Chapter 17
Character Is the Way: The Path to Spiritual Freedom in the *Linji Lu*

Tao Jiang

Linji Yixuan (臨濟義玄, d. 866), a famed Chan Buddhist master, personifies the climax of Chinese Chan Buddhism that has come to define later iconoclastic representations of Chan/Zen in Chinese and other East Asian cultures. He has been revered as the last, arguably the most famous and certainly the most colorful, Chan patriarch in the "orthodox" Hongzhou lineage (洪州宗) during the so-called "golden age" of Chan Buddhism in Tang dynasty (618–907). Linji was living in an increasingly tumultuous time as the once powerful Tang dynasty was sliding toward eventual demise, which might have contributed to his martial pedagogical style. He is legendary for his blasphemous and iconoclastic teachings as well as unconventional teaching methods, such as shouting at his disciples and hitting them with a stick, all of which have now become part of the stock images of Chan enlightenment. In the *Linji Lu* (臨濟錄: *Recorded Sayings of Linji*),[1] we can see a lively portrayal–or construction–of such an image. In constructing such an iconic figure, the Chan tradition has cultivated a particular representation of enlightenment and spiritual freedom, and a careful study of the *Linji Lu* can reveal a great deal about the tradition that has constructed and idolized the image of Linji as one of its most celebrated messengers. In this essay, we will look into a salient aspect of the teaching in the *Linji Lu*, the representation of spiritual freedom (or enlightenment) and the central role character plays in its realization.

The *Linji Lu* has been traditionally recognized as the collection of Linji's authentic teachings and the record of his various activities. The text is divided into three

[1] There are three major English translations of the *Linji lu*: Burton Watson's *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi: A Translation of the Lin-chi Lu* (1999), Ruth Fuller Sasaki's *The Record of Linji* (2009), and Jeffrey Broughton and Elise Yoko Watanabe's *The Record of Linji: A New Translation of the Linjilu in the Light of Ten Japanese Zen Commentaries* (2013). I use Sasaki's translation in this essay, with modifications where necessary.

T. Jiang (✉)
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
e-mail: tjiang@rutgers.edu

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segments: discourses (*yulu* 語錄), critical examinations (*kanbian* 勘辨) and record of pilgrimages (*xinglu* 行錄). However, recent scholarship has seriously challenged the traditional wisdom about the text, questioning whether or not it represents the "original" and "authentic" teachings of the patriarch and disputing the "pure" and "spiritual" nature of the teachings. Such scholarly discussions have on the one hand vastly increased our knowledge about the complicated history of Chan Buddhism and the contested nature of well-known Chan texts like the *Linji Lu* while seriously calling into question the viability of a philosophical inquiry into those texts on the other. We will discuss this aspect of the Chan scholarship in more detail.

A further challenge to Chan/Zen philosophy in modern scholarship came from what was known as Critical Buddhism that arose in Japan and garnered a great deal of attention in western scholarship in the 1980s and 90s. The main challenge posed by Critical Buddhism was that the core East Asian Buddhist notion of Buddha Nature 佛性, characterized in Mahāyāna texts like the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* 大般涅槃經 as permanence 常, bliss 樂, self 我, and purity 淨,[2] is inconsistent with the Buddhist orthodoxy that highlights impermanence, emptiness and no-self of existence. As part of the Buddha Nature tradition, much of the Chan/Zen teaching could not escape Critical Buddhism's scathing critiques of its being antithetical to Buddhist orthodoxy in its alleged reification of Buddha Nature. Whether or not the Chan tradition is guilty of reifying Buddha Nature or whether there is indeed a so-called Buddhist orthodoxy are legitimate but separate questions that require careful examinations of each Chan masters' teachings in their respective context as well as an investigation into the very construction of Buddhist orthodoxy in the history of Buddhism and in modern scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, the popularity of Critical Buddhism contributed to the decline of Chan philosophy in recent scholarship.

Under the dual challenge of historicist scholarship and Critical Buddhism, the contemporary discourse has trended away from philosophical inquiries of Chan texts. Therefore, before our philosophical inquiry into the notion of spiritual freedom in the *Linji Lu*, let us take a brief look at some recent development in the scholarly discussions on the text and Chan Buddhism more generally in order to have a better appreciation of its stake on a philosophical discourse on Chan Buddhism.

[2] For example, in Fascicle II of *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the Buddha is portrayed as declaring:

> These [errors] are known as "inversions" and it is by means of them that written letters may function in the world yet their [true] meanings remain unknown. And what are those meanings? "Nonself" [actually] denotes "saṃsāra." "Self" denotes "tathāgata." "Impermanence" denotes "śrāvakas" and "pratyekabuddhas." "Permanence" denotes the "dharma a body of tathāgatas." "Pain" (*duḥkha) denotes "all other paths." Bliss (*sukha) denotes "nirvāṇa" itself. "Impurity" denotes "created dharmas." "Purity" denotes "the true teaching of the buddhas and bodhisattvas." All these are what I call the "noninversions." It is by means of what is not inverted that one can understand the meaning of letters. If you want to separate yourself from the four inversions, you must understand permanence, bliss, purity, and self in this way. (Blum 2013: 59–60)

We will not deal with Critical Buddhism here as it has been covered extensively,[3] whereas the historicist challenge posed to philosophical scholarship by issues concerning textuality and authorship has received inadequate attention.

