

## Book Reviews

Steven Heine

*Opening a Mountain: Kōans of the Zen Masters.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 200 pages.

In the book under review here, Steven Heine expands his examination of “supernatural” themes in the *kōan* tradition. Heine had focused so far mainly on the famous Fox *kōan*, the second case of Wumen Huikai’s *kōan* collection *Wumenguan* (Gateless Gate) of the thirteenth century, which he treated in a 1996 HJAS article and later in a book-length study *Shifting Shape, Shaping Text: Philosophy and Folklore in the Kōan Tradition* (Honolulu, 2000). This book also continues themes that were treated in the volume *The Kōan – Texts and Contexts in Zen-Buddhism* (Oxford, 2000) which Heine co-edited with Dale S. Wright.

For this volume, the author has collected sixty *kōan* (“cases,” as he calls them), which are presented to the reader under five main headings, “Surveying Mountain Landscapes,” “Contesting with Irregular Rivals,” “Encountering Supernatural Forces,” “Wielding Symbols of Authority and Transmission” and “Confessional Experiences;” each of these sections has a brief introduction. The *kōan* are selected partly from the well-known *kōan* collections of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; besides the *Wumenguan* mentioned above the book cites cases from the *Biyuan lu* (Bluecliff Record), the *Congrong lu* (Record of Serenity) and several collections and writings of Dōgen. In addition, there are quite a number of cases taken from the Chan genealogical chronicle *Jingde Chuandeng lu* and from individual recorded sayings (Dongshan and Linji). In cases where several versions exist, the order of preference seems to be roughly the sequence given above, although we are not informed about details of the selection process, nor about the reasons for selecting a specific version. The cases are presented in two parts, a summary of the *kōan* under consideration (sometimes a complete translation, in other cases just the main case with or without some additional excerpts from other sections of the *kōan*, and occasionally capping phrases are also translated) and a discussion which gives the sources of the *kōan*, background information and an attempt at a short exegesis. All this is preceded by an introduction of thirty-five pages, which is the only part of the book that uses footnotes.

The main theme of the book, as stated in the foreword (p. xiii) is “... [T]he selection of *kōan* cases emphasizing supernatural symbols – such as mountains, animals, and other natural imagery – based on a strict scholarly standard of translation and the citation of appropriate source materials.” I was quite puzzled when I first read this phrase and still have difficulties making out what this is supposed to mean. Mountains, animals and other natural imagery do not quite seem to fit the characterization as “supernatural symbols” that is given here. Nevertheless, “supernatural” certainly is the main keyword, occurring well over a hundred times in this slim volume. It

is used in contexts like “supernatural experiences involving dreams, visions and encounters with gods, demons, and magical animals” (p. xiv) and “key elements of supernaturalism, ritualism, and other mythological and magical features.” (p. 6) Heine comes closest to defining his usage of this term when he mentions that it resembles the “marvelous” used by Jacques LeGoff in his study of medieval Christian literature, encompassing the supranormal and the magical and contrasting with “superstitious” “which manipulates spiritual forces for personal gain.” (p. 8) However, the way the “supernatural” is actually used throughout the volume seems more like a general handle for a tradition of folk beliefs, folk literature and at times even general Chinese cultural symbols such as the dragon. Heine quotes a poem by Wang Wei of which the last lines read “At dusk by the bend of a deserted pond, / A monk in meditation, taming poisonous dragons.” He sees this as an ironic use of supernatural imagery, whereas (as he admits in a footnote) the straightforward interpretation would be to see the dragons as metaphorically representing passions. But even granted this usage, dragons form an integral part of the Chinese cultural setting, woven into the cultural fabric to a degree that the character representing a dragon is given its own radical in most dictionaries. The distinction between what is considered supernatural and what can pass as a natural, daily experience is certainly culturally dependent and should be reflected on more thoroughly somewhere in the book. It does not seem particularly helpful to just apply a modern, western notion of the dichotomy natural/supernatural to texts that are not only separated from us by time and culture and built on a very different understanding of nature, man and their relationship, but also explicitly play against the dichotomies that lay at the foundation of our cultural constructs.

There also seems to be fuzziness with another key term used in this book, “*kōan*” or “*kōan* literature.” While on the one hand Heine places *kōan* literature, as is usually done, in a specific sense within the other genres of Zen literature as a technical term of the twelfth and thirteenth century *kōan* collections (p. 18), at other times, as can be seen from the sources from which he works, he uses *kōan* in a very wide sense which seems to encompass almost all written records from the Zen tradition. This two-fold usage causes the term to drop all of its descriptive functions; thus, as used in the title for the collection presented in this volume, it cannot mean much more than simply “Zen story.” This loses sight of one of the most distinguishing features of *kōan* literature, which is its exact referential function: *kōan* are always performed in a discursive setting, where another episode from the Zen records, or sometimes a quotation from a scripture (the “main case”) is taken up and examined, commented on and otherwise dealt with; in a way *kōan* are like the sparks that emit from the blades of fencing rivals. The *kōan* as a genre of Zen literature developed out of this distinct teaching method of Zen, but it can only be called thus meaningfully if it fulfils the defining characteristics of the genre. While this might seem like a minor academic distinction, it is surprising to see this imprecision in a book that claims to be “based on a strict scholarly standard of translation and the citation of appropriate source materials.” As far as Heine’s source materials are concerned, one is also surprised to find statements such as “many accounts in [the *Jingde Chuandenglu*] were excerpted from the *Song kao-seng chuan*.” (p. 4) In my own reading, I found surprisingly little

overlap between these quite different collections, even for the relatively small number of figures mentioned in both texts.

