols of Power’.

⁶ Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 98-100.

⁷ Writings which are supposed to be produced by people considered as members

me that at least until the beginning of the 9th century, they present few supernatural elements, and confrontations between monks and local gods are practically absent. From the Northern school genealogy, the *Record of the masters and disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* (*Lengjia shizi ji* 楞伽師資記), to the Southern school history *Chronicles from the treasure grove* (*Baolin zhuan* 寶林傳), what Chan authors constantly highlight is rather the doctrinal sayings of patriarchs and the transmission link between master and student. This realistic image of Early Chan monks is in sharp contrast to the thaumaturgical one shaped by contemporaneous and later hagiographies written by outsiders.⁸ In his *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (519), Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554) summarized the accomplishment of “meditation practitioners” (*xichan* 習禪) in terms of “supernatural powers” (*shentong* 神通, Skt. *abhijñā*).⁹ This authoritative Buddhist biography collection probably contributed to affirming the association between supernaturalism and the *chan*, and therefore popularized the idea of a Chan monk thaumaturge in the imagination of medieval Chinese Buddhists and people in general. In parallel, among the major *dhyāna* schools of this period, the “wall-gazing” (*biguan* 壁觀) current connected to Bodhidharma seemed to be the only one still active during the 7th century and attracted more and more followers. This large and heterogeneous community gave rise to some practices that deviated from prior Buddhist tradition, by privileging meditation at the expense of discipline and the cultivation of

of what is recognized as the Chan School, that is to say the branch of *dhyāna* monks affiliated to Bodhidharma (Putidamo 菩提達摩/磨 or Damo 達摩/磨) according to the lineage system formalized under the Song.

⁸ See, for example, the biographies of Shenxiu in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks compiled under the Song* (*Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳) and the *Broad records from the Taiping reign* (*Taiping guangji* 太平廣記), cited by McRae, *The Northern School*, 44–46.

⁹ *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, T no. 2059, 50: 11.400c03.

wisdom. The excessive use “practitioners of meditation” made of their capacities in the realm of prodigious was then criticized by non-Chan biographers such as Huijiao and Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667).¹⁰ This context might help us to understand why the supernatural and local gods were meticulously avoided in histories of the Early Chan. By focusing instead on doctrine and legitimate transmission among a minority of elite monks, the authors probably attempted to draw a clear distinction from the current image of Chan monks and to win the approbation of mainstream Buddhist authority.

In 952, a monumental work, the *Anthology from the halls of the patriarchs* (*Zutang ji* 祖堂集), was completed in Fujian by two monks of the Southern school. Including biographies of 256 Indian and Chinese patriarchs, this compilation contributed to a great extent to the formalization of what is commonly called “patriarchal genealogy,” an emblematic Chan historiographical genre.¹¹ Compared to earlier Chan biography collections, supernatural events are depicted more explicitly: on the side of Indian lineage, several accounts and stanzas fully approve of the patriarchs’ thaumaturgy. For instance, in order to create a written canon of Buddha’s teachings after his nirvāna, Mahākāśyapa (ch. Dajiashe 大迦葉), the first Indian patriarch, is supposed to have called on every holder of miraculous power to gather at the Council in Rājagṛha, so as to assist in the transcription.¹² On the side of Chinese lineage, even though the quantity of encounters between monks and local gods is still limited, they involve several transmission lines dated at different epochs. Among masters of the Early Chan, a disciple of Hui’an 慧安, also known as Lao’an 老安 or Dao’an

¹⁰ Jan, ‘Zhongguo zaoqi chanfa de liuchuan he tedian’.

¹¹ On this work, see Yanagida, ‘Sodōshū no shiryō kachi’. Demiéville, ‘Le recueil de la salle des patriarches’. Welter, *Monks, Ruler, and Literati*, 59–114.

¹² Sun, Kinugawa and Nishiguchi, *Zutang ji*, 20.