1 Textual History, Authorship and Chan Philosophy

Contemporary western scholarship of Chan Buddhism has moved away from the earlier Romanticist (and often Orientalist) impulse to idealize the teachings of masters collected in Chan texts through philosophical constructions. Rather, the contemporary discourse has become overwhelmingly historicist, preoccupied with issues pertaining to the partisan and political–as opposed to "true" and "spiritual"–aspects of Chan Buddhist teachings as well as the historical construction of "orthodoxy" in the hands of Chan historiographers and followers of particular lineages. This discourse is dominated by historians who approach Chan texts like the *Linji Lu* with historicist frameworks and methodologies. Such a historicist approach to Chan texts has left very little room for the philosophical discourse in contemporary scholarship that tends to be more presentist and normative, historical contextualization notwithstanding.

In this connection, we can see the seed of historicism sowed in the important debate in the 1950s between Hu Shi 胡適 and D.T. Suzuki 鈴木大拙 on the proper way to understand Chan/Zen. The debate was carried out in the April 1953 issue of *Philosophy East and West*. It began with Hu Shi's article, "Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in China: Its History and Method," followed by Suzuki's "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih." The central issue was historicism versus experientialism in understanding the nature of enlightenment portrayed in Chan.[4] In that debate, Hu forcefully advocated a distinctly historicist approach to the understanding of various Chan representations of enlightenment by situating them within the history of Chinese Buddhism and Chinese thought more generally whereas Suzuki passionately criticized the inadequacy of such an approach for its negligence of the experience of Zen enlightenment as non-dual and history-transcending. Clearly, despite Suzuki's ubiquitous influence in modern Chan/Zen scholarship, more recent Chan/Zen discourse has aligned more with Hu's historicism, to such an extent that there is little scholarly interest in pursuing philosophical inquiry on Chan texts which might not even make scholarly sense any more. Let us look into this interesting phenomenon more closely.

The primary reason for the lack of scholarly interest in Chan Buddhist philosophy has to do with the problematic nature of Chan texts, and this can be seen in two aspects: the lack of an explicit philosophical system in the texts which does not so easily lend themselves to philosophical inquiries without heavy constructions, and

[3] To get some ideas about the debate and responses from some western scholars, see Hubbard and Swanson 1997; King 1995.

[4] I recount this debate in some detail in Jiang 2004.

more seriously the historicist approach to the study of Chinese texts which can effectively explain away the scholarly object of a philosophical inquiry. The first aspect is in line with much of the Chan rhetoric that is disparaging to linguistic expressions and antithetical to scholastic discourses. It is a serious challenge to philosophical explorations of Chan teachings, although that did not prevent earlier scholars from engaging in such an endeavor since anti-language and anti-scholasticism can certainly be philosophically illuminating. However, it is the second challenge that has posed the gravest threat to philosophical inquiries of Chan texts in contemporary western scholarship. As we will see in the following, the historicist approach to Chan texts has essentially left the philosophical project without its scholarly object.

The discovery of Dunhuang 敦煌 manuscripts in early twentieth century has provided a treasure trove of previously unknown historical materials pertaining to Chinese Buddhism from fifth to eleventh centuries including Chan, and its significance to the study of the history of Chinese Buddhism has been increasingly recognized in recent scholarship.[5] In fact, the importance of Dunhuang materials to the study of Chinese Buddhism is comparable to, if not greater than, the significance of Mawangdui 馬王堆 and Guodian 郭店 texts to the study of classical Chinese history and thought. Such a discovery has helped scholars to challenge the established narratives of Chan Buddhism by reconstructing a much more complex and nuanced historical development than what the orthodox Chan history has presented. Furthermore, the methodologies of textual criticism and historical analysis pioneered in modern biblical scholarship have also powerfully influenced contemporary Chan scholarship that attempts to unveil the multilayered and obfuscated nature of texts like the *Linji Lu*.

Contemporary Linji scholarship has been significantly shaped by the works of the famous Japanese scholar Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山 (1922–2006). In his seminal work, *Rinzai roku* 臨済録, Yanagida carefully reconstructs the life of Linji and the evolution of the *Linji Lu* based on available documents at the time.[6] Subsequent scholarship has largely followed Yanagida's lead. The most recent and comprehensive effort to critically examine Linji and the *Linji Lu* is Albert Welter's book, *The Linji lu and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy: the Development of Chan's Records of Sayings Literature*. As Welter's careful study of the *Linji Lu* convincingly demonstrates, the image of Linji in the text is a myth created by the followers of the Linji faction during the Song dynasty. He outlines four stages in the evolution of what would come to be known as the *Linji Lu*:

> In the first place, there is the activity of note taking, a process removed from our view but known to us through the criticisms it generated. This is followed by the compilation and editing of the notes, assumed in the *Linji lu* to be the product of Sansheng Huiran and Xinghua Cunjiang. This stage presumably included the incorporation of different versions,

[5] Interested readers can check out the International Dunhuang Project website (http://idp.bl.uk/idp.a4d) for further details.

[6] Readers can see the English translation of Yanagida's Introduction to his *Rinzai roku* (Yanagida 1961) in Sasaki 2009: 59–115.

> or versions of notes assembled by different hands. The third stage, the first stage for which we have concrete evidence, involves the publication of excerpts or extracts of the edited compilations into *denglu* 燈錄 collections. … The fourth and final stage is the formation of the *Linji lu* proper, a comprehensive *yulu* either as incorporated in the *Sijia yulu* 四家語錄 or as in Yuanjue Zongyan's 圓覺宗演 reedited, standardized version. (Welter 2008: 161)

This clearly shows the complex history of the *Linji Lu* that was not out of the hands of a single person. Nor was it a simple *record* of Linji's teachings and activities. Instead, the text was the result of a long process of textual construction that involved many people across several generations with their complicated motivations and interests.

