

Beyond Mimesis: Unnatural Narrative in Ch'an Kōans

Wu Amiao and Ellen Y. Zhang

Abstract—Ch'an (*Zen*), as a face-to-face transmission of the dharma outside the Buddhism sutras, is also a discourse on "how not to say". For transcending words and pointing directly to the human mind, Ch'an Buddhism defies the parameters of usual interaction by employing Kōan system—an unusual Ch'an teaching system, to provoke "great doubt" and test a disciple's progress in practice. Throughout history, researchers have been interested in Ch'an text all along, and an extensive research from different perspectives help foster the development of interpretive approaches to Ch'an study. But none of the academic research has delved into the relationship between Kōan and its unnatural narrative structure so far, and how its peculiar practice may help disciples realize the mind and seeing self-nature. Through the lens of unnatural narratives, this paper seeks to present an exploratory study of new paradigm in analyzing Ch'an Kōans, and to demonstrate another effective way of probing and understanding Ch'an text. The paper will sketch out basic concepts, scholarly origin, research aims, and point out directions for an interdisciplinary study of religious text within the framework of unnatural narratology. By drawing on unnatural narrative theories for Kōan cases, we aim to show possibilities of application of unnatural narratives to Ch'an tradition and what fresh vitality this approach can bring into the study of religious texts.

Index Terms—Ch'an Kōans, interdisciplinary study, religious texts, unnatural narratives.

I. INTRODUCTION

How to speak the unspeakable? The dialogic exchanges in Ch'an Kōans present unnatural use of language, which usually reside in masters' body languages like shouting, hitting, peculiar combination of shout and fist, and enigmatic language like negation, repetition, non-referentiality, paradox and metaphor, which are combined to defy the parameters of usual face-to-face narrative. Hence such peculiar expressions or communication may be well expounded and explored by one of postclassical narrative theories – Unnatural Narrative Theory that can be indebted to the joint essay by narratologists Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson [1], as well as their debates with Monika Fludernik [2]. The theory is much directed toward an investigation of unnatural or anti-mimetic narration in texts that violate usual elements of cognition and narrative, producing a physically, logically or psychologically impossible and defamiliarizing scenes and events. We believe this freshly established subfield of general linguistics will shed a light on our discussion of a very important and unique religious text—Ch'an Koans. According to Roman Jakobson (1896—1982), a literary scholar unacquainted with linguistic methods is an anachronism [3]. In recent years, an interdisciplinary study of

some religious texts from the perspective of linguistics has broadened our research scope and helped to gain explanatory insight into the Ch'an text. Ch'an canonical works strike readers that unnatural narrative makes it such a pervasive and fascinating phenomenon in those deep and subtle texts. Through our original observations and tests, we find that an unnatural narrative mode may inform every aspect of Ch'an teaching, and perform great functions among master-disciple interaction. Few of us would be like Huineng (638–713) who heard someone reciting the *Diamond Sutra* and immediately became enlightened. Great teachers have said the text revealed it to us slowly. Throughout the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha instructs us not to be bound by words, even concepts of "Buddha" and "dharma." [4] So a postclassical narrative inquiry into the Ch'an tradition would address a critical issue—how to speak the unspeakable. Although the peculiar way of teaching the ultimate truth within Ch'an Buddhism is not logically soluble and beyond mimetic model, it is still anchored within its unnatural narrative mode.

II. THE INTERFACE BETWEEN KŌAN TRADITION AND THE UNNATURAL NARRATIVES

A. Ch'an Kōan

An extensive body of Ch'an literature has shown that Kōan is a popular teaching strategy employed by enlightened Ch'an masters. The widespread literary works for collection of Kōans are *Jing De Transmission of Dharma Collection* (《景德传灯录》), *Gateless Gate* (《无门关》), and *Blue Cliff Record* (《碧岩录》), which provide us with a large corpus for studying its literary context, complex structure, and ways of secret transmission. Kōan (Ch. Gong'an, 公案) literally means "public cases", acting in the same manner as a legal matter brought before a judge in a medieval Chinese court. The Ch'an master, like a magistrate whose word is law and he can declare who is innocent or guilty [5]. Let's take *The Gateless Gate* for example, which contains a collection of 48 Ch'an Kōans compiled by famous Chinese Ch'an master Wumen Huikai (1184-1260) [6]. For every Kōan of this collection, there is a root case appearing in the first part and followed by Wumen's comments with his verse at the end. Consider the famous case 29 "Not the Wind, Not the Flag" as follows:

[Kōan case] Two monks were arguing over a flag. One said: "The flag is moving."

The other said: "The wind is moving."

The sixth patriarch happened to be passing by. He told them: "Not the wind, not the flag; mind is moving."

[Wumen's commentary] The sixth patriarch Huineng said, "The wind is not moving, the flag is not moving. Mind is moving." What did he mean? If you understand this clearly, you will see the two monks there trying to buy iron and

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gaining gold. The sixth patriarch Huineng could not bear to see those two dull heads, so he made such a bargain.

[Wumen's verse]

Wind, flag, mind moves
The same understanding
When the mouth opens
All are wrong

Structurally speaking, all Kōans in *The Gateless Gate* and *Blue Cliff Record* [7] take the same form as in the example above. And as revealed in the case 29, the first part of the Kōan serves as the root case, which usually presents an "event", and what follows are Wumen's commentary words along with his verse. From the case 29, we may notice that, on a primary level, the sixth patriarch is holding up the case "what is moving" as if in front of an assembly of monks in a dharma hall, while on a secondary level, Wumen gives further judgment to evaluate the root case, like a magistrate in a higher court.

Apart from structural analysis, some scholