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NEITHER STRAIGHT NOR CROOKED: POETRY AS PERFORMATIVE DIALECTICS IN THE FIVE RANKS PHILOSOPHY OF ZEN BUDDHISM



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In traditional and popular accounts, Zen Buddhism is depicted as a practice that rejects literary study and intellectualization in favor of a direct experience of enlightenment that is beyond words. Indeed, the Zen school has traditionally defined itself as a “separate transmission outside the teachings, not dependent on words and letters” (教外別傳/不立文字). Even when regarding the tradition’s literary output, Zen literature is famous for its antinomian dialogues replete with outrageous antics, frequent non sequiturs, and crude, illiterate utterances that appear to validate the perspective that Zen simply rejects logical thinking, rational discourse, literary cultivation, and any systematic means of study. While it is true that Zen literature emphasizes the practical over the theoretical, privileges silence over words, and is severely critical of logical descriptions of reality, failure to account for the dialectical underpinnings of Zen literature obscures the tradition’s philosophical commitments and engagements. Zen may be critical of language, theoretical abstractions, and logical formulations, but this criticism is necessarily expressed verbally, within a literature rooted in the dialectics of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. Rather than adopt the modes of discursive philosophical analysis and elaboration, the Zen tradition has preferred oral dialogue, performative utterances, and symbolic language. Yet, its literature does explicitly address numerous philosophical ideas. This is especially evident in the poetry composed by Zen masters that began to be collected in increasing numbers within “recorded sayings” (*yulu* 語錄) and other Zen literature in Song dynasty (960–1279) China. These poetry collections contain numerous imagistic verses composed to elucidate key Buddhist doctrinal concepts and elaborate on theoretical frameworks particular to the Zen tradition. They thus serve as a valuable resource for analyzing Zen philosophy, along with more often cited sermons, dialogues, and *kōan* 公案 (Chin. *gong’an*) cases.

In this article, I analyze a poetic series composed by the influential and prolific Song dynasty Zen master Hongzhi Zhengjue 宏智正覺 (1091–1157) on “The Five Ranks” (*wuwei* 五位), one of Zen’s most sophisticated philosophical schemes, in order to illustrate why poetry is a preferred mode of discourse for expressing the dialectical relationship between conventional and ultimate truths (the Two Truths of Mahāyāna philosophy) in Zen

literature. I first provide an overview of the Five Ranks and its general significance in terms of Zen philosophy and literature. I then provide a close reading of Hongzhi's poetic series as necessary to illustrate the function and variety of its literary techniques for illuminating Mahāyāna dialectics. In doing so, I offer an original explanation of the logical differences between the ranks and their overall progression by clarifying the dialectical relationship in each according to the Five Ranks' terminology, as well as the paradigm of yin-yang complementary opposites that pervades the imagery and structure of the poetic series.¹ Through the analysis of Hongzhi's verses, I argue that poetry serves two crucial functions: (1) it employs literary techniques to convey the dialectical philosophy of the Five Ranks by creating multiple levels of non-dual relationships, and (2) the poetry itself performs an integration of the ultimate and conventional.

Victor Sōgen Hori has previously analyzed the ways in which Zen language is performative in the context of *kōan* literature. According to Hori, *kōan* dialogues offer concrete examples of non-duality that engage both performative and descriptive levels of language.² In contrast to the vernacular utterance and non-verbal action typical of *kōan*, the doctrinal verses of Zen masters investigated here represent a more sophisticated literary performance that reveals the erudite side of Zen training and literature often obscured on the surface. The aim of the Five Ranks verses themselves is to embody the ultimate within the conventional realm of dualistic and relative language. In other words, instead of simply rejecting the adequacy of language and logic, Zen doctrinal poetry expresses the ineffability and irrationality of reality within a refined verbal discourse based in the logic of Buddhist dialectics.

1. The Philosophy of the Five Ranks

The Five Ranks represent one of Zen's most elaborate philosophical frameworks, and the scheme is clearly dialectical in nature. The Five Ranks consist of five possible relationships between the "straight" (*zheng* 正) and "crooked" (*pian* 偏), semi-imagistic terms that thinly veil their philosophical import. The term "straight" refers to that which is absolute and ultimate, while "crooked" refers to the particular—that which is conventional and relative. As explained by Caodong lineage master Caoshan Benji 曹山本寂 (840–901), "The rank of the straight is the realm of emptiness, where originally there is not a thing. The rank of the crooked is the realm of form, where the myriad shapes and objects exist."³ Although Zen masters from various lineages have written about the Five Ranks scheme in their discourses, it is strongly associated with Hongzhi's Caodong (Jpn. Sōtō) lineage, since it is originally attributed to the lineage founder Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (807–869). Poetry is also central to the transmission of the

Five Ranks, as the scheme has been primarily expressed through poetry, rather than discursive analysis and expository discourse.⁴ The original and foremost expression of the doctrinal scheme is deemed to be Dongshan's poetic verses on the Five Ranks. Dongshan composed a verse on each rank, conveying its import through imagery and metaphor, and these verses were frequently imitated by masters from various lineages. Although there are numerous exegetical commentaries on the Five Ranks (particularly those attributed to Caoshan Benji as quoted above), they are presented as secondary and derivative to Dongshan's verses, which represent the kernel of Five Ranks doctrine.⁵

