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# Teasing the Buddha: Colloquial language in the transmission of Chan dialogues in the Song (960-1276)

Qin Yang\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Australian National University – Australia

## Abstract

A disciple of Zhu Xi once asked, "Is lively language Chan or not?" "It is not Chan," Zhu Xi responded, "It is colloquial." For critics of Chan, like Zhu Xi, colloquial language (*su yu*) was a shared resource that was taken and exploited by Chan practitioners. The use of colloquial language had been pervasive in Chan sources compiled since Tang, especially in the genres of transmission records (*deng lu*) and records of sayings (*yu lu*). The use of colloquial language grew especially conspicuous in Song in the recounts of, and comments on, Chan encounter dialogues, known as public/open cases (*gong an*). Produced to train disciples, Chan dialogues were reconstructed as teaching scenarios and started to assume structured forms. To downplay the role of canonical authority, Chan masters in the dialogue usually gave seemingly illogical responses in perplexing utterances. Chan commentators also used a bold exegetical style in a hybrid of lively colloquial language and written commentarial expression. In extreme cases, their approach was romanticized as 'berating the buddhas and accusing the patriarchs' (*he fo ma zu*).[1]

Chan dialogues about Buddhahood, therefore, provide a good case to examine the unique narrative style and linguistic traits in the religious practice of Chan Buddhism. The selection and adaptation of dialogues posed interesting questions about achieving enlightenment through colloquial language. How did colloquial language function to liberate Chan Buddhism from doctrinal authority? And how did they contribute to the transmission of Chan knowledge?

The issues could be investigated in two layers of the Chan commentarial texts. In the first layer, the main dialogues contain straightforward or even vulgar phrases, which were given deep Chan meanings to provoke intense scrutiny and doubt. For example, the question "What is Buddha?" was met with a range of bewildering answers, among which the most provocative were 'three catties of hemp' (*ma san jin*) and 'dry shit-wiper' (*gan shi jue*). And the answer 'no/wu' to the question 'whether or not dogs have Buddha nature' became a critical phrase (*hua tou*) for pondering non-existence. In the second layer, commentators re-interpreted the dialogues with colloquial glosses in an effort to situate their readers in a conversational context. As a result, readers would not only notice the absence of more abstract expressions for imported Buddhist concepts—the likes of consciousness (*shi*), awakening/enlightenment (*jue*), and truth (*di*)-but would also experience constant linguistic shocks from the plethora of native vernacular expressions, such as 'dead man', 'old thief', and 'a sudden hit'.

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\*Speaker

*Foguo Yuanwu chanshi biyan lu* , T.2003, no.48, 139a22.

I am a PhD candidate at the Australian Centre on China in the World, Australian National University. My doctoral thesis examines pictorial forms of canonical scholarship during the Song period, focusing on the use of diagrams (tu ) for the purpose of canonical study and teaching. I am also developing a post-doctoral project about Chan commentaries in the Song, with a focus on linguistic style and commentarial strategy.