道安 (582-709, himself a disciple of the 5th patriarch Hongren 弘忍), once preached Buddhist dharma before a local stove god (*zhaoshen* 竈神), so that this one went directly up to heaven and its previous dwelling, the stove, disintegrated straight away. The monk, whose original name was unknown, was from then on called “Stove Breaker” (Pozaoduo 破竈墮).¹³ In another biography, after having practiced meditation for ten years under the guidance of Hongren, but still uncertain in regard to the exact signification of meditation, the monk Zhihuang 智皇 went down to the South to consult Huineng 慧能 (638-713). Once he attained enlightenment at Caoxi (Guangdong), a dragon spirit notified the donors of the region where the monk previously lived of the good news that very day.¹⁴ Concerning the period of the “Classical Chan” (8th-10th centuries), we can cite, for example, the Silla monk Fanri 梵日 (kr. Beom-il, 810-889), a second-generation disciple of Mazu 馬祖 (709-788). It is said that during his escape from the Huichang 會昌 persecution of Buddhism (840-846), Fanri was guided by spirits of rivers and mountains, and thus survived.¹⁵ In addition, the biography of Mazu himself is especially significant, because it also contains an episode devoted to an extraordinary phenomenon.¹⁶ It is said that two ghosts appeared in the dream of the head of the Da’an 大安 monastery, located in today’s Nanchang city (Jiangxi). For forty years, this monk had been preaching nothing other than *sūtras* and *śāstras*, and used to

¹³ Ibid., 155-156. Interestingly, Pozaoduo’s teacher Hui’an and fellow student Yuangui 元珪 (see below) were later also recognized for having subdued the god of the Songshan 嵩山. The three monks are all classified in the “Spiritual Resonance” (*gantong* 感通) chapter in the *Biographies of Eminent monks compiled under the Song* (*Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳), T no. 2061, 50: 18.823b12-c21, 19.828b06-829b 16.

¹⁴ Sun, Kinugawa and Nishiguchi, *Zutang ji*, 177-178.

¹⁵ Ibid., 757. On biographies of Fanri, also see *Samguk Yusa* 三國遺事, T no. 2039, 49: 3.996c23-997a11. *Seonmun bojang nok* 禪門寶藏錄, X no. 1276, 64: 1.810a15-22.

¹⁶ Sun, Kinugawa and Nishiguchi, *Zutang ji*, 611-612.

slander the Chan monk Mazu. However, the messengers of hell accused him of having taught without having carried out any practice himself and announced his imminent death to him. After having managed to negotiate a short reprieve, the monk rushed that very night toward Mazu's residence, the Kaiyuan 開元 monastery, and implored him for a remedy. Mazu then asked the monk to simply stand beside him. At dawn when the ghosts came back to abduct the monastery head, the two monks became invisible to them.¹⁷ In this way, the head monk ended up saving himself. Through this anecdote, the Chan School shows its spiritual superiority over either local religion (represented by the ghosts), or mainstream Chinese Buddhist schools (represented by the head monk).

We know that between the second half of the 8th century and the middle of the 9th century, the so called Southern school experienced a sustained boom. Whereas a few Chan temples were set up in the surrounding areas of prefecture centres, the majority of them sprang up in the remote or mountainous zones of the Southeast, especially in Jiangxi, Hunan and Fujian. These institutions were directed for the most part by patriarchs affiliated to diverse branches of the Southern school, such as the Hongzhou and the Caodong in Jiangxi, the Weiyang in Hunan, and Xuefeng's 雪峰 (822-908) community in Fujian (his two disciples were later considered respectively as the founders of two other major branches: the Yunmen and the Fayuan). As the number of legal temples was highly limited under the Tang, most of these temples were not recognized by the State and thus became the subject of repressive measures undertaken by local governors. However, their numbers continued to grow, which is attested by the

¹⁷ According to Iriya Yoshitaka 入矢義高, one theme of the post-Mazu Chan doctrine actually insists that the mental activities of the awakened one should not be within others' reach. Iriya, *Baso no goroku*, 127.

frequent use of the term “opening the mountain” (*kaishan* 開山), as well as by a number of Chan monks named after mountain locations at this period.¹⁸ The emergence of local gods in Chan biographies around the 9th century actually bears witness to the numerous vernacular beliefs, which Chan Buddhism confronted in the course of its expansion during its Classical period. Once collected and transcribed, these stories probably served, as John Kieschnick suggests in his study on the *Gaoseng zhuan* collection, “as justification for taking over local shrines in the name of the Dharma.”¹⁹