As a result, we can now see with a much higher degree of clarity that the *Linji Lu* was compiled, fabricated, and redacted at various points in its history. Such scholarly endeavors have convincingly demonstrated the continuing evolution in the construction of Linji's collected sayings as a result of catering to different interests and considerations and addressing different issues and audiences before achieving canonical status in Song dynasty. More specifically, it has shown that political and partisan motivations were often at play in the creation of myth surrounding prominent Chan figures like Linji. This conclusion challenges the "pure" and "spiritual" nature of Chan teachings which has been enshrined in famous Chan rhetoric that portrays the tradition as "mind-to-mind transmission" (以心傳心) and "special transmission outside established doctrines" (教外別傳), etc.

In this connection, Welter observes that Chan's preference for oral over written instruction signaled a shifting locus of spiritual authority in the Chan tradition:

> In effect, the Chan master displaces the classical Buddhist texts, the scriptures and treatises, as the prime arbiter of Buddhist wisdom. The teaching of past buddhas is displaced by that of present Chan patriarchs; Chan oral transmission privileges the living tradition over the received record (i.e., past tradition). (Welter 2008: 162)

Such a shift in turn influenced the way Chan identity was reshaped and Chan orthodoxy was constructed:

> … the dynamic quality of the oral transmission trope, especially as seen in Chan encounter dialogues, provided a new sense of what it meant to be Buddhist. This identity was inscribed in *yulu*, where it became the basis of a new Chan orthodoxy that endures to the present day. The *Linji lu* epitomizes this orthodoxy and illustrates the process through which it came into being. (Welter 2008: 163)

The political implications in all these moves should be abundantly clear, although such an analysis does not necessarily explain away the spiritual lure of Chan teachings in the *Linji Lu*.

The historicist discourse on Linji and the *Linji Lu* has vastly enriched and complicated our understanding of the creation of the text as well as the evolving image of the Chan icon (or iconoclast) portrayed in it. However, it also raises critical questions concerning the viability or even legitimacy of a philosophical approach to a text like the *Linji Lu*, given the fact that it was not the product by a single author but rather the product of people across several generations who brought with them their own intentions and interests. The increasing disassociation between Linji and the

Linji Lu raises profound questions for the possibility of a philosophical discussion of the text due to the central importance of authorship in the philosophical approach to a text that bears his name. As I have argued elsewhere,[7]

> Authorship is more than a matter of whether or not someone is the actual author of a text. Rather, the assumption of a single author makes possible a particular interpretative strategy. That is, when we approach a text, the implicit or explicit assumption of its being composed by a single author sets the boundary of interpretative strategies, in terms of its textual unity and coherence, grounded in the unity of authorial intent and agency, however nebulous they turn out to be. (Jiang 2016: 44)

That is, authorship is not simply a matter of whether someone is the actual author of a text historically, but, perhaps more importantly, also as a function that provides the ground and sets a boundary for philosophical inquiries. Without the ability to attribute a unified intention to a single authorial agent, a text becomes more scattered and its philosophical exploration is rendered groundless.

Accordingly, the image of Linji as an iconoclastic and confrontational Chan patriarch is central to the philosophical understanding of the text that bears his name. Explaining away Linji from the *Linji Lu* would make the text anchorless as a philosophical text. While a historian uses a text to study history, a philosopher is more interested in exploring ideas in it that are grounded in certain historical and cultural context but not reducible to it. This irreducibility can, at least partially, account for the continuing lure of the text beyond its specific historical production and particular cultural milieu.

In order to solve the problem of authorship and textual coherence that is required for a philosophical inquiry, I have proposed (Jiang 2016) that we distinguish historical author from textual author and authorial intent from textual intent when interpreting historically important works like the *Linji Lu*. Historical author and its corollary authorial intent belong to the historical discourse whereas textual author and its corollary textual intent fall within the domain of philosophical discourse. Furthermore, on the related issue of textuality, I propose that we differentiate inherited texts from original texts when studying historically significant texts like the *Linji Lu*, in order to provide an intellectual space for the philosophical approach to pre-modern Chinese texts that focuses on the normative aspect of received texts while respecting the historian's interest in discovering the original texts and all the entailments such endeavors warrant.

Consequently, we have two methodologies to achieve conceptual coherence of a text when confronted with internal tensions: philosophical and historical. Philosophical interpretations of a classical text almost always involve some kind of conceptual reconstruction to produce a coherent philosophical system in order to encapsulate the complexity of the text and find a philosophically compelling way to accommodate its conflicting elements within a larger system by attributing (textual) intent to it. This is viable only when the text is assumed to have a single (textual) author. By contrast, a historian's training and interest more likely incline her to

[7] The rest of the discussion in this section of the current essay is based on the *Dao* article, adapted for the Chan context.

treating the conceptual incoherence as representing voices of different people under different contexts in the history of the text, hence historicizing away the tensions involved. Put simply, in approaching classical texts philosophers tend to build on the idea of a unified authorial agent whereas historians tend to problematize that very idea. Clearly historicizing a text and philosophizing it can be at odds with each other such that the former can deprive the latter of the opportunity to engage philosophically a text that has a complicated compositional history.

In this connection it is important to recognize the fact that historians also utilize the notion of compilers' intent or motivations (e.g., Welter 2008: 9) but frame them primarily in political and partisan terms rather than philosophical and normative ones. Such an approach does not address the issue of the continuing philosophical and spiritual lure of these texts that has taken on a life of their own, independent of their historical originations.