The Five Ranks can be translated as follows:⁶

1. The Crooked within the Straight (*zheng zhong pian* 正中偏)
2. The Straight within the Crooked (*pian zhong zheng* 偏中正)
3. Coming from within the Straight (*zheng zhong lai* 正中來)
4. Arriving amidst Both (*jian zhong zhi* 兼中至)
5. Unity Attained (*jian zhong dao* 兼中到)

I follow Victor Sōgen Hori's translation of the terms as "straight" and "crooked," since, although an array of abstract philosophical ideas are associated with the terms, these are quite literal translations that provide a concrete visual image of what they represent—a quality valued in accordance with Zen's general suspicion of philosophical terminology. Hori justifies his translation of the terms in this way to indicate that within the Five Ranks one side is not privileged over the other. The whole point of the Five Ranks is that the relative and the absolute are mutually dependent; neither can exist without the other, and it is essential to see the significance of both. At the same time, precisely because the Five Ranks dismantle the respective inferiority and superiority of the straight and crooked, it is necessary to analyze these verses using hierarchical terms, such as absolute versus relative, and ultimate versus conventional. In fact, true to the intended paradox of the Five Ranks philosophy itself, the scheme is simultaneously hierarchical and non-hierarchical. As many previous scholars have noted, the term "Five Ranks" (*wuwei* 五位) itself is more accurately translated in a non-hierarchical manner as "positions," "stages," "modes," or "degrees;"⁷ yet, at the same time, the Five Rank are typically interpreted as a progression.

The first two ranks begin by establishing a first-order interrelationship between the straight and crooked and then proceed, as I will argue and explain below, to a more sophisticated examination of their interrelationship from the ultimate (straight) perspective, conventional (crooked) perspective, and finally synthesized (neither ultimate nor conventional) perspective, through ranks three, four, and five, respectively. There is thus a hierarchy in terms of the intellectual comprehension and depth of insight required at each rank, and there is an implied religious teleology as well, as is

especially evident in the case of Japanese Rinzai (Chin. Linji 臨濟) master Hakuin 白隱 (1686–1768), who incorporated the Five Ranks into his revitalized *kōan* curriculum. Not only does he use the Five Ranks to classify all of the *kōan* investigated by the monks in meditation; he discusses each rank in terms of progressive meditative attainments.⁸ At the same time that there is an apparent hierarchy and implied teleology, however, the fifth rank does not truly represent an absolute and final standpoint. While it is arguably more sophisticated, it remains only one perspective of the interrelationship between the conventional and ultimate. The point of the Five Ranks is that no perspective or linguistic formulation can be wholly sufficient or absolute. From this non-hierarchical standpoint, each rank is valid from a certain perspective, but, although heuristically useful, none can be deemed ultimate.

While the Five Ranks have an air of originality about them, they are obviously rooted in the dialectics of the Two Truths theory of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and its Chinese Buddhist articulations, particularly the Huayan Buddhist concepts of principle (*li* 理) and phenomena (*shi* 事).⁹ Even though Zen often prefers symbolic and poetic language to convey Buddhist dialectics, as illustrated in both the terminology and verses of the Five Ranks, there are many examples in Zen literature of a clear dialectical movement whereby the Two Truths of Mahāyāna philosophy (ultimate and conventional) are synthesized in the logical pattern of “A = not-A, therefore A,” as based in the *Diamond Sutra*. Besides the most popularly known “mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers” anecdote,¹⁰ this dialectical process is embodied in the famous quote by Zen master Linji 臨濟 (Jpn. Rinzai) (d. 866): “When you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha” (*feng fo sha fo* 逢佛殺佛).¹¹ Interpreted dialectically, the statement indicates the synthesis of “meeting the Buddha”—signifying a conventional perspective of being and existence—with “killing the Buddha,” representing the ultimate perspective of non-existence. This quote is a superb example of poetry’s potential for expressing non-dual philosophy, since its symbolic language adds another level of dialectical synthesis that exists in contradiction to the first. Since “Buddha” here symbolizes the ultimate or absolute truth, the interpretations of “ultimate” and “conventional” can simultaneously be inverted, in which Linji is equally stating: the ultimate (“meeting the Buddha”) is not ultimate (“killing the Buddha”).

Instead of representing part of the dialectical movement leading up to synthesis, the Five Ranks start from the point of synthesis, where A = not-A, or the ultimate = the conventional. The Five Ranks thus represent a higher level of dialectical philosophy where the interrelationship between the ultimate and conventional (or straight and crooked) is being explored from different angles, rather than being merely established, as in the case of simpler Buddhist dialectical formulations. For this reason alone, the Five

Ranks merit further philosophical consideration and investigation. Furthermore, the standpoint of synthesis assumed in the Five Ranks is not one of simple identification of the straight and crooked. As I will demonstrate, each stage of the Five Ranks assumes that the straight and crooked are neither fundamentally identical nor fundamentally different, but rather exist together in a non-dual, mutually dependent interrelationship as in the model of yin and yang. The Five Ranks assume this non-dual standpoint throughout to explore the dialectical interrelationship between the straight and crooked from multiple perspectives, in which the standpoints of straight and crooked are similarly and skillfully turned against themselves to expose their fundamental emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