From the 11th century on, under the Song, and inspired by the expansion of secular historiography throughout the dynasty, Buddhist historians established several new genres in the field of Buddhist history writing and improved those that already existed in previous epochs.²⁰ The Chan school actively got involved in this literary movement: in addition to the further formalization of patriarchal genealogy, then represented by a series of “lamp histories” (*denglu* 燈錄), it also launched a set of new styles, such as “annals” (*biannianti* 編年體), “sectarian biographies” (*sengbaozhuan* 僧寶傳), “miscellanea” (*biji* 筆記), and “individual chronological biographies” (*nianpu* 年譜). They assembled a variety of heterogeneous sources and met diverse proselytic demands fashioned by the new times. Local deities not only can be found in all these historiographical forms, but

¹⁸ On the institutional development of the Southern school, see, for example, Jia Jinhua, *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-Century China*, 95–105. On the symbolism of mountain in the Chan School, see Heine, *Opening a Mountain*, 20–25.

¹⁹ Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, 109.

²⁰ For a survey on Buddhist historiography under the Song, see Chen, *Zhongguo fojiao shiji gailun*, 77–89, 94–124. Makita, ‘Sōdai ni okeru bukkyō shigaku no hatten’, 631–633. Jan, ‘Buddhist Historiography in Sung China’. Cao, *Songdai fojiao shiji yanjiu*.

they also interact with a larger population. Some cases from the lamp stories evoking early Chan figures, including the Northern school monk Yuanguai 元珪 who subdued the mountain god of Songshan 嵩山 (Henan), as well as Nanquan 南泉 (748–835), a major disciple of Mazu who was greeted by an earth god, have already been examined by scholars.²¹ As for contemporaneous Song patriarchs, the *Biographies of the Saṃgha Treasure in the Chan Groves* (*Chanlin sengbao zhuan* 禪林僧寶傳), for example, relates that at the Zhurong 祝融 Peak of Hengshan 衡山, the Linji master Guquan 谷泉 (d. 1056–1064) tamed a malefic pine spirit (*songyao* 松妖), which had attacked him in the form of a giant python.²² In writings that transcend the purely sectarian, we can even identify prodigious traces of non-Chan figures. The 13th century miscellanea collection *Precious Mirror for the Usage of Humans and Gods* (*Rentian baojian* 人天寶鑑) reports that the practitioner Neng (Neng Xingren 能行人, ca. 1st half of the 12th century), seemingly a fourth-generation disciple of Zhili 知禮 (960–1028) of the Tiantai school, made friends with a mountain god in the Jiangzhe region. Whenever his monastery was lacking provisions, he just addressed prayers to his extraordinary companion, who would then go door-to-door to collect donations from the local inhabitants.²³

²¹ See Shinohara, 'Two sources of Chinese Buddhist biographies'. Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 112. Heine, *Opening a Mountain*, 39–42, 116–118.

²² *Chanlin sengbao zhuan* 禪林僧寶傳, X no. 1560, 79: 15.522c09–11. A slightly different version of the story was recorded in Huihong's miscellanea collection, the *Records from the Chan Groves* (*Linjian lu* 林間錄, X no. 1624, 87: 2.264b18–20), and the Buddhist version of a monograph on Hengshan the *Record of the collected highlights of Nanyue* (*Nanyue zongsheng ji* 南嶽總勝集, T no. 2097, 51: 3.1090c26–28).

²³ *Rentian bojian* 人天寶鑒, X, 1612, 87:1.11c02–13. The important role of local gods in the survival of Chan monasteries is recorded in several Chan writings of the Song. For example, the *Chronological Biography of Dahui* (*Dahui nianpu* 大慧年譜) cites a commemoration composed by a lay student of Zonggao 宗杲 (1089–1163), Li Bing 李邴 (1085–1146), on the Thousand Monks Pavillon (Qianseng ge 千僧閣) newly

At this period, when supernatural encounter narratives were achieving great success in Chan literature, discordant notes, or rather ambiguous discourses on the subject of popular beliefs, were also forming here and there, and incited readers to re-examine the validity of supernatural powers. The following account dealing with the confrontation between a Linji monk and a local god offers a characteristic illustration. Related and reformulated by various sources dated at different epochs, this account seems to have been widespread in the Buddhist community since the Song.²⁴ The version I show below is an extract from a major miscellanea collection from the mid-12th century, the *Unofficial Record from Lake Luo* (*Luohu yelu* 羅湖野錄). It contains a crucial plot element omitted in most of the other extant sources.