The roles played by historians in the contemporary philosophical interpretations of classical texts like the *Linji Lu* can be summed up in terms of the following three kinds. First, it offers important historical, intellectual and linguistic contexts to the texts, and let us call this the preparer. Second, it questions the premise of the philosophical approach by challenging the coherence and the authorship of the texts, the challenger. Third, and somewhat ironically, it sometimes also offers scholars of philosophy an easy escape when faced with difficult conceptual tensions in a text, the jailbreaker. That is, historical maneuvers can offer a useful or even convenient tool when scholars of philosophy are confronted with philosophically difficult issues since they can always appeal to historical specifics, like historical vicissitudes of the text, to explain away the problems. The latter two roles played by the historical discourse can undermine the integrity, or even legitimacy, of the philosophical approach to Chan texts and scholars of Chan Buddhist philosophy need to have a clear-eye view of the stakes involved.

It is, nevertheless, important to recognize the constructive role of historical discourse in the philosophical exploration of Chan texts, as the preparer. That is, historical knowledge prepares the necessary historical, intellectual and linguistic contexts for the philosophical approach to Chan texts. It is neither possible nor desirable for scholars of Chan philosophy to completely ignore historical scholarship, due to the peculiar status of Chan Buddhist philosophy in contemporary discourse, situated between history and philosophy. There is no escape from history if one wants to study the Chan texts philosophically with proper cultural and intellectual sensibility, even though a scholar of Chan philosophy does not have to engage in the historicist *discourse* per se. The more historical knowledge a scholar has, the more culturally rich and grounded her philosophical interpretations of inherited Chan texts can be. But scholars of Chan Buddhist philosophy should not keep their eyes off the primary objective of their endeavors, namely the philosophical integrity and implications of a large body of texts whose conceptual universes have shaped the Chinese Buddhist cultural and intellectual outlooks. Given the dominance of historicism in the contemporary scholarly discourse on Chan Buddhism, scholars of Chan philosophy need to carefully weigh historical evidence

against the potentials for philosophically creative explorations of a text such that philosophical interests are not completely marginalized by historical concerns when it comes to the interpretations of Chan texts.

In recent years, contemplative studies has emerged as an innovative way to explore contemplative theories and practices in the world's spiritual traditions, especially their phenomenological and experiential dimensions, within the context of contemporary secular academic setting. Chan Buddhist tradition, with its singular focus on meditation, certainly has a good deal to contribute to such a discourse. It would be unfortunate that the rich Chan resources are explored only in its political and historical dimensions but not its philosophical and phenomenological aspects, doing injustice to both the tradition in Asia and its modern practitioners in the west.

With these considerations in mind, let us now turn to the second task of this essay, namely a philosophical inquiry into Linji's teaching on the relationship between spiritual freedom and personal character. At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that the primary audience of Linji's teaching was Buddhist practitioners, mostly Chan monastics, who had already embraced the Buddhist ideal of enlightenment (and its various expressions) as the ultimate goal of their practices. Only within such a context can the radical aspect of Linji's teaching make sense and be properly evaluated. The rest of this essay treats the *Linji Lu* as an inherited text and is an attempt to construct a coherent understanding the relationship between personal character and spiritual freedom in the *Linji Lu* by attributing a unified textual intent to the textual author of Linji as portrayed in the text.

2 Character Is the Way in the *Linji Lu*

Linji is known for his teaching on the true person with no rank or position (無位真人), an enlightened person of genuine spiritual freedom (自由, 自在 or 解脫) who is unfettered by various traps in both the mundane (凡) and sacred (聖) realms.[8] The main challenge to achieving spiritual freedom for Linji is the overcoming of attachment, which is a major theme within the larger Buddhist tradition. However, it is interesting to note that Linji does not appear to target our attachment to the

[8] Contemporary scholarship has questioned the veracity of such Chan/Zen rhetoric of freedom by pointing out the all-pervasive hierarchical structure of the traditional Chinese society as well as Buddhist monasteries. As Dale Wright points out, "Collective labor, collective meditation, collective meals, collective *dharma* discussions, collective sleeping arrangements – all of these came to be institutionalized with the new codes [namely, the 'Pure Regulations' of Chan monastic life (清规) adopted in the Song Dynasty], thus possibly giving Zen a more thorough 'collective' character than any previous form of Buddhism. Virtually no dimension of Zen monastic life depended upon individual preference and personal decision making. Freedom, in the form of autonomy at least, was not an important consideration. … Nevertheless, in the midst of this 'community of constraint,' 'freedom' came to be an essential defining feature of the community's purpose" (Wright 1998: 123). I will not get into the institutional aspect of Linji's teachings in this essay.

(illusion of) self. The "signature" Buddhist doctrine of no-self (*wuwo* 無我) does not feature prominently in his teaching. In fact, the word *wuwo* (P. *anattā*; S. *anātman*), ubiquitous in Buddhist texts, does not even appear in the *Linji Lu*.[9] His main concern is often discussed in terms of the struggle between a host (*zhu* 主) and a guest (*bin* 賓 or *ke* 客)[10] or between a person (*ren* 人) and the surroundings/circumstances (*jing* 境).[11]

My argument here is that for Linji the key to overcoming attachment lies in building a strong character. That is, only those Chan practitioners with a strong character can weather the grueling demand of the arduous spiritual journey prescribed in the Buddhist teachings. This aspect of Linji's teaching resonates strongly with the saying, "character is destiny," traditionally attributed to Heraclitus. Therefore I describe Linji's teaching as advocating that "character is the Way,"[12] wherein the Way (*dao* 道) refers to the path of enlightenment, so as to highlight this unique dimension in his teaching that clearly stands out within the Buddhist tradition.

Character in everyday parlance usually means a set of mental and moral qualities that distinguish one person from another. In the context of this essay, character refers to the part of personal quality that manifests itself spontaneously when a person is under pressure or caught in an unexpected situation, since a spontaneous response to an unexpected challenge is the most revealing indicator of one's character traits. The *Linji Lu* is full of vivid descriptions of unexpected situations Linji creates by putting his disciples on the spot when he demands an immediate response to a question arising on that occasion. What is interesting is Linji's demand of immediacy in response without giving the disciple time to think it through.

Within the Chan context, immediacy is almost always associated with the teaching of sudden enlightenment (*dunwu* 頓悟), enshrined as the Chan orthodox. However, such an automatic linkage can stifle other lines of inquiry, hence limiting and impoverishing the potential for us to explore other possibilities. Here we explore the significance of immediacy in a different direction by probing its connection with a Chan practitioner's character. The kinds of character traits that are typically

[9] This can be explained either as a case of the shift away from being primarily preoccupied with self-attachment (*wo zhi* 我執) to being more concerned with attachment to *dharma* (*fa zhi* 法執) in Mahāyāna Buddhism to which Linji belongs or as an instance of the rather complicated history of the doctrine of no-self in Chinese Buddhism which did not feature prominently until much later, unlike its preeminence from the very beginning in Indian Buddhism (cf. Zürcher 2007: 11–12). The *Linji Lu* is clearly more concerned with attachment to *dharma* even though the terms of neither self-attachment nor attachment to *dharma* is explicitly invoked.

[10] This is what later came to be known as the "Fourfold Relation of Guest and Host" (*si binzhu* 四賓主) in Linji's teaching.

[11] This is the focus of Linji's famous pedagogy laid out in the text that deals with the intricate relationship between a person (*ren* 人) and *jing*, known as the Four Classifications (*si liaojian* 四料揀 or 四料簡).

[12] This is also a way to differentiate Linji's teaching from his Dharma predecessor Mazu Daoyi's 馬祖道一 famous teaching "ordinary mind is the Way" (*pingchang xin shi dao* 平常心是道) while appreciating their continuity.

shown, when one is challenged, include tepidity, resignation, passivity, defiance, confidence or forcefulness, etc. In this connection, Linji's demand for an immediate response from his disciples under any circumstances can be interpreted as Linji's prodding of them to demonstrate how much of the Buddhist learning has been integrated into their character such that their learning could be demonstrated in the way they perform spontaneously and confidently in the face of any challenge.

This line of inquiry that links immediacy with character is reminiscent of Mencius' teaching on our spontaneous compassion toward a child who is on the verge of falling into a well as an indication of our natural moral inclinations. Immediacy in one's response to a situation reveals the most authentic aspect of the person, one's true character. Similarly, for Linji true Buddhist learning and practice is one through which a practitioner's character is transformed, reflected in the very way one carries oneself under unexpected or trying circumstances. His goal is to train his disciples so that they can develop a strong character and engage the world confidently and dynamically under challenge or duress.

Within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, to which Chan Buddhism belongs, such a quality is one of six major virtues cultivated in the spiritual practice, namely the perfection of vigor or energy (S. *vīryapāramitā*; C. 精進波羅蜜), the others being the perfections of generosity, morality, tolerance, meditation and wisdom. This particular virtue has a special place among the virtues celebrated in Mahāyāna Buddhism. As Dale Wright explains,

> The first three – generosity, morality, tolerance – are appropriate practices for anyone. The final three, however, – energy, meditation and wisdom – operate at a higher level of spiritual awareness and therefore tend to be the focus of monks, nuns, and others who given priority in their lives in spiritual practice and insight. At this point in the practice, high levels of energy are required to undertake the practices of concentration and meditation prescribed in the fifth perfection, and in order to sustain the transformation in personal orientation experienced through insight and wisdom in the sixth. (Wright 2009: 137)

In other words, *vīryapāramitā* is situated right at the pivot to the more demanding and spiritual phase of the Buddhist practice, especially for those monastics who are singularly devoted to achieving spiritual freedom promised in Buddhism. *Vīrya* used to mean the power and virility of a warrior in the earlier Brahmanic context, and the Buddhists appropriated it for their spiritual project:

> Early Buddhist texts referred to the Buddha himself as a *vīra*, a great hero, the one who was victorious over the forces of evil–Mara–and whose spiritual achievements would transform the world. For Buddhists, therefore, *vīrya* meant the energy of accomplishment, the effort, courage, and power to see spiritual endeavor through to its completion. *Vīryapāramitā* is the perfection of this energy, the power of unyielding commitment to the ultimate goal of universal awakening. (Wright 2009: 138)

Linji's apparent touting of *vīryapāramitā* (without using the term) is a clear indication that he treats the Buddhist project of spiritual freedom as a fierce battle against illusion and attachment that demands a forceful character and vigorous practice. The martial quality of Linji's teaching has been duly noted within the Chan/Zen

tradition,[13] which might explain Linji's singling out *vīryapāramitā* in his discussion of character training, rather than treating it as part of the six virtues acclaimed in the Mahāyāna tradition.

Linji's eagerness to help his disciples build a strong character is palpable throughout the text. The following passage is one such example:

> Followers of the Way, if you want to accord with *fa*, just be men of great resolve. If you just shilly-shally spinelessly along, you're good for nothing. Just as a cracked jug is unfit to hold ghee, so he who would be a great vessel must not be taken in by the deluded views of others. Make yourself master everywhere, and wherever you stand is the true [place]. (Sasaki 2009: 16, with modifications)

Here Linji speaks like a general who is training his disciples to strengthen their resolve and stiffen their spine so that they can engage in the demanding endeavor of spiritual practice. The Buddhist enlightenment project requires vigor and firmness in a practitioner's understanding and practice such that one would not be easily swayed by others. The expression "make yourself the master everywhere and authenticate your stand anywhere" (隨處作主, 立處皆眞) is a crucial teaching in the *Linji Lu*, as it is repeated in the following passage:

> Just make yourself master of every situation, and wherever you stand is the true [place]. No matter what *jing*s come they cannot dislodge you [from there]. Though you bear the influence of past delusions or the karma of [having committed] the five heinous crimes, these of themselves become the ocean of emancipation. (Sasaki 2009: 12, with modifications)

Here Linji is unequivocally clear that a Chan practitioner's firmness can transform delusion or karma into emancipation. Within the context of Linji's teaching, this means that practitioners need to cultivate a confident and forceful character that enables them to confront their attachments on both the mundane and the spiritual dimensions, instead of being bulldozed by powerful karmic forces or deceptive illusions. In this connection, Linji's main targets are the entrapments of a practitioner by *jing* 境[14] and by reified spiritual icons represented by the Buddha 佛, patriarchs 祖 and *fa* 法.[15] Let us take a closer look at these two entrapments as they are discussed in the text.