Despite the Five Ranks' association with the Caodong lineage, the philosophical scheme has been admired across Zen lineages, unlike other aspects of the Caodong lineage that have been the target of critique, particularly from Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) of the rival and powerful Linji lineage.¹² In addition, I have not seen any evidence of a debate about the philosophical validity of the Five Ranks, although, from the standpoint of practice, the Japanese masters Hakuin and Dōgen have warned against the intellectualization of the scheme, and Dōgen—unlike Hakuin and others—belittled its significance for Zen training.¹³ Otherwise, I would assume that the generally positive reception is largely due to the scheme's foundation in Mahāyāna Two Truths Theory and the fact that, similar to Nāgārjuna, it does not advance a philosophical position in a conventional sense but rather seeks to deconstruct any ultimate position. The fact that no ultimate standpoint can be articulated in language is generally accepted as a fundamental premise in Zen literature and philosophy. This is itself a form of philosophical thesis—simply one that negates the absolute validity of any linguistic expression.

Five Ranks verses thus do not engage in philosophical debate but rather offer an exposition of a series of philosophical perspectives based on the synthesis of the ultimate and conventional. In this manner, the poetic language of the Five Ranks is used to express each rank through imagery and figurative language, instead of employing logical argument and analysis. Its poetic language works to display an extended network of non-dual relationships in order to challenge the ontological status of any duality. Five Ranks poetry thus operates to deconstruct any ultimate position, while doing so *within* language. As such, the Five Ranks deny the ultimate truth status of language, while affirming the efficacy of language in expressing the interrelationship between the ultimate and conventional. In doing so, the Five Ranks themselves necessarily reject the duality between the ultimate (silence, non-duality) and conventional (language, duality) through poetic performance. For these reasons, when examining the classic Zen literature published in China during the Song dynasty, we do not encounter debates

regarding the meaning or validity of the Five Ranks, but instead witness Zen masters competing to create the most original, insightful, and skillfully crafted poetic representations of Buddhist dialectical philosophy.

II. The Poetics of the Five Ranks: A Dialectical Analysis of Hongzhi Zhengjue's Verses

The poetry of Caodong Zen master Hongzhi Zhengjue is an ideal case study as Hongzhi himself embodies the paradoxical integration of sustained literary engagement with the promotion of silence as the ultimate, authoritative source of Zen insight. Hongzhi was one of the most prolific and well-respected poets among Song dynasty Zen masters, with over one thousand poems preserved in his recorded sayings, far more than any other master of the period. At the same time, he is best known for coining the expression “silent illumination” (*mozhao* 默照) within a popular doctrinal inscription, which poetically describes the metaphysical insights of meditative practice.¹⁴ Although Hongzhi did not actually use the term “silent illumination” very often in his writings,¹⁵ the term silence (*mo* 默) and its reduplicative “absolute silence” (*momo* 默默) permeate his poetry and sermons, far more frequently than in other Zen literature despite the tradition’s general criticism of language and emphasis on silence.

Hongzhi’s own verses on the Five Ranks are at the forefront of his doctrinal verses, and the Five Ranks system and terminology pervade his verses and sermons, sometimes in alternative formulations. Hongzhi’s Five Ranks verses are prime examples of how the mutual dependence of the straight and crooked can be effectively expressed in poetic language. Within these poems, creativity hinges on the master’s choice and use of imagery, metaphor, and allusion to display individual insight into the philosophical positions of each rank. As with Dongshan’s and other Five Ranks verses, Hongzhi’s verses follow the metrical pattern of 3–7–7–7 characters per line, where the name of a rank constitutes its first line, which is then followed by a series of poetic images.

The First Rank concerns the existence of the relative within the absolute. The guiding assumption within this first rank is that if one closely examines that which is considered to be absolute, empty, unified, et cetera, one discovers it to be imbued with and conditioned by relativity, form, and differentiation. Hongzhi expresses the position of the First Rank with the following poem:

The crooked within the straight:

As the blue sky clears, the cold river of stars floods the heavens.
At midnight, the wooden boy knocks at the door of the moon,
And in the darkness, startles the jade maiden from her sleep.¹⁶

正中偏

霽碧星河冷浸乾
半夜木童敲月戶
暗中驚破玉人眠

Two central and interrelated features of Zen poetry are apparent in this verse: the use of natural imagery and the prevalence of symbolic images for establishing multiple levels of non-dual meaning. Natural imagery functions to provide a concrete basis for the abstract principles of the Five Ranks and to advance the idea that the world of nature serves as a reliable field of knowledge, not only for attaining insight, but for affirming the validity of the Zen philosophy of non-duality. In this verse, the river of stars surging forth from the clear sky represents the myriad things emerging from within emptiness. The sky at midnight further alludes to the darkness of non-discrimination where no thing can be discerned. But it is within this place of darkness that activity, illumination, and particularity naturally appear. Hongzhi uses the symbolic images of the wooden boy and jade maiden, commonplace within Zen poetry, to encapsulate the paradox of stillness and movement, the interrelationship of life and death, and the yin-yang complementarity of reality.¹⁷ Here the wooden boy strikes upon the moon—symbolizing the luminosity of the mind—and causes the jade maiden to suddenly awaken from the sleep of delusion. Although images of the wooden man and jade women appear fantastic, they allude to the animated character of the material world and the ideal of selfless action for the Zen practitioner, who should act naturally and spontaneously without a thought of self. Furthermore, they represent a yin-yang complementary pair, which Hongzhi skillfully employs to evoke an expanding series of interdependent opposites: movement and stillness, life and death, male and female, darkness and light, enlightenment and delusion, and so forth. Thus, rather than simply stating or arguing for the validity of non-duality, Hongzhi's poetic imagery presents a series of non-dual relationships that resonate with one another within the domain of the natural world.