死心禪師紹聖間住江西翠巖。法堂後有齊安王祠，威靈甚著。死心徙祠於院西偏，即址以建丈室。設榻燕寢，蟬蟠身側，叱去復來，夜以為常。一夜將三鼓，夢冠裳者通謁，極陳遷居非所樂，欲假莊丁六十輩南遊二廣。死心在夢諾之。居無何，莊丁家疫癘大作，物故如數而後已。

During the Shaosheng era (1094–1098), the Chan master Sixin assumed the abbacy of the Cuiyan monastery in Jiangxi. Behind the Dharma Hall was situated a shrine dedicated to the cult of Prince Qi'an, which

completed in the Jingshan 徑山 monastery (Zhejiang), on the initiative of Zonggao. According to Li Bing, the monastery was founded by a certain Tang monk, who was supposed to be supported by a dragon spirit in the collection of donations. Another anecdote of the *Unofficial Record from Lake Luo* deals with a Linji monk named Zuyuan 祖元 (ca. 12th century) and his allies, some tutelary gods who also steered his monastery through a financial crisis. See Ishii, 'Ta-hui p'u-chüeh-ch'an-shih-nien-p'u no kenkyü', 105–108. *Luohu yelu* 羅湖野錄, X. no. 1577, 83: 1.383c19–23.

²⁴ *Bu Chanlin sengbaozhuan* 補禪林僧寶傳, X no. 1560, 79 (following the *Biographies of the Saṃgha Treasure in the Chan Groves*): 1.555a08–12. *Xu chuandenglu* 續傳燈錄, T no. 2077, 51: 22.613c05–09. *Fozu gangmu* 佛祖綱目, X no. 1594, 85: 37. 737a17–23. *Shenseng zhuan*, 9.1014a18–22. *Zongtong biannian* 宗統編年, X no. 1600, 86: 22.227c18–22.

manifested a huge extraordinary power. Sixin moved the shrine to the western part of the monastery, so as to construct at that very place the Abbot's quarters. After having prepared his couch and lied down for an easy sleep, [Sixin noticed] beside him the presence of a python. Even if chased away by shouts, it always came back in the night, a situation to which [Sixin] got accustomed. One day, around the third watch, [Sixin] dreamed of a person in the clothing of government official coming for an audience. He related with insistence that the change in location of the altar was difficult for him, and he thus hoped to borrow sixty labourers from the monastic farm, who would accompany him during his trip in the Two Guang region in the South.²⁵ Sixin gave his agreement in the dream. Shortly afterward, an epidemic devastated the houses of the labourers and the number of casualties stopped just after it attained the settled one.²⁶

Sixin 死心 (1043–1116), one of the two protagonists, was a second-generation disciple of Honglong 黃龍 (1002–1069), the putative originator of the Huanglong (literally “Yellow dragon”) sect. Together with the Yangqi 楊岐, this line represented the two most dynamic Linji currents under the Song. Mainly based in Jiangxi, the centre of the Huanglong's activities from the middle of 11th century, the monk Sixin was celebrated within the monastic milieu for his eccentric personality and the bold style of his teaching. Outside the clergy, he also won support from elite laymen, especially Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), his supposed “dharma brother” and devoted “External Patron” (*waihu* 外護),²⁷ Moreover, Sixin figures among the rare patriarchs who had transmitted the dharma to women.²⁸ His female-heir Zhitong 智通 had been married to one grandson

²⁵ The Two Guang region designates the western and the eastern circuits of the Guangnan (Guangnanxilu 广南西路, Guangnandonglu 广南东路), covering today's Guangxi, Guangdong and Hainan provinces, as well as the Leizhou peninsula.