Another recurring motif of the book is the frequent juxtaposition of contrasting concepts of “regular” and “irregular” practitioners, which has even a separate section to it. Yet Buddhism as a whole and Zen in particular have always recognized many different types of practice and there is no instance or institution that would endorse one specific way as the only regular one. In the golden era of Zen there were multitudes of places for practice, with seekers traveling in between them selecting one to stay in for a while and then moving on to another one. The only valid criterion which was used for deciding to stay was the degree of understanding of the teacher, which was tested in encounter dialogs, some of which made it into the *kōan* collections. In the same way, a teacher had to constantly monitor the progress and development of his students and this again was done through dialogs that have been recorded in some form, describing an atmosphere where insight and attainment could not be taken for granted but had constantly to be proven. While the full details of this picture still have to be scrutinized for historic validity, the overall image seems to be reasonably accurate. In this light, at times Heine’s “supernaturalizing” of events reported in the chronicles seems to go too far. A point in case is *Wumenguan* Case 40, “Guishan kicks over the Water Pitcher” (Case 6 in the present volume). This is a selection story along the lines of the famous contest between Shenxiu and Huineng for the succession after the fifth patriarch Hongren; in this case Baichang must select between his head monk Hua Linjue and his head cook Guishan Lingyou. The chosen one will be sent off to Mount Gui in response to a request from a wandering monk, who is seeking for a suitable person to act as a founding abbot for a new monastery. The mendicant (“irregular monk” in Heine’s terms) called Sima rejects Baichang himself as being not suitable for the job, has a look at the head monk Linjue, who is also rejected, and then settles on Lingyou, a selection that is readily approved by Baichang. What seems like a kind of job interview in the chronicle comes across in this book as a result of “occult arts such as geomancy, divination and physiognomy” (p. 49) in Heine’s words and is presented as a narrative that had been suppressed in the *Wumenguan* version (presumably because of its supernatural elements) and is recovered here “in order to understand [...] [the] *kōan*’s overall meaning and significance.” In the narrative according to the *Jingde Chuandenglu*, which is not translated but only paraphrased by Heine, Hua Linjue feels that he has the right of first choice and challenges Baichang’s decision. Baichang then stages the contest that forms the content of the main *kōan* case, putting up a water pitcher and then asking both of them to define it. Hua Linjue lamely says “It can’t be called a wooden wedge,” whereas Guishan Lingyou overthrows the pitcher and thus wins the contest; this underlines the previous decision. The *kōan* case revolves around this contest; Heine’s explanation involving supernatural and irregular elements does not seem to contribute much to its understanding.

However, be this as it may, these objections do not really diminish what I consider the main value of the book, which is as a thematic collection of Zen stories that deal with confrontations with spiritual forces. As noted, it is sometimes difficult to see how what Heine calls “the two-fold structure” of *kōan* – that is, an additional layer of

reading added to the “conventional understanding” of the traditional *kōan* literature in order to take into account some of the cultural background – contributes to the understanding of the *kōan*; I suggest understanding would better arise from looking at the way *kōan* are used in the daily practice of Zen. Nevertheless this book does seem to be an important step towards reading the Zen records more within the context of the broader cultural environment that generated them. The work will hopefully inspire more thorough investigations of the many themes that have been hinted at, but not developed and analyzed in this book.

Christian Wittern  
Kyoto University

D. Max Moerman

*Localizing Paradise – Kumano Pilgrimage and the Religious Landscape of Premodern Japan.*

Harvard University Asia Center: Cambridge (Mass.) and London 2005. 297 pp.

This book treats the complex of the Three Kumano Shrines (*Kumano sanzan*), the Hongū, Shingū and Nachi, which are located in the southern part of what is called today Wakayama prefecture. This place was, as the author in the beginning writes, “the most visited pilgrimage site in Japan, attracting devotees from across the boundaries of sect, class and gender.” (p. 1) This statement already indicates the importance of the subject introduced here at book length (to my knowledge) for the first time in a Western language. It is a thorough study of the multi-layered phenomenon “Kumano,” which historically developed from a native cosmology to a Buddhist worldview. The book, consisting of five chapters and a conclusion, is richly illustrated with pictures (including color) and maps.

The first chapter “Situating Kumano” introduces the geographical location of the shrines and explains the pilgrimage route between Kyoto and Kumano. It then describes the institutional structures of pilgrimage sites and the shrines as well as their economic basis, i.e. the “religious economy” represented in prayers and donations of land, etc. (p. 23) This chapter also contains an account of the diverse groups involved in pilgrimages, such as itinerant ascetics, abdicated emperors and their entourage, women, and regional communities. Here the author treats the relationship between religious cosmology and society. As in subsequent chapters, he extensively explains the Nachi Pilgrimage Mandala (at the same time a “devotional and promotional” picture) whose composition leads viewers through the sacred precincts of Kumano in a narrative movement and functions like a map. (pp. 26, 34 ff) This mandala contains “multiple perspectives,” depicting the religious places and practices at the same time. (p. 36)

Chapter 2 “Emplacements” traces the history of the Kumano shrines in their development from three local places of indigenous *kami* worship to a single Shinto-Buddhist cult complex. Originally, these shrines were dedicated to deities related to