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[13] As Yamada Mumon observes:

> Rinzai Zen is distinguished from the other Zen schools by its brusque and somewhat martial disposition. Its central concern is "the person who is master in all places," whose effortless activity is a giving and taking away, creating and annihilating absolutely at will, with the "sword that kills, and the sword that gives life." This is one reason the school has been given the label "Shōgun Zen," and no doubt also accounts for the great success it enjoyed in the past among the samurai classes of Japan. (Yamada 2009: vii.)

[14] The Sanskrit term for *jing* is *viṣaya*, meaning sphere or object.

[15] *Fa* is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *dharma* (Pāli: *dhammā*). *Dharma* is a ubiquitous term in Buddhism (as well as in Indian religious and philosophical traditions). It can mean the teachings of the Buddhism, objects, or the irreducible constituent of the world, to name just a few. Within the *Linji Lu*, *fa* usually refers to the Buddha's teachings and the reality they depict. We will discuss this in greater detail later in the essay.

The first major trap Linji constantly refers to is *jing*, usually translated as circumstances, conditions, or surroundings. It can be divided into two broad categories: past and present. Past *jing* refers to karma; it points to the fact that we are the products of karma and continue to be conditioned by the past (Sasaki 2009: 12). Present *jing*, which is the focus of the text, refers to the psychophysical constituent of the human existence:

> The grosser part of you is at the mercy of [the four elements:] earth, water, fire, and wind; the subtler part of you is at the mercy of the four phases: birth, being, decay, and death. Followers of the Way, you must right now apprehend the state in which the four elements [and four phases] are formless, so that you may avoid being buffeted about by *jing*. (Sasaki 2009: 14, with modifications)

The four elements of earth, water, fire and wind are the traditional categories in the Buddhist discourse on the physical world. Here they refer to the constituents of the human body as well as its different phases. To overcome the entanglement by the four elements, a practitioner should strive to see their formlessness, synonymous with the famous Mahāyāna doctrine of emptiness that points to the insubstantiality and the thoroughly conditioned nature of all existence, including human existence.

In the next passage, Linji expands the four elements to encapsulate mental activities by correlating them with specific mental phenomena:

> Someone asked, "What is the state in which the four elements [and four phases] are formless?"
>
> The master said, "An instant of doubt in your mind and you're obstructed by earth; an instant of lust in your mind and you're drowned by water; an instant of anger in your mind and you're scorched by fire; an instant of joy in your mind and you're blown about by wind. Gain such discernment as this, and you're not turned this way and that by *jing*; making use of *jing* everywhere—you spring up in the east and disappear in the west, spring up in the south and disappear in the north, spring up in the center and disappear at the border, spring up at the border and disappear in the center, walk on the water as on land, and walk on the land as on water.
>
> "How is this possible? Because you have realized that the four elements are like dreams, like illusions. Followers of the Way, the *you* who right now is listening to my discourse is not the four elements; this *you* makes use of the four elements. If you can fully understand this, you are free to go or to stay [as you please]. (Sasaki 2009: 14–15, with modifications)

The four elements are expanded to include both the physical and the psychological constituents of human beings. Therefore, *jing* in the *Linji Lu* refers to both bodily and mental aspects of human existence. According to Linji, the key to dealing with the *jing* is to cultivate a strong character that can withstand our emotional volatility and train one's mind to be so agile and detached that it is not ensnared in any state associated with the four elements, i.e., the mental state of doubt with the element of earth, lust with water, anger with fire, and joy with wind. Indeed, a person with such a mind and character is the master of one's *jing*, not its slave. A practitioner with such a strong character and a nimble mind is a person of freedom–free to go or stay as one pleases–who does not reify or attach to any of those states and is in the state of formless (無相境).

The second trap problematized in the *Linji Lu* pertains to various forms of spiritual attachment in a Chan practitioner's practices, i.e., scriptural studies and

meditation. With regards to scriptural studies, to be a Chan Buddhist obviously requires one to follow the examples set by the Buddha and the patriarchs as well as their teachings. However, those Buddhist icons and ideals can themselves be reified and become objects of attachment, as is argued brilliantly by Nāgārjuna in his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. From Linji's perspective, committed Chan followers can become slavish to Chan teachings, which is antithetical to the Buddhist project of enlightenment and spiritual freedom. Linji dismisses reified Buddhist teachings as "the words of some dead old guy" (Sasaki 2009: 27) and ridicules those who are attached to them as "blind idiots" (*ibid.*). Clearly, for Linji rote learning and scholastic deftness are inadequate as far as achieving spiritual freedom is concerned. The cognitive and discursive approach to Buddhist teachings reifies those teachings by turning them into objects to be studied and memorized. Learning in such a fashion might enable practitioners to engage in sophisticated conceptual games but they would inevitably fall short in performing enlightenment in a pressing real-life context.