²⁶ *Luohu yelu*, 2.391b16–21.

²⁷ *Jiatai pudenglu* 嘉泰普燈錄, X no. 1559, 79: 23.427c05–13.

²⁸ According to the *Assembled essentials of the five lamps* (*Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈

of Su Song 蘇頌 (1020-1101), an eminent scholar and Prime councillor in the Yuanyou 元祐 era (1086-1094).²⁹ The rival of the monk, a certain local god named Qi'an wang 齊安王, probably refers to the prince Xiao Yaoguang 蕭遙光 (468-499) of the Qi Dynasty (479-502), the founder of the Cuiyan 翠巖 monastery (in today's Nanchang city), where the story took place.³⁰

The account starts with a typical “taming” scheme. Following an initial abbacy at the Yunyan 雲巖 monastery (in today's Xiushui 修水 district)³¹, Sixin was transferred in 1097 to the Cuiyan monastery in the same region, where the back of the Dharma Hall was occupied by the temple devoted to Prince Qi'an. The new abbot then had the temple moved to the western part of the monastery, so as to make room for the Abbot's quarters.³² Other contemporaneous sources employ the term “illicit shrine” (*yinci* 淫祠) to qualify the altar of the Prince and explain that “everyday the prayers of local inhabitants were filling up the sordid temple, where a profusion of alcohol and large pieces of meat were presented.”³³ During the imperial period, “illicit shrine” had designated all sanctuaries without official status,

會元), which were compiled at the end of the Southern Song, the female-male ratio of heirs is around 1:100. See Hsieh, ‘Images of Women in Ch'an Buddhist Literature of the Sung Period’, 176.

²⁹ *Jiatai pudenglu*, 10.351c13-352a04. *Luohu yelu*, 1.375c24-376a22.

³⁰ Suzuki, *Chūgoku zenshū jimei sanmei jiten*, 217.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

³² In his study on Chan architecture and discipline, Griffith Foulk shows the plan of the Lingyin 靈隱 monastery (Zhejiang) during the Song, of which the Dharma Hall is located on the central axis of the monastery and in front of the Abbot's quarters. Foulk, ‘Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice in Sung Chan Buddhism’, 168. On the layout of Song Chan monastery and the function of its components, see also Sekiguchi, *Sekiguchi kin'ya chosakushū* 2, Section 1.

³³ *Bu Chanlin sengbaozhuan*, 1.555a09.

that is to say temples offering “illicit sacrifices” (*yinsi* 淫祀) to deities not included in the *Canon of sacrifices* (*Sidian* 祀典) or without official titles.³⁴ Enjoying steady growth throughout the Song, “illicit shrines” were meanwhile systematically suppressed by the government.³⁵ Other biographies of the monk report that he had originally confided the relocation task to the administrator of the monastery (*zhishi* 知事), who declined it for fear of misfortune.³⁶ Despite its spiritual force, the common Buddhist clergy also capitulate vis-à-vis the Prince. A similar account of the Tang monk Shitou 石頭 (701–791) could be the model of this episode. It is said that once he was an adult, Shitou destroyed the temple of a local god, to which the inhabitants, being afraid of ghosts and spirits (*guishen* 鬼神), offered excessive sacrifices.³⁷ After having been moved from the centre of the monastery, the Prince fought back first by taking the form of fierce reptile. This threat appeared to be ineffective, since in a non-acting serenity, the monk got into the habit of sleeping in the presence of the python. A compromise was then negotiated in the dream of the monk, which compensated for the failure of the Prince’s authority by sacrificing the lives of numerous monastery labourers. The loss of these lay members of the Chan community proved to be necessary, as from then on, no further nuisance occurred around the

³⁴ Pregadio, *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, vol. 2, 1176–1177. On the distinction between the “licit shrine” (*zhengci* 正祠) and the “illicit shrine” under the Song, see Pi, *Songdai minzhong cishen xinyang yanjiu*, 274–282.

