

“Dilemma and Dogma in Chan Studies: Further Thoughts on East Asian Buddhism in Later Centuries,” A lecture by Professor Jiang Wu at UBC

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On August 12th 2018, Professor Jiang Wu, Director of the Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Arizona and the winner of the inaugural Tianzhu Book Prize for Excellence in Chan Studies, delivered a lecture on “Dilemma and Dogma in Chan Studies: Further Thoughts on East Asian Buddhism in Later Centuries” at the University of British Columbia. Professor Jiang Wu’s lecture was not only a celebration of the award, but also a part of the closing ceremony for the UBC Intensive Program on Buddhism organized by the Tianzhu Global Network of Buddhist Studies and UBC’s SSHRC-sponsored international and interdisciplinary project on Buddhism and East Asian Religions. The lecture was attended by the Head of the Department of Asian Studies, Ross King; various scholars; and participants of the program.

Professor Wu began his lecture by discussing the research status and difficulties of studying Chan Buddhism. According to Professor Wu, “Chan Buddhism is a difficult subject to study not only because of its apparent use of rhetorical strategies and rejection of theorizing but also because of its involvement in the formation of political, social, and cultural systems in the history of China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and recently in the West as well.” Therefore, Professor Wu pointed out, despite numerous scholars having shown interest in Chan studies, there are still many Chan Buddhist texts and figures in East Asia that have not yet received critical attention.

Professor Wu further explained that the vast amount of primary materials is not the only factor that makes Chan studies difficult. More challenges are created by the constricting nature of existing paradigms, which Chan scholars must constantly work within.

Studies of Chinese Chan in later centuries remains a barren field. It is even overshadowed by studies of contemporary Chinese Buddhism, which have been greatly promoted in recent years. In short, the difficulty of studying Chan or Zen Buddhism in later centuries lies in the fact that a revitalization of Chan Buddhism does not fit in any existing research paradigm, which creates hopeless dilemmas and dogmas.

Professor Wu then shifted his focus to the narrative of the Chan/Zen decline in later centuries. This is a key issue and it is one of the dilemmas he is still facing. He cited and explained famous authors and quotations about Chan Buddhist studies such as Arthur Wright’s *Buddhism in Chinese History*, Heinrich Dumoulin’s *Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China*, Eric Cunningham’s *Zen Past and Present* and

other Japanese works. These books describe the decline of Chinese Buddhism, in particular Chinese Chan/Zen Buddhism, which appeared as a mixture with the Amida cult and the Pure Land practice, and when there were few new movements in Zen monastic life or innovations in doctrinal interpretations.

When mentioning recent books and information, Professor Wu introduced John McRae. At the end of his book *Seeing through Zen*, John McRae talked about how Chan evolved in later periods and in other contexts. Because Chan studies relied so heavily on the “Song-dynasty climax paradigm,” “we would have to evaluate the dynamics of evolution and transmission that govern Chan in later times and other places.” McRae asks, “What were the constraints, and possibilities, placed on the tradition as it developed in post-Song Chan, or in Korea, Japan and Vietnam?” As detailed by Professor Wu, the question remains that if such a post-Song dynasty paradigm exists, we must also consider what premises and assumptions contribute to its creation.

Then Professor Wu reviewed the validity of the popular “constructivist” approach to Chan/Zen studies. The constructivist approach tends to trace the process and provenance of a particular religious phenomenon and reveal its constructive nature enmeshed in complicated social and historical contexts. More importantly, this approach isolated the literary, artistic and ritual components manifested in the tradition without the attempt to link them to a universal “essence” or “noumenon,” which is supposed to characterize the tradition but exists beyond, behind, or above the representation of these components. Professor Wu also discussed its applicability in later periods by re-examining the debate between Hu Shih and D. T. Suzuki in the 1950s. The response of D. T. Suzuki to Hu Shih’s attack is about a question: What is Zen in itself? The “Pure Zen,” according to D. T. Suzuki, is beyond and above history.

In the third part of his talk, Professor Wu shifted to a new topic, “Textual ideal, Textual Double and World 3 Objects,” to demonstrate the major characteristics of Chan Buddhism. “Textual” is a frequently used word in Professor Wu’s research, such as “textual revival,” “textual ideal,” and “textual double.” Through studying the meaning of texts, he hopes to give “Zen-in-itself” a place in the contextualized history and describes it as “a textual ideal.” When mentioning “the textual ideal,” he reminded us that it is contained in the numerous Chan contexts but not in the actual physical life, which explained that the textual ideal can only exist and be experienced in its textual form in relation to the text format and active textual community which interpretes it. To be specific, from a historical perspective, the physical demonstration of such textual ideals can only be seen in certain historical moments when active interpreters, including the monks and pro-Chan literati, “release” the Chan ideal from their textual format and “enliven” these ideals. But if the Zen ideal does exist, where can we find it? This is a question Professor Wu kept asking himself, and his answer is that the textual ideal of “Pure Zen” did exist in the East Asian context as a type of “the textual double” of the reality.