The sudden illumination of the first rank is only the starting point—a first glimpse into the non-duality of straight and crooked that is investigated in further depth through the rest of the series. The next poem, for instance, looks at the relationship between the straight and crooked from the opposite, yet complementary perspective. The first two ranks are thus themselves instances of a yin-yang type identification of opposites—two divergent perspectives of the same metaphysical standpoint.

The straight within the crooked:
A sea of clouds converges on the spirited mountain peak.
The old woman returns—white hair on her temples hanging
down like silk;¹⁸
Ashamed, she faces the mirror of Qin, coldly reflecting her
image.¹⁹

偏中正
海雲依約神山頂
歸人鬢髮白垂絲
羞對秦臺寒照影

Hongzhi again situates this poem in the domain of nature as a manifestation of emptiness, but in place of the fantastic activity of inanimate figures he introduces an ordinary, human element, reinforced through the presence of literary allusion as a means to extend the poem's significance. The standpoint of this poem is similarly the vast, boundless realm of non-discrimination exemplified by the expansive sea of clouds on the mountain peak. Out of the mountain clouds, however, an old woman returns—the discrete, conventional self, affected by time, old age, and suffering. Here the conventional self looks into the mirror—or, in Zen language, the mind of *samādhi*: a symbol of the original mind that is not divided into subject and object. Hongzhi creates further levels of meaning here, however, by alluding to the Qin Emperor's mirror, which could reflect the good and evil in a person's heart.²⁰ The mirror of *samādhi* does not divide the world into good and evil; it simply reflects the phenomenal world before it. But in doing so, all distinctions, including good and evil, are contained within. Through the use of literary allusion, then, Hongzhi skillfully conflates the presence of discrimination and non-discrimination within a single image, which can be used to interpret the significance of the old woman in the poem. When the conventional person looks into the mirror of the ultimate, the conventional world is merely reflected back, coldly, without feeling or judgment. Not only are the distinctive marks of old age fully exposed; so are the delusive passions and defects of the conventional person ashamed at her appearance. When the absolute is realized to exist within the conventional, old age and delusive passions are not eliminated, but they are only illusions in the mirror of *samādhi*.

The next step within the process of the Five Ranks is to consider the relationship between the ultimate and conventional as a whole, rather than focusing on one side and then the other. This integrative perspective is associated with the logic of “both/and” or “neither/nor.” On the one hand, both the straight and crooked can be seen arising together; on the other hand, the two concepts ultimately fail to map onto reality and are forgotten. As in the first two ranks, in the next two—ranks three and four—the first privileges the perspective of the straight and the second the crooked in considering the relationship between them. While the first two ranks establish the basic first-order interrelationship between the two sides, the next two represent a higher order of insight. Instead of connecting one side to the other, these ranks examine the already established interrelationship of straight and crooked, first from the perspective of the absolute, and then from the relative.²¹ To use the symbolism of yin-yang as an analogy, if the first two ranks each focus on one side of the pair, as with regarding yang within yin and yin within yang, the next two ranks consider the full circle of their yin-yang relationship, first as one and then as two. Like the first two ranks, ranks three and four are complementary opposites, as follows, while the fifth rank fuses their logical standpoints in a final synthesis:

- Rank 3: The straight and crooked as one (ultimate perspective; logic of neither/nor)
 Rank 4: The straight and crooked as two (conventional perspective; logic of both/and)
 Rank 5: The straight and crooked as neither one nor two (ultimate = conventional perspective; fusion of neither/nor, both/and)

The third rank, “Coming from within the Straight” (正中來), thus represents a unified standpoint where neither straight nor crooked can be properly distinguished. The poetics of this verse is characterized by paradoxical images for spatial dimensions, which in terms of boundlessness and discreteness metaphorically refer to the philosophical notions of the absolute and particular. Hongzhi’s verse on this rank captures the infinite expanse of emptiness through the image of the mythical fish Kun 鯤, an allusion to the opening passage of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 in the chapter “Free and Easy Wandering” (*Xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊). In Hongzhi’s verse, the immense Kun sheds its enormous shell, enveloping the entire world, with its back rubbing the heavens and the clouds becoming its wings:

| | |
|--|---------|
| Coming from within the straight: | 正中來 |
| On a moonlit night, the great Kun casts off its shell. | 月夜長鯤蛻甲開 |
| Its great back rubs against the heavens, as it flaps its wings of clouds, | 大背摩天振雲羽 |
| And soars down the bird paths—a thing difficult to categorize. ²² | 翔游鳥道類難該 |