³⁵ From a geographic viewpoint, while fox spirits abounded in the North, snake spirits predominated in the South-west. As for the Jiangnan region, the god of Five Penetrations (Wutong shen 五通神) enjoyed significant popularity and writings of the Song literati bear witness of the corrupt nature of its cult. See Liu, ‘Lun songdai mingjian yinci’. On the god of Five Penetrations, see von Glahn, *The sinister way*, 180–221.

³⁶ *Zongtong biannian*, 22.227c15. *Fozu gangmu*, 37.737a17.

³⁷ *Jingde chuandenglu* 景德傳燈錄, T no. 2076, 51: 14.309b03–05. *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, 9.763c24–27.

monastery, so that the monk's triumph over the local god is confirmed.

Nevertheless, in the following part of the account, the story takes an unexpected turn and the conquest previously achieved turns out to be minimized. By opening a debate on the very existence of his defeated rival, which is unusual in Chan literature, the abbot Sixin seems to challenge the premise of the "taming" narrative.

遂設問於學徒曰：“且道果有鬼神乎？若道有，又不打殺死心。若道無，莊丁為甚麼死？”時下語鮮有契者。適楚源首座自寶峰真淨會中來，死心如前問之。源曰：“甜瓜徹蒂甜，苦瓠連根苦。”死心笑而已。

[Sixin] then questioned the students: "Allow me to ask: Do ghosts and spirits truly exist? If that is the case, why didn't they kill me, Sixin? If not, why did the farm labourers die?" Following this, rare were the responses corresponding [with Sixin's intention]. The Head seat Chuyuan happened to arrive from Baofeng Zhenjing's (1025-1102) community. Sixin asked him the same question. [Chu]yuan declared: "Whereas melons are sweet up to the stem, calabashes are bitter from the roots." Smiling, Sixin brought his interrogation to a close.³⁸

As we can see, this part is developed in the typical form of an "encounter dialogue" (*jifeng wenda* 機鋒問答), a didactic tool designed to evaluate the spiritual level of the student, or to arouse enlightenment in him.³⁹ By creating a dilemma between, on the one hand, the non-human power of the Prince over certain humans (the dead labourers), and on the other hand, its inefficiency regarding others (the abbot), Sixin drives his interlocutor into the classical trap of dualist thought. The response of the Head seat Chuyuan 楚源, which carries us right up the paths of a vegetable

³⁸ *Luohu yelu*, 2.391b21-c01.

³⁹ See McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, 74, and the note 190 on p. 298. Demiéville, *Les Entretiens de Lin-tsi*, 45.

garden, seems clearly off topic, but turns out to be the answer that satisfies the abbot. Therefore, this seemingly illogical and enigmatic conversation probably embodies the exact attitude of the Chan School under the Song with regard to extraordinary beings, and deserves a careful philological survey.

I have noticed that from the 11th century, the couplet “Whereas melons are sweet up to the stem, calabashes are bitter from the roots” frequently appears in Chan doctrinal sayings. The Linji master Wen Yue 文悅 (997–1062), as well as the Yunmen master Xue Dou 雪竇 (980–1052) and his dharma heir Yi Hui 義懷 (993–1064), were most likely the first to employ the verses in their teachings.⁴⁰ However, Song patriarchs and commentators seemed unwilling to discourse directly on the signification of the expression, and despite being frequently quoted, it remained obscure. It is only in later epochs, starting in the 17th century, that more intelligible explanations begin to appear in the works of Japanese Zen exegetes. For instance, Mujaku Dōchū 無著道忠 (1653–1745), eminent Rinzaï 臨濟 philologist, considers the couplet to signify “get on with each other” or “be in harmony.”⁴¹ For the Ōbaku 黄檗 annotator Taichi Jittō 大智実統 (ca. 1st half of the 18th century), in the same way as melons are sweet up to the stem and calabashes are bitter from the roots, the phenomenal world is characterized by the diversity of its manifestations, which is not to be changed by men’s arrangements. Thanks to his transcendent vision, the awakened one penetrates into the reality of phenomena, but cannot, on the contrary, homogenize them.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Guzunsu yulu* 古尊宿語錄, X no. 1315, 68: 41.267c07–08. *Mingjue chanshi yulu* 明覺禪師語錄, T no. 1996, 47: 4.694b13–14. *Liandeng huiyao* 聯燈會要, X no. 1557, 79: 28.248a16–17.

