



Steven Heine, *Opening a Mountain: Kōans of the Zen Masters*

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STEVEN HEINE's new book, *Opening a Mountain: Kōans of the Zen Masters*, continues his on-going exploration in Zen kōan literature of the contribution of local folk tradition, belief in supernatural forces, and elements from popular religion. His earlier book, *Shifting Shape, Shaping Text: Philosophy and Folklore in the Fox Kōan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), focused on the well-known kōan, "Pai-chang and the Wild Fox," (J. *Hyakujō Yako*, Case 2 from the *Mumonkan*), and argued that it had a "multivalent discursive structure" (*Shifting Shape*, pp. 41–64), or a "two-fold structure" (*Opening a Mountain*, 9 *et passim*). On the one hand, it was a traditional enigmatic Zen kōan, an "encounter dialogue," used as part of monastic kōan practice, posing a problem to the Zen practitioner about karma and non-duality. On the other hand, it was also a typical fox story from the folk tradition, a morality tale in which a human being, deceived into a mistaken way of life by a fox, repents his mistake, after which the fox is exorcised. In the present book, *Opening a Mountain*, Heine widens his focus to include sixty kōans which feature not just foxes but also rogue priests, hermits, wizards, magical animals, shapeshifters, dangerous women, dreams and visions, staffs and robes with magic powers, monks who walk on water, and other elements from the world of the supernatural. He argues that all

these kōans too, need to be understood not just against a traditional background of Mahayāna Buddhist philosophy and Zen logic, but also against a background of local myth, folklore, and popular religion. When we see a kōan as having a two-fold structure, then we see it in not merely two contexts of interpretation: we see that “[c]onventional readings stress the ‘truth’ of kōan discourse, whereas the [mythic-magic] interpretations in this volume focuses on the role of ‘power’ underlying the truth claims” (18).

Scholars in contemporary religious studies often use different methodological perspectives— anthropological, mythic, economic, psychoanalytic, feminist, theological, and so on—to analyze a single topic, but their analyses frequently seem to operate in quite different realms that do not connect. Heine argues, however—and this is a separate thesis in addition to his claim about a two-fold structure—that the two perspectives that he has identified in Zen kōans must be combined into one, that part of the Zen meaning of kōans is that they show Zen masters subjugating the supernatural. That is what it means to “open a mountain.” He says,

[t]his volume introduces sixty kōans that highlight a central underlying theme: how Zen masters ‘open a mountain,’ or establish a new monastery or teaching lineage. This is achieved through encountering and ultimately domesticating powerful yet wild and erratic spiritual forces in remote mountain landscapes. Once the transformation has been completed, the previously untamed forces become protectors and providers of the Buddhist Dharma. The transforming of spiritual forces that had been closing off the mountains into manifestations of sacred space in Zen was referred to in Chinese as *kuai-shan* (Jap. *kaizan* or *yama o hiraku*). (26)

When a Zen master opens a mountain, he first clears Dharmic space on a mountain that originally was home to supernatural beings and forces; he then constructs a monastery and founds a lineage. Thereafter the name of the mountain is used as the name of the monastery and also as the name of the monastery’s abbot. For example, “Pai-chang,” which originally means “hundreds of fathoms,” was the name originally of the mountain, then of the monastery on its slope, and then of each succeeding abbot, who generation after generation taught in that monastery. In this contest over opening the mountain, on the one side is Zen, which contributes the “iconoclastic,” “demythological,” and “rational” (4–6) element to Zen kōans. On the other side is the entire world of supernatural forces which contribute “strange practitioners, anomalous spirits, magical animals, and dangerous women, as well as confessional experiences of self-mutilation and death” (8). The Zen side seeks not to conquer and extinguish the supernatural other, but to subjugate and co-opt the supernatural other. “Zen seeks to establish its priority over local cults that rely on magic and folklore, but at the same time it tries not to eliminate but to transform these perspectives” (19) so that they serve the Dharma.