Even with its massive, immeasurable size, the Kun is able to soar through the narrow “bird paths” (*niaodao* 鳥道), one of Dongshan’s metaphors for the difficulty and elusiveness of Zen practice.²³ In other words, not only does emptiness subsume the entire realm of straight and crooked as a whole, it also penetrates the tiny and discrete, yet invisible and fleeting, paths of birds—distinct manifestations of emptiness within the realm of particularity. It is this simultaneous vastness and minuteness, along with the fusion of absolute and relative at both levels, that is beyond words—impossible to comprehend or classify in terms of ordinary logic or dualistic language. Hongzhi’s allusion to the *Zhuangzi*, with its relativism and contradictory language, is very fitting, as the term *kun* 鯤, used to refer to the enormous fish, literally means fish roe. As Burton Watson explains, “The tiniest fish imaginable is also the largest fish imaginable.”²⁴

The fourth rank, most often referred to as “Arrival amidst Both” (*jian zhong zhi* 兼中至) is also alternatively titled “Arriving in the Crooked” (*pian zhong zhi* 偏中至).²⁵ “Arriving in the Crooked” fits logically within the progression of the Five Ranks, after “Coming from within the Straight” (正中來), and more effectively distinguishes this stage from the final rank. My reading here also accounts for the notion of “both” (*jian* 兼) in the more commonly used title, as the fourth rank employs the logic of “both/

and,” returning to the duality between straight and crooked that was dissolved within the preceding ranks.²⁶ Here, both the straight and crooked are seen as equals; both are fully present, even while interpenetrating without obstruction:

Arriving amidst both:

Facing each other, it is not necessary to avoid taboo names.

Transformation does not harm the mystery of the true meaning.

Within the light, there is a path that is naturally different.²⁷

兼中至

覲面不須相忌諱

風化無傷的意玄

光中有路天然異

Even with its symbolic language, this is the most prosaic of Hongzhi’s Five Ranks verses, where he quite clearly states that the distinction between straight and crooked need not be abandoned. Even though they are interrelated—meeting each other face to face—one can still speak of both aspects. In addition, the presence of the relative—even the conventional distinction between straight and crooked—in no way corrupts the absolute. One need not even abandon such concepts as the “ultimate”—symbolized by the name of the then current Emperor, which was “taboo” to use during his reign and dynasty. This is particularly significant in the case of Zen literature, which is often characterized as avoiding philosophical and technical language. As much as Zen literature engages with poetic symbolism, this is nearly always done in negotiation with conventional Buddhist terminology, and as Hongzhi indicates here, the abstractions and concepts of Buddhism do have an appropriate place, even if insufficient in themselves. Hongzhi asserts this point by playfully inverting the message of Dongshan’s verse based on the perspective of the previous rank, where Dongshan insists on discarding the dualistic notion of the ultimate as “taboo”:

Coming from within the straight:

Amidst emptiness, there is a path beyond the dust.

If you can avoid the current emperor’s name,

you will surpass the tongueless talent of the previous dynasty!²⁸

正中來

無中有路隔塵埃

但能不觸當今諱

也勝前朝斷舌才

By mirroring Dongshan’s third rank verse here, Hongzhi highlights the fact that ranks three and four form complementary opposites, and with his literary skill he exhibits poetry’s capacity for subverting and expanding meaning by reviving the abstract notion of the “ultimate.” Furthermore, he appropriately shifts the location of the “path” from “amidst emptiness” in Dongshan’s third rank to return “within the light” in the fourth. The “path” (*lu* 路) in Hongzhi’s final line could be read in either the plural or the singular, offering two distinct meanings. In the plural, Hongzhi would

simply be making the standard claim that plurality and difference exist within unity and emptiness: in the radiance of non-discrimination there are naturally many paths. But Hongzhi seems to suggest that there is a single path that can be discerned within the practice of non-discrimination: the path where one clearly distinguishes the mutual dependence of the straight and crooked.

The final rank, “Unity Attained,” presents a final integrated standpoint that synthesizes the perspectives of ranks three and four. Here, the straight and crooked are simultaneously distinct and indistinguishable—the nature of their relationship ultimately impossible to pin down, as they are neither one nor two:

Unity attained:

When the handle of the dipper slants in the sky before dawn,
The crane awakens from its dream amidst the cold dewy air
And flies out of its old nest—the clouds and pines turned
upside down!²⁹

兼中到

斗柄橫斜天未曉
鶴夢初醒露氣寒
舊巢飛出雲松倒

Hongzhi begins this poem by referring back to the starry night imagery of the first verse, but now the tilted handle of the Big Dipper hangs in a sky that is between night and day, darkness and illumination. As the rotating movements of the Big Dipper’s handle turn like a clock in the sky, the liminal period between day and night is also a discrete moment—the moment when the individual crane awakens. Hongzhi has a special liking for the image of the crane (*he* 鶴), typically representing Daoist immortality and transcendence, which in Chan poetry becomes identified with enlightenment and buddha-nature. Even in this final rank, the crane, as the originally enlightened self, is just awakening from—or *within*—its dream amidst the cold dew of the relative world. The crane is effective as an image since, though it is an ordinary being in the world, it is also one that carries Daoist immortals into the sky, mediating between the mundane and transcendent. As such, it is a prime example of the significance of metaphor in expressing the non-dual perspective of Zen. In addition, the crane as a white, solitary bird standing in the enveloping fog is an example of another common type of imagery in Zen poetry, also associated with Dongshan, where two white objects merge with one another, symbolizing the interdependence of identity and difference.³⁰ As the singular crane disappears into the white expanse of fog, neither can be distinguished, nor are they the same. In the language and logic of the fifth rank, even while the particular and conventional (the crane) is subsumed by the emptiness of the absolute (the misty haze), the conventional and ultimate may still be meaningfully distinguished from one another.