Indeed, a striking feature of Linji's teaching in the text is that he, more often than not, privileges character over cognition. He devotes much of his teaching to training his disciples how to act spontaneously, rather than how to think thoroughly. The rationale for such a focus on the performative, instead of the cognitive, aspect of spiritual freedom is laid out in the following passage:

> The moment a student blinks his eyes he's already way off. The moment he applies his mind, he's already differed. The moment he arouses a thought, he's already deviated. But for the man who understands, it's always right here before his eyes. (Sasaki 2009: 252)

From Linji's perspective, to think is to objectify. That is, the cognitive approach to Buddhist teachings easily results in objectifying those teachings, which can mislead practitioners in their pursuit of spiritual freedom. In light of our argument here, we can interpret Linji as stating that as long as one has to think about how to handle a situation in light of some Buddhist doctrines, those teachings have not yet been integrated into one's character. One's character is indicative of one's way of being in the world that spontaneously manifests itself in the way one performs in any situation. This means that for Linji enlightenment is more than enlightened cognition. Rather, it is enlightened performance, grounded in an enlightened character, marked by courage, confidence and detachment, that spontaneously manifests itself in a Chan practitioner's engagement with the world, especially under challenging circumstances.

Such a singular focus on the practitioners' character is also evident in Linji's teaching on meditation. The practice of meditation is widely recognized as being central to the Chan project of spiritual freedom. However, as Linji sees it, the misunderstanding of meditation is rampant among Chan practitioners. Accordingly, many people mistake all the prescribed postures of the seated meditation–sitting down cross-legged with one's back against a wall, tongue glued to the roof of one's mouth, completely still and motionless–as the quintessential practice of Chan. He dismisses all of them as misguided as they direct practitioners toward obsessing over the external form (Sasaki 2009: 24–25). For him, Chan practice is about

transforming a practitioner's character, not the particular bodily posture or meditation-induced visions. Linji's emphasis on the cultivation of a set of forceful character traits through meditation is an interesting contrast with the traditional Buddhist teaching that focuses more on the cognitive aspect.

Focusing on the cognitive dimension of meditation in one's Chan practice, for Linji, can easily lead to the reification of various kinds of visions. Linji sternly warn Chan practitioners of the grave danger posed by meditation-induced hallucinations (S. *māra*; C. 魔). In certain advanced meditative states, a practitioner can sometimes have a powerful experience of catching a glimpse of Buddhist icons like the Buddha or Chan patriarchs. Given the intensely meaning-charged nature of these icons for a Chan Buddhist, a practitioner can easily mistake such experiences in a meditative state as signs of enlightenment whereas they are actually manifestations of subtler reification and attachment at a more advanced level of the spiritual journey.

Clearly, the extraordinarily demanding nature of Chan meditation practice means that it is not for those with a weak character since they can be easily seduced and misled by certain images seen in meditation, especially those of the Buddha or Chan patriarchs, whereas all such images should be dismissed as *māra*. This is critical in cultivating detachment to Buddhist icons that is at the heart of Linji's teaching against attachment to Buddhist icons and images, a particularly potent kind of attachment for a committed Chan follower:

> Someone asked, "What is Buddha-*māra*?"
>
> The master said, "One thought of doubt in your mind is *māra*. But if you realize that the ten thousand *fa*s never come into being, that mind is like a phantom, that not a speck of dust nor a single thing exists, that there is no place that is not clean and pure—this is Buddha. Thus Buddha and *māra* are simply two states, one pure, the other impure.
>
> "In my view there is no Buddha, no sentient beings, no past, no present. Anything attained was already attained—no time is needed. There is nothing to practice, nothing to realize, nothing to gain, nothing to lose. Throughout all time there is no other *fa* than this. 'If one claims there's a *fa* surpassing this, I say that it's like a dream, like a phantasm.' This is all I have to teach. (Sasaki 2009: 12–13, with modifications)

Interestingly Linji appears to take two conflicting positions on the relationship between Buddha and *māra* here. In the first paragraph Linji characterizes the Buddha and the demon (*māra*) as two states of mind, pure and impure respectively. On the other hand, he dismisses even the Buddha and argues that all is empty in the second paragraph. One way to account for the apparent inconsistency is, following Nāgārjuna's famous teaching of two truths (二諦) widely known among Chinese Buddhists, that the first passage explains Buddha-*māra* from the perspective of conventional truth, which separates the Buddha from *māra*, whereas the second passage explains it from the perspective of ultimate truth since both Buddha and *māra* are conventional constructs (all constructs are conventional) and are ultimately empty. In other words, any image experienced in meditative state is *māra* and only imagelessness and formlessness is the state of enlightenment wherein all reifications, gross and subtle, are overcome.

Such an interpretation is consistent with Linji's advice to cut off representations of spiritual enlightenment, i.e., the Buddha, the patriarchs and arhats, as well as

objects of mundane affection, i.e., parents and kinsmen. The following signature passage cements Linji as the ultimate iconoclast[16] in the Buddhist tradition:

> Followers of the Way, if you want insight into *fa* as it is, just don't be taken in by the deluded views of others. Whatever you encounter, either within or without, slay it at once. On meeting a buddha slay the buddha, on meeting a patriarch slay the patriarch, on meeting an arhat slay the arhat, on meeting your parents slay your parents, on meeting your kinsman slay your kinsman, and you attain emancipation. By not cleaving to things, you freely pass through. (Sasaki 2009: 22, with modifications)

In other words, the two hurdles, i.e., attachments to both mundane and spiritual objects, need to be overcome in order to attain spiritual freedom promised in Linji's Chan teachings. Given the centrality of meditation in Chan practice, misunderstanding meditative experiences is an easy trap to fall into. It is critically important for Chan practitioners to be unwavering and resolute in the recognition that true enlightenment is formless and cannot be reified or attached to: "true buddha has no figure, true *fa* has no form" (Sasaki 2009: 20, with modifications). The rather violent rhetoric in the above passage is obviously not to be taken literally, but should be taken as reflective of Linji's wariness of the seductiveness of meditation-induced experiences that can be easily reified and clung to as signs of enlightenment. As I have argued elsewhere,

> What is central to Linji's teaching is that true awakening is to transform this very *structure* of attachment, not just to substitute one set of attached objects for another. An attachment to "spiritual" objects does not, ultimately speaking, make the attachment better, since what is changed is simply the object of attachment while the underlying structure of attachment remains firmly entrenched and intact. Much of Linji's teaching, as recorded in the *Linji Lu*, is geared toward helping his devout disciples to transform this structure of attachment. (Jiang 2011: 259)

To overcome attachment to spiritual ideals and to transform the underlying structure of attachment have to be extraordinarily difficult for Buddhist practitioners since those Buddhist icons and ideals represent the very fabric and structure of Buddhist spiritual universe that gives meaning to the Buddhist practices.

Therefore, to transcend a practitioner's attachment to the representations of Buddhist enlightenment and mundane affection requires a strong character that can persevere in the course of the inevitably traumatic spiritual transformation, analogous to the overturning of one's world: "Heaven and earth could turn upside down and he wouldn't have a doubt; the buddhas of the ten directions could appear before him and he wouldn't feel an instant of joy; the three hells could suddenly yawn at his feet and he wouldn't feel an instant of fear" (Sasaki 2009: 20). Here Linji is pointing out that Chan practices are riddled with terrifying as well as seductive experiences wherein one's established sense of self and the world would be turned upside down.

[16] Youru Wang, in his 2012 article "Paradoxicality of Institution, De-Institutionalization and the Counter-Institutional: A Case Study in Classical Chinese Chan Buddhist Thought," critiques the characterization of Chan as iconoclastic in contemporary scholarship. He introduces a new paradigm of de-institutionalization to interpret the Chan attitude toward institution, inspired by Derrida's idea of the counter-institutional. Here I am not problematizing the category of iconoclasm in characterizing Linji's Chan teaching.

Without a strong character a Buddhist practitioner can be easily overwhelmed by such grueling and demanding practice. A strong character provides a secure anchor for a practitioner to explore perilous aspects of spiritual practices that are unavoidable in one's spiritual journey. Clearly, enlightened character, marked by courage, confidence, and detachment, is at the heart of Linji's project of spiritual freedom.

3 Conclusion: Chan's Character Turn

In this essay we have attempted to explore an alternative interpretation of the core teaching in the *Linji Lu*, namely spiritual freedom, by reframing it in terms of its connection with a practitioner's character. In so doing, we hope to highlight a unique aspect of Linji's Chan teaching. That is, enlightenment is more about a practitioner's character than just their cognition.

Cognition occupies much of the Buddhist scholastic discourse in both India and China. Much of scholastic Buddhism is devoted to highly sophisticated, meticulous, and at times tedious, deliberations on the nature and activities of the deluded mind in terms of its various reifying operations. Discussions on the transformation of a practitioner's character are marginalized by the overwhelming emphasis on the cognitive aspect of the mind from delusion to enlightenment. The essay is meant to redress the inadequate attention given to this important dimension in the Buddhist practice, most saliently represented in the *Linji Lu*. In other words, Chan practice, at least in the case of *Linji Lu*, can be more fruitfully understood as focusing on the transformation of a practitioner's character rather than highlighting the cognitive aspect of the spiritual pursuit.

In an important sense, the person of Linji as portrayed and constructed in the *Linji lu* is the very message of the text. As we pointed out at the beginning of this essay, Linji is an iconoclast in the Buddhist tradition. His character is that of courage, confidence, and detachment. The teachings presented in the text bear an unmistakable mark of a person with such a character. By contrast, much of the received Buddhist tradition puts a higher premium on the cognitive aspect of enlightenment. In this respect, Linji can be seen as solidifying a new direction in the history of Chinese Buddhism, already signaled in the (constructed) figure of Huineng 慧能, the famous sixth patriarch of Chan, in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. That is, Linji and the Chan discourse of spiritual freedom he engaged in crystalize a character turn already underway in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, against the heavily cognitivist and intellectualist orientation in the more traditional Buddhist scholastic discourse. By putting an emphasis on character in his discussion of spiritual freedom, Linji highlights the central role character plays in the Buddhist project that sees spontaneous and confident performance in dealing with trying circumstances as the best indicator of an enlightened person, rather than the ability to engage in sophisticated conceptual deliberations that dominates much of Buddhist scholasticism. This reorientation toward character would have far-reaching consequences in the subsequent Chinese intellectual development beyond the Buddhist circles. But that topic would have to be left for another occasion.

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Tao Jiang is Associate Professor in the Religion Department at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick. His primary research interest is Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, classical Chinese philosophy, and comparative philosophy. He is the author of *Contexts and Dialogue: Yogācāra Buddhism and Modern Psychology on the Subliminal Mind* (University of Hawai'i Press) and the co-editor of *The Reception and Rendition of Freud in China: China's Freudian Slip* (Routledge). He is finishing a monograph on the origins of moral thinking in early China while working on several other long-term projects that include Linji's Chan Buddhist philosophy and Buddha Nature in Chinese Buddhism. He co-directs the Rutgers Workshop on Chinese Philosophy and co-chairs the Neo-Confucian Studies Seminar at Columbia University. He was chair of the Religion Department at Rutgers University and is currently serving on the Program Committee of the American Academy of Religion.