⁴¹ Mujaku, *Kidōroku rikō*, 1359.

⁴² Taichi, *Hekiganroku shudenshō*, 2.

If we rely on these indications, it is not impossible to consider that the Head seat's statement actually provided a comprehensive examination of all the replies possible to abbot's question: on the one hand, a minority of elite students gifted with superior spiritual aptitude would proceed to a metaphoric reading of the encounter between the monk and the local god, and regard supernatural beings and events as a provisional expedient of Buddhist teachings; on the other hand, the masses of believers, who were unable to maintain their faith without prodigious by-products of religious practice, would need to believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits, and, furthermore, in a Buddhist more powerful than them. Being in contradiction with each other in a manner as radical as the way that sweet melons are opposed to bitter calabashes, these two visions cohabit in this world. The harmonious coexistence of phenomena of opposite nature is dictated by Buddhist dharma and will persist irrespective of men's will. If this observation, approved in the end by the abbot as the final word on the story, fully bestows functionary existence to extraordinary phenomena, it refutes at the same time their authentic existence. In doing so, the account indeed deconstructs the topic of "taming," because what conquest could one claim if the adversary doesn't even exist? Likely to ensure that the readers remained faithful to the Chan school, this subversive discourse is after all hidden under the irrational and cryptic rhetoric of the Chan. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, this second part of the account is included only in a limited number of Buddhist writings, whereas the first part, the Buddhist victory over the local god, is systematically related by formal histories of the Chan school and of Chinese Buddhism in general.

Actually, during the Song, although marginal, this dual acceptance of supernaturalism and its antithesis manifests itself not only in Chan biographies, but also in doctrinal writings of the school. For example, in his research on popular religiosity and Chan rhetoric, Steven Heine compares

several *gong'ans*, which all describe the mythic encounter at the mount Wutai (Shanxi) between the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and a Tang monk named Wuzhuo 無著. This case study shows the fundamental tensions and ambivalence between two levels of discourse: the first, an ideal iconoclasm and anti-ritualism, and the second, the interest in a practice based on supernatural vision and numinous experience. In the same way, the comments of these *gong'ans*, such as what we can read in the *Blue Cliff Record* (*Biyan lu* 碧巖錄), deliberately cultivate an ironic ambiguity, which avoids showing their position vis-à-vis the extraordinary nature of the Buddhist deity.⁴³

As shown at the beginning of this study, it is from the period of the Song that local gods start to gain national legitimacy through the policy of name plaque and official title attribution. The production of “taming” stories thus might be more evidence that the Chan school was trying to contain the growing influence of these competitive cults. We also know that under the Song, monks and laymen from the lettered milieu or ruling classes played an increasingly more prominent role in the Chan community and were authors of a linguistic turn initiated during the 11th century, the “lettered Chan” (*wenzichan* 文字禪) movement. The communicative capacities of language, formerly denied, came to be fully approved by the school, which promoted a spiritual practice centred particularly on the reading and interpretation of texts.⁴⁴ It is in this context that a more subtle writing of vernacular cults emerged in Chan historiography: while preserving, on the

⁴³ Heine, ‘Visions, Divisions, Revisions’, 139. Heine also shows that emblematic Tang patriarchs, such as Linji, Yunmen and Zhaozhou, also explicitly prohibit the practice of pilgrimage in their “recorded sayings”. Ibid., 138.

⁴⁴ On the definition and the historical presentation of this movement, see Zhou, *Wenzi chan yu Songdai shixue*, 25–42, and *Chanzong yuyan*, 94–139, 140–141. See also Gimello, ‘Mārga and Culture’, 380–381.

surface, the propagative function of supernaturalism, it attempts to redefine supernaturalism such that it serves fundamental Chan doctrine.

Abbreviation

- J* *Jiaxing dazangjing* 嘉興大藏經. Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1987.
- T* *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924-1932.
- X* *Shinsan Dainihon Zokuzōkyō* 新纂大日本統藏經. Edited by Kawamura Kōshō 河村孝照 et al. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1975-1986.

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