As the crane returns to the ordinary world and flies out of its old nest (*jiu chao* 舊巢)—which is equally and paradoxically its former, conventional way of thinking and its original home of buddha-nature—the natural world itself embodies paradox and mystery. It is significant that Hongzhi steers clear of the seemingly otherworldly vitality of stone or wooden objects or the mystifying behavior of mythical creatures in this verse. Instead, the final image is simply one of the crane flying amid the clouds and pines; only now the pines and clouds are turned upside down, as if reflected in the water below. There is nothing truly out of the ordinary about the scene—the pines and clouds are just the same as before. Their unconventional nature is merely one of perspective, flipped around just as the assumptions of conventional and ultimate have been turned inside out.

III. Conclusion: Poetry as Dialectical Performance

As I have demonstrated through the analysis of Hongzhi's verses, poetry is an ideal mode for conveying the dialectical philosophy of the Five Ranks by crafting layers of non-dual relationships through multiple and interrelated literary devices. Through natural imagery and yin-yang parallelism, Hongzhi elicits the interdependence of conventional opposites, such as dark and light, male and female, stillness and activity, and the straight and crooked themselves, while implying the naturalness and immediacy of Zen philosophy. His use of the particular symbolic language of Zen, such as the fading of a white crane into the mist, performs a similar function of illuminating the non-dual nature of reality, even within the bizarre images of dancing wooden men and jade maidens. At the same time, these images serve as metaphors for Buddhist philosophical terms of selflessness and emptiness. As such, both vehicle and tenor participate in the Five Ranks philosophical scheme, where the "ultimate" meaning of the metaphor resides firmly within its conventional medium. In other words, these images are intended to be not only symbols or metaphors for emptiness, but instances of emptiness themselves. Finally, Hongzhi uses literary allusions and metaphors—such as the Qin mirror, Zhuangzi's mythical *kun*, or the crane's "old nest"—to sustain paradoxical double meanings that unify such opposites as discrimination and non-discrimination, vastness and minuteness, and enlightenment and delusion, within a single poetic image. Through the use of these figurative techniques, recourse to apophatic language or the discursive alternations between affirmation and negation often found within Mahāyāna texts is generally avoided—the only noticeable exception here being Hongzhi's mirroring of Dongshan's verse, if one compares the two series.

While each verse of Hongzhi's Five Ranks presents the integration of straight and crooked through figurative language, the differences in perspective between each rank are relative and often subtle. Although I have attempted to tease out a logical progression, efforts at schematic representation of the Five

Ranks are wrought with frustration. The ranks are in no way mutually exclusive, and within them the relationships of identity and difference become compounded in such a rich vortex of interpenetration that the scheme collapses into itself and falls apart. This is precisely the point. The terms of “straight” and “crooked” and the multiple ways of viewing their relationship are valuable heuristically but cannot ultimately define either their relationship or the character of ineffable reality. This is not to say that we return to silence and view the verses and ranks as merely derivative expressions to be discarded. Such a view would violate the understanding of straight and crooked developed within the scheme. On the contrary, the world that cannot be logically or discursively confined is exemplified in the language of the verses themselves—metaphorically speaking, each embodies silence within language, as each provides concrete, literary examples of the unification of the ultimate and conventional. In fact, the engagement with language is both indispensable and ideal. Precisely because language is crooked, conventional, and dualistic, it is an incomparable medium for expressing the silence of the absolute in a non-dualistic manner. In this way, Hongzhi’s verses are not writing *about* Five Ranks philosophy but are written *as* Five Ranks philosophy, performing a dialectical synthesis that is, simultaneously, both the subject and object of its philosophical-poetic discourse.

Notes

This article has benefited from the suggestions of numerous scholars as its contents have been presented in various earlier forms. I would particularly like to thank Jingjing Li and Melanie Coughlin for inspiring this current version, and Thomas Lamarre for facilitating a stimulating discussion within our panel on Buddhist dialectical philosophy at the Canadian Philosophical Association Annual Conference in 2018. As ever, I am indebted to Grace Fong for her suggestions on the translation and interpretation of the poems.

- 1 – As explained further below, the semantic and grammatical ambiguity of the rank titles, as well as the philosophical sophistication and poetic expression of the ranks themselves, pose serious interpretive challenges, making it difficult to provide a clear logical distinction between the ranks or an adequate account of their implied progression. Few comprehensive studies are currently available in Western scholarship. The most detailed and scholarly study remains Alfonso Verdú’s *Dialectical Aspects in Buddhist Thought: Studies in Sino-Japanese Mahāyāna Idealism* (Lawrence, KA: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1974). Recently, Zen teacher Ross Bolleter produced a book-length commentary on the Five Ranks from the standpoint of *kōan* practice: *Dongshan’s Five Ranks: Keys to Enlightenment* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2014). Bolleter primarily interprets the ranks in

relation to insights of practice and real-life experience but also provides an original explanation of the ranks in philosophical terms. My interpretation is closest to that of Bolleter's, but, as explained further below, I provide a different interpretation of ranks three and four, which further helps distinguish the logical standpoint of the "unity" expressed in the fifth rank. Taigen Dan Leighton has also provided new translations of Five Ranks materials, including Hongzhi's verses, along with brief commentary, in *Just This Is It: Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness* (Boston: Shambhala, 2015).