Heine has thus created a new collection of sixty kōans all related to this theme of subjugating the supernatural in the process of opening a mountain. To each translation of the kōan case, he appends his own commentary. He divides the kōans into

five categories, devoting one chapter to each category. Chapter One, “Surveying Mountain Landscapes” (Cases 1–15), contains kōans in which the mountain setting is important. These are sub-divided into “Northern and Ox Head School” kōans, “Southern School” kōans, kōans dealing with “Tung-shan’s Mountain” and kōans dealing with “Mount Wu-t’ai.” The Mount Wu-t’ai kōans are particularly important for Heine’s thesis because many prominent Zen masters prohibited their disciples from visiting Wu-t’ai. Wu-t’ai was said to be the home of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and many people made a pilgrimage to Wu-t’ai hoping to have a vision of Mañjuśrī. Chapter Two, “Contesting with Irregular Rivals” (Cases 16–26), brings together kōans in which a Zen master encounters hermits, shamans, wizards, and others who use techniques such as exorcism, divination, or geomancy to communicate with supernatural forces. In some of these kōans, the Zen master himself is the hermit and in a few cases, the irregular rival is a woman. These kōans are sub-divided into kōans dealing with “Hermits, Wizards and Other Masters” and kōans dealing with “Dangerous Women: Zen ‘Grannies’ and Nuns.”

The heart of the book is probably Chapter Three, “Encountering Supernatural Forces” (Cases 27–40), which sub-divides into kōans dealing with “Trance, Visions and Dreams,” koans dealing with “Spirits Gods and Bodhisattvas,” and kōans dealing with “Magical Animals.” This chapter includes the important kōan, “Pai-chang and the Wild Fox.” Heine reminds us that despite its iconoclasm, the Zen tradition had its own icons of authority, such as sticks, staffs, fly-whisks, fans, robes, and so on, which sometimes were depicted as having supernatural powers themselves. Chapter Four, “Wielding Symbols of Authority and Transmission” (Cases 41–49), brings together kōans dealing with these implements, sub-divided into two classes, “Symbols of Authority” and “Transmission Symbols.”

Chapter Five, “Confessional Experiences” (Cases 50–60), brings together kōans in which the attempt to control life and death is the central theme. These sub-divide into kōans dealing with “Repentance and Self-Mutilation” (including the important kōan, “Chü-chih’s One Finger Zen,” which Heine discusses in more detail in the Introduction, 9–13) and “Death, Relics and Ghosts.” This chapter contains the important kōan, “A Woman’s True Soul,” in which a woman’s soul divides into two, one running off to live with her lover, one remaining at home with her parents.

After one surveys these sixty kōans, the first set of questions that arises concerns the two sides in the contest of “opening a mountain.” In that contest, on the one side is Zen, which is described as iconoclastic, demythological and rationalist, and on the other side is the world of the supernatural. I am quite willing to accept the two-fold structure: Zen “encounter dialogue” vs. folklore morality tale, but I have some questions about the two categories: rationalist Zen vs. the supernatural. First of all, standard kōans such as “sound of one hand” and “original face before your father and mother were born,” have long been described as beyond the bounds of reason, language, and ordinary logic, so it is a little strange to associate the Zen tradition with rationalism. This is so despite Heine’s observation that “Leading Zen thinkers were in competition with the rational focus of Confucian philosophers and needed to distance themselves

from supernaturalism to forestall the critique of rationalist rivals” (6). Furthermore, it is not so obvious that the supernatural is “the other.” The sutras of the entire Mahāyāna tradition, of which Zen is a branch, are full of strange practitioners, anomalous spirits, magical animals and self-mutilation. Heine himself implicitly recognizes this as he himself uses the phrase “the shamanistic quality of Mahāyāna Buddhism” (61). There is a distinction here between two sides in a contest but it is not clear that “rationalist” to describe the Zen side and “mythic,” “magical,” and “supernatural” to describe the other side are the right terms to explain this distinction.