Professor Wu then introduced the intriguing concept of “textual double,” meaning a parallel world created by texts and within texts. To explain the idea that textual double was typically represented in

Chinese civilization, Professor Wu quoted excerpts from the book *Writing and Authority in Early China* by Mark Lewis, “The Chinese empire, including its artistic and religious versions, was based on an imaginary realm created within texts.” Professor Wu stressed that if you understand the classical Chinese texts, then you control the Chinese empire by manipulating her textual double. This concept also transfers to Zen Buddhism because Zen texts played an important role in fostering this kind of textual double which embodied the Zen textual ideal through reading, writing, publishing and disseminating. Here, Professor Wu quoted Bernard Faure who recounted Yanagida Seizan’s visit to the great Haein-sa monastery in South Korea (Haein-sa is the place where the original woodblocks of the Korean Tripitaka are preserved). According to Bernard Faure, Yanagida Seizan made the following remarks about the textual double as he saw it: “The wooden blocks are not just some object. They are one half of the living founder and as such they are waiting for the other half to pay its respects... Each word and phrase of the Zen text is looking for its other half, wants to be united with its reader.” Yanagida Seizan’s comments shed light on the role textual double plays in Chan Buddhism.

Professor Wu further connected the idea of textual double to the concept of “World 3 objects” in the study of Chan Buddhism. He adopted the description of the “Three Worlds” theory proposed by British philosopher Karl Popper. According to Popper, the World 1 is the universe of physical entities or physical states, and World 2 is made up of mental states that interact with World 1 objects and create human actions. World 3 objects are man-made but autonomous and objective. As exemplified by Karl Popper, a book is physical object, and it therefore belongs to World 1; but what makes it a significant product of the human mind is its content - that which remains invariant in the various copies and editions - and this content belongs to World 3. As a result, “Zen-in-itself” belongs to World 3. Moreover, the “objects” in World 3 can be discovered as well. As Bernard Faure stated, “this textual double is not, cannot be, a mere object, it is the ritual shifter which allows the ‘fusion of horizons’ aimed at by any ‘researcher’ worthy of this name.” In line with this reasoning, Professor Wu also quoted great works from other scholars to showcase how a new Chan/Zen historiography is possible.

Professor Wu moved on to Chan Buddhism in the world of seventeenth-century East Asia. This topic has a strong connection to his award-winning book *Leaving for the Rising Sun: Chinese Zen Master Yinyuan and the Authenticity Crisis in Early Modern East Asia*. In this section, Professor Wu elucidated how Chan ideals were revived from Chan texts and expressed as “claims” to the enlightening experience and how we can find these textual ideals as “World 3 objects” at the historical moment of the late seventeenth century. The revival of Chan Buddhism began with the production on printing the Jiaxing canon, whose main section was reprinted as the Ōbaku Tetsugen canon by Yinyuan Longqi’s Japanese disciples. This new canon adopted the string-bound folding book format, which greatly aided in the facilitation of reading and disseminating Chan texts.

Finally Professor Wu talked about several famous monks in seventeenth century, such as Miyun Yuanwu, Feiyin Tongrong, and Yinyuan Longqi. Each of them, claiming to have received the authentic

transmission of Chan Buddhism, are considered to be the founding figures in the Chan Buddhism revival movement. They also greatly impacted Japanese Buddhism because of Yinyuan Longqi's migration to Japan. According to Professor Wu's study, the Chinese monks who arrived in Japan at that time faced the challenge of negotiating between ideal and reality, as well as the irony of their reinvention of Chan Buddhism. On the one hand, they all claimed to be idealized "Chan" masters; on the other hand, the reality was a mixture of the ritualistic monastic traditions. Furthermore, Professor Wu pointed out that something can exist as "Pure Ideal" without its actual existence as long as people share the same ideals. Lastly, Professor Wu showed a map on the distribution of the reinvented Chan tradition in East Asia.

Professor Wu concluded his talk by discussing the methodology of Chan studies. This is especially important because of the constant struggle scholars of religion face due to the tension between insider and outsider, and subjective and objective viewpoints. He cited Bernard Faure's *Chan Insights and Oversights* and Griffith Foulk's recent review of Professor Wu's award-winning book about the methodology of Chan study and showcased how a new Chan historiography is possible. Quoting Griffith Foulk, Professor Jiang Wu stressed the importance of recognizing that the Chinese Chan tradition was "pretty consistent and consistently impressive in the masters it produced, from Song times all the way down through the Ming."