- 2 – See Victor Sōgen Hori, "Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum," in *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 280–315, esp. 304–307. As I imply here, Hori has previously illustrated the literary training necessary for kōan training, in addition to arguing that kōan practice is based in paradigms in Chinese poetry, in *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), pp. 30–61.
- 3 – 正位即空界，本來無物。偏位即色界，有萬象形。 See *Fuzhou Caoshan Benji chanshi yulu* 撫州曹山本寂禪師語錄, in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 (hereafter T), ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭, 100 vols. (1924–1935; reprint, Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1960–1979), 47.536c.
- 4 – Five Ranks verses were composed by numerous Song dynasty masters. See, e.g., the materials collected on the Five Ranks within *juan* 3 of *Rentian yanmu* 人天眼目, T 48, no. 2006, which includes verses on the Five Ranks, as well as commentaries, by masters of various lineages.
- 5 – The primary source for Five Ranks exegesis, including an explanation by Dongshan himself, is the *yulu* of his most prominent disciple Caoshan Benji. The *yulu* of Caoshan Benji includes commentary and annotations to Dongshan's verses, as well as his own interpretations of the Five Ranks (*Fuzhou Caoshan Benji chanshi yulu*, T 47.536c–537a; 541c–542c; 544b–c). Caoshan, being second in line to Dongshan, is largely responsible for explaining his master's original insight and poetic elucidation through interlineal commentary and discursive exegesis.
- 6 – The translation of the Five Ranks is borrowed from Hori, *Zen Sand*, p. 24, whose translation is itself based on that in Miura Isshū and Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *Zen Dust: The History of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzai (Lin-chi) Zen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), pp. 62–72. Hori replaced their rendering of *zheng* 正 and *pian* 偏 as "real" and "apparent," with the language of "straight" and "crooked." I

have changed the translation of the fourth rank, however, in order (1) to highlight its logic of “both/and,” (2) to distinguish it from the fifth rank, and (3) to capture the sense of the alternate title of the rank as “Arriving within the Crooked” (*pian zhong zhi* 偏中至), as explained further below.

- 7 – See, e.g., Leighton’s discussion of these options in *Just This Is It*, p. 212, where he offers an innovative argument for his use of “degrees.”
- 8 – See the discussion of the Five Ranks in Rinzai *kōan* practice and the translation of Hakuin’s commentary on Dongshan’s Five Ranks verses in Miura and Sasaki, *Zen Dust*, pp. 62–72, and Norman Waddell, trans., *Poison Blossoms from a Thicket of Thorn* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2014), pp. 101–112. Hakuin’s original commentary is found in *Tōjō goi henshō kuketsu* 洞山五位偏正口訣, in Mitsumura Goto 後藤光村, ed., *Hakuin oshō zenshū* 白隱和尚全集, 8 vols. (Tokyo: Ryūkonsha, 1967), 2.81–88.
- 9 – Comparisons with Nāgārjuna, Huayan philosophy, the *Yijing*, and other systems of thought are made throughout Alfonso Verdú’s analysis of various expressions of the Five Ranks in *Dialectical Aspects*, pp. 115–238. Caoshan himself uses the terms *li* 理 and *shi* 事 in his explanation of the straight and crooked (*Fuzhou Caoshan Benji chanshi yulu*, T 47.536c).
- 10 – This well-known anecdote is often abbreviated and paraphrased in a concise dialectical form as provided in this version by Victor Sōgen Hori: “At first the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers. Then the mountains are not mountains and the rivers are not rivers. Then finally the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers” (“*Kōan and Kenshō* in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” p. 301). The original and slightly longer version attributed to Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信 (Northern Song) is found in *Xu chuandeng lu* 續傳燈錄, T 51.614b–c.
- 11 – *Zhenzhou Linji Huizhao chanshi yulu* 鎮州臨濟慧照禪師語錄, T 47.500b.
- 12 – For a discussion of Dahui’s criticisms, see, e.g., Morten Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-dynasty China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), pp. 104–121.

The earliest extant record of the Five Ranks is, in fact, found within the *yulu* of Linji master Fenyang Shanzhao 汾陽善昭 (947–1024), *Fenyang Wude chanshi yulu* 汾陽無德禪師語錄 (1004), T 47.605b–c. Fenyang Shanzhao’s writings on the Five Ranks, as well as the Five Ranks verses of his most prominent disciple Shishuang Chuyuan 石霜楚圓 (986–1039), are found in the *Tiansheng guangdenglu* 天聖廣燈錄

(1039) in *Shinsan Dai Nihon zoku Zōkyō* 新纂大日本續藏經 (hereafter ZZ) (Tokyo: Kokusho KankōKai, 1975–1989), 78.498c and 78.509b, respectively.

The writings of Juefan Huihong 覺範惠洪 (1071–1128), yet another Linji monk, are the earliest extant source of Dongshan’s own Five Ranks verses. Huihong, who clearly showed interest in the Caodong school, included them in both the *Linjian lu* 林間錄 (1107), ZZ 87.274b, and *Chanlin sengbao zhuan* 禪林僧寶傳 (1123), ZZ 79.493a–b.