Heine’s earlier book, *Shifting Shape, Shaping Text*, introduced the very useful idea of a two-fold structure of kōans to explain the complexity of the “Pai-chang and the Wild Fox” kōan, but in the present book, Heine’s commentaries presuppose the two-fold structure for sixty kōans without really arguing for it. In the kōan, “Pai-chang and the Wild Fox,” Master Pai-chang meets an old man who declares that he was once the master of Pai-chang’s monastery many lives ago. In that earlier life, when asked, “Does a person of great awakening fall into karma?” he mistakenly answered, “A person of great awakening does not fall into karma,” for which he was punished with five hundred rebirths as a fox. The old master then asks Pai-chang for the correct answer. Pai-chang says, “A person of great awakening does not ignore karma,” and with this answer, the old man is released from his punishment. Later, Pai-chang leads his monks into the mountains and discovers the body of a dead fox, to which he gives a funeral. Although there may be disagreements on the exact lesson of the kōan, there clearly is a more or less standard way of interpreting it in the Zen tradition. It is about nonduality and karma. That is, a person who thinks that Zen awakening transcends the ordinary life of karma is still caught in dualism, a dualism between falling into karma and transcending karma. The implicit dualism inherent in “does not fall into karma” exposes the old man’s unawakened mind. Thus, when he declared that one does not fall into karma, he caused himself to fall into karma. Moral of the kōan: awakening begins with the realization of the nonduality of falling and not-falling into karma. Now, in addition to this standard Zen reading, Heine argued that the fox kōan should also be seen against the extensive folklore tradition in which the fox is an important shape-shifting trickster figure. In a standard fox morality tale, the fox appears in human guise causing some person to neglect his moral duties—and, in the process, putting his own life in danger, since the fox-lady [usually the fox assumes a female form] is draining him of all his vigor and life energy. The morality tale reaches its crisis when the human victim of the fox finally repents his moral mistake and confesses, at which point the fox is exposed, exorcised, and returned to its original fox-shape. When the animal is finally buried, the moral world returns to its normal condition. The folk story ends with a pronouncement of the moral of the story. Heine clearly showed that the “Pai-chang and the Wild Fox” kōan had the standard structure of the fox morality tale: the fox appearing in human guise, the deceived person’s ritualized act of confession, the exorcism of the fox, the burial of the corpse, and the pronouncement of the

moral of the story (*Shifting Shape*, 39). Seen one way, the kōan is an encounter dialogue; seen another way, it is a morality tale from folklore.

But just because one kōan, “Pai-Chiang and the Wild Fox,” has such a two-fold structure does not mean that every other kōan that includes a supernatural element has such a structure. All of the kōans in *Opening A Mountain* include some supernatural feature but in many cases the supernatural feature appears to be just a non-essential flourish or metaphor. In Case 19, when Chao-chou visits, one hermit raises his fist, and Chao-chou responds, “A ship cannot anchor where the water is shallow.” When he visits a second hermit, the hermit also raises his fist, and Chao-chou responds, “You have the ability to give and to take, to kill and to give life” (82). The supernatural elements are the hermits. But their presence in this kōan looks to be quite incidental. The core problem apparently is why does Chao-chou disapprove of one and approve of the other. The fact they are supernatural beings does not seem relevant. In Case 28, Huang-po says to his assembly, “All of you people are gobblers of dregs. If you keep up practicing this way, what will you ever expect to achieve? Do you realize that in all of T’ang China there is not a single genuine Zen teacher?” When challenged by a monk, Huang-po replies, “I didn’t say that there is no Zen. I just said that there is no genuine Zen teacher” (106). The core problem apparently is about whether there is a genuine Zen teacher. The supernatural element is that once in Huang-po’s past, he had an encounter with a monk who could walk on water. In Case 39, when a monk asks, “What did Ch’ang-ch’ing really mean when he said, ‘Let us give thanks for the midday meal?’ in response Ta-kuang did a dance. The monk bowed. When Ta-kuang asks why he bowed, the monk did a dance. Ta-kuang said, “You wild fox spirit” (133). Here “wild fox” could be a reference to the supernatural, but it is much more likely that it is being used in its standard metaphorical sense to denote a person whose Zen is based on imitation and not on authentic personal experience. In all these cases, the reference to the supernatural does not provide another frame of interpretation. It is hard to discern a two-fold discursive structure.

In the present volume, we want to see each kōan told twice, once as a Zen encounter dialogue and once again as a story in the folklore tradition. In a very few cases, Heine does this. In Case 56, “A Woman’s True Soul?” (184–87), the parents of a young woman, Ch’ien, arrange a marriage for her. Unfortunately she is in love with a childhood sweetheart, so she and her lover run off together to a remote place where they live for five years. Out of a sense of duty to their families, they decide to return. On their return, Ch’ien’s father is incredulous because, as far as he is concerned, Ch’ien fell ill and has been sick in bed for five years. There are two Ch’iens, one who ran away with her lover for five years and one who lay sick in her family bed for five years. The kōan asks, which is the true Ch’ien? Seen as a kōan, the Zen question is straightforward. In the language of spirits, it asks the practitioner, “What is nonduality?” in the same way that “Sound of One Hand” asks “What is nonduality?” in the language of hands, and “Original Face” asks “What is nonduality?” in the language of faces. But like the “Pai-Chang and the Wild Fox” kōan, the entire story of “A Woman’s True Soul?” can be seen in a quite different context. It

is, says Heine, a well-known ghost tale expressing the theme of duty versus passion (or in Japanese terms, *giri* versus *ninjō*). As a Confucian tale of filial piety, when the daughter followed her selfish desires, she was divided in soul; she became whole again only when she returned to her family as a filial daughter. In this case, we are willing to follow Heine when he says that aside from its use in Zen *kōan* practice, the story has an alternative “mythic and ritual narrative structure” (8) which gives it a second meaning altogether. But as readers, we want to see a complete two-fold analysis for every *kōan*. Granted such a detailed analysis for every *kōan* would multiply the size of this book many times, but there needs to be some stronger evidence provided that all sixty *kōan* have such a two-fold structure and that understanding this two-fold structure is necessary for complete comprehension of the *kōan*.

In asking for a much more comprehensive evidence, I realize that I am asking for something which cannot be provided in a single volume. Heine’s thesis resembles the *honji suijaku* thesis in Japanese religion both in structure and in scale. The claim that Buddhism over many centuries both confronted and then coopted Japanese Shinto is a massive thesis that needs to be argued in a doctrinal context, a ritual context, a local political-historical context, on an art and iconography level, and so on. Heine’s claim that in both China and Japan, Ch’an/Zen confronted a world of superstition and local folk religion which it displaced by cooptation is similarly a massive thesis which needs to be argued in many contexts. Perhaps scholars in the future will look back and identify Heine’s two books, *Shifting Shape*, *Shaping Text* and *Opening a Mountain*, as initiating a new stream in Zen scholarship.

A constant muted element that runs throughout Heine’s commentaries is the voice of Dōgen. Although the *kōan* tends to be associated more with the Japanese Rinzai tradition, which continues to use the *kōan* as the basis of its meditation practice, nevertheless we should not forget that Dōgen, the Japanese founder of the Sōtō sect, was responsible for bringing one version of the *Hekigan-roku* to Japan and that he knew all of its one hundred *kōans* intimately. Not only does Heine give us Dōgen’s reading of a *kōan* case whenever possible, he also includes a Dōgen *kōan*, “Dōgen Disciplines Monk Gemmyō” (182–84). One of the strengths of *Opening a Mountain* is that it is one of the very few books where the Rinzai point of view and Dōgen’s view on a *kōan* are both represented in a balanced way.

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