

DOCTORAL THESIS

Storytelling and the Ineffable: An Inquiry into Chan Pedagogy from the Perspective of Unnatural Narratology

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Abstract

If storytelling is an inherent ability that we human possess for organizing our experience, as assumed in cognitive narratology, there is also an intrinsic connection between human sufferings and the way we conceptualize reality. The suffering may occur particularly due to an insistent calling for coherent narratives and plausible plots. This underlying narrative mentality is essential for generating discriminative knowledge. In such a case, it is worth noting that Chan teaching asserts the importance of “abandoning memory and intellect” (憶智俱忘) and proposes a sudden doctrine without relying on words. Nonetheless, its innovative teaching strategies (e.g., *gong'an* 公案) still follow the Buddha’s teaching philosophy of “using a yellow leaf as a piece of gold to entice an unweaned baby” (黃葉止啼). In this account, my argument is that “yellow leaves” applied in Chan tradition can be considered as unconventional narratives for tackling narrative cravings, which precisely resonates with Chan way of “fighting delusions with delusions” (以妄制妄). However, Chan scholars have usually refrained from a study of how Chan pedagogy deals with the role narrative plays in memory and cognition. Not much effort has been explicitly spent on mining the correlation between a narrative mind and the way that “consciousness clings to outer forms and factors” (情識攀緣), as Chan teachers consistently remind their students in teachings.

My research is centered on what narrative strategies are employed for teaching, how they deal with an emplotted mind, and why such Chan expediency can awaken recipients’ capacity for self-realization. I thus attempt to elaborate Chan pedagogical framework of “combining living words and pantomimed performance” (語勢示禪) through an interdisciplinary lens that blends insights primarily from unnatural narratology, cognitive psychology, as well as Paul Ricoeur’s narrative philosophy. The data for case study is collected from the canonical texts of Chinese Chan Buddhism, e.g., *Jingde chuandeng lu* (《景德傳燈錄》), *Biyuan lu* (《碧巖錄》), *Zutang ji* (《祖堂集》), which align with the manifestation of unnatural narratives.

The process of Chan teaching is unnatural in that it intentionally transgresses

mimetic conventions, and destabilizes conventional storytelling scripts. Chan narratives seek to elicit “great doubt” (疑情) that is critical for self-realization by evoking logically or psychologically implausible storyworlds. It is further suggested that Chan narrative strategies are represented by unnatural acts of narration, unusual temporality, creative play of rhetorical devices, and Chan way of characterization. The function of integrating these devices into Chan teaching is to cut off vital relations of motivation, causality, analogy and identity, in order to give no hold for narrative expansion and thus wipe out all traces of discriminative function of mind.

The final chapter brings the ideas together and gives a broad account of my major findings, with a particular focus on “unnaturalizing reading strategies” for approaching Chan teaching style. It is important for Chan practitioners to remain in the strangeness of nonsensical scenarios to avoid naturalizing Chan narratives and to experience the ineffable. The effort to explore Chan pedagogy from a narrative perspective is certainly worth undertaking, which extends its textual study beyond a purely linguistic-based paradigm. It not only expands the applicability of narrative theories, but also provides ready means to appreciate Chan teaching philosophy in a holistic sense.