Despite the early appearance of the Five Ranks within the records of these Linji masters, these texts all identify Dongshan Liangjie as the progenitor of the doctrinal scheme and associate the Five Ranks with the Caodong lineage.

- 13 – Dōgen’s comments reflect his criticism of conceptual formulations in general. There is no indication that he opposes the dialectical philosophy of the Five Ranks itself, and similar dialectics are apparent within Dōgen’s writings. See, e.g., Leighton’s application of Five Ranks dialectics to Dōgen’s writings in *Just This Is It*, pp. 233–237. For an insightful historical account of the reception of the Five Ranks system in Japan, including Dōgen’s criticisms, see Marta Sanvido, “Multiple Layers of Transmission: Gasan Jōseki and the Goi Doctrine in the Medieval Sōtō school,” *Annali di Ca’ Foscari: Serie orientale* 53, no. 1 (2017): 337–367.
- 14 – See “Mozhao ming” 默照銘 in *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu* 宏智禪師廣錄, T 48.100a–100b.
- 15 – See Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, pp. 144–174.
- 16 – *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 48.99a. For this verse and the following ones, I have made my own translations in consultation with those in Taigen Daniel Leighton and Yi Wu, trans., *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1991), p. 41. In many cases I use similar language, especially when closely following the language and syntax of the original, but the changes in word choice and phrasing have significant bearing on the interpretation of the poems, and there are a number of images that I understand quite differently.
- 17 – The wooden boy and jade maiden imagery are frequently found in Zen verses, along with other similar yin-yang pairings of inanimate, lifeless beings engaged in dynamic activity, thus depicting selfless action and the interdependence of life and death. Although most probably historically inaccurate, Dongshan’s “Baojing sanmei ge” is often considered the source of this type of imagery, as it offers the following couplet: “The wooden man begins to sing;/the stone maiden rises to

dance” 木人方歌 / 石女起舞 (*Ruizhou Dongshan Liangjie chanshi yulu* 瑞州洞山良价禪師語錄, T 47.526a).

- 18 – Although there is no gender indicated for the person in the poem, I have followed Leighton and Wu’s rendering of the image as referring to a woman because Hongzhi is alluding to Dongshan’s poem on this rank, which contains an image of an old woman (*laopo* 老婆) looking into a mirror (*Ruizhou Dongshan Liangjie chanshi yulu*, T 47.525c).
- 19 – *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 48.99a.
- 20 – See the entry for *qinjing* 秦鏡 in *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典 (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1988–1993).
- 21 – Distinguishing ranks three, four, and five from the other ranks poses the greatest interpretative challenge. My interpretation here aims both to clarify the dialectical structure of the individual ranks and to account for the logical progression of the series. The third rank, in particular, is often interpreted as an absolute standpoint of emptiness. In this way, the third rank would represent a non-dialectical standpoint, despite the synthesis of the ultimate and conventional already established in the first two ranks, or simply a return to the first rank with no obvious differentiation, disrupting the progression of the series either way. William Powell, for instance, in his brief description, appropriately interprets each of the ranks in the language of form and emptiness and their dialectical relationship, yet explains the third and fourth ranks in the language of “return,” where they appear to represent a similar standpoint to ranks one and two: “The third rank returns the focus to the real, or emptiness. . . . In the fourth rank, attention is redirected to phenomena” (William F. Powell, trans., *The Record of Tung-shan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986), pp. 11–12). In *Dongshan’s Five Ranks*, Bolleter argues that the third and fourth ranks are “mutually exclusive” (p. 71), where the third rank offers a completely ultimate perspective, or “just the dark,” and the fourth rank presents a totally conventional perspective, or “just the bright” (p. 34). My interpretation here complements Bolleter’s and Powell’s, while accounting for the progression of the ranks and resolving the inconsistencies with Mahāyāna dialectics—which Bolleter himself recognizes (p. 71)—by interpreting ranks three, four, and five as a higher order dialectic.
- 22 – *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 48.99a.
- 23 – For discussion of Dongshan’s usage of the “bird path,” see Leighton, *Just This Is It*, pp. 111–122.
- 24 – Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 29.

- 25 – In fact, while Hongzhi's Five Ranks verses contain the title "Arriving amidst Both" 兼中至, the rank appears as "Arriving in the Crooked" 偏中至 within his informal sermons where he responds to questions about the meaning of each rank in metaphor (*Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 48.16a).
- 26 – Whereas Powell and Bolleter understand this rank as an exclusive focus on the phenomenal, Leighton describes this rank according to the logic of "both/and," as I do here, suggesting that this stage "indicates active engagement with both the real and the phenomenal" (Leighton, *Just This Is It*, p. 216).
- 27 – *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 48.99a.
- 28 – *Ruizhou Dongshan Liangjie chanshi yulu*, T 47.525c. See Verdú, *Dialectical Aspects*, pp. 124–125, for further explanations of the allusions in the verse.
- 29 – *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, T 48.99a.
- 30 – Dongshan's "Baojing sanmie ge" is also seen as a source for this type of imagery, where Dongshan provides a terse explanation of its significance in terms of identity and difference: "Like snow within a silver bowl,/an egret hidden by the bright moon—/similar but not the same;/intermingled, yet still apparent" (銀碗盛雪 / 明月藏鷺 / 類之弗齊 / 混則知處) (*Ruizhou Dongshan Liangjie chanshi yulu*, T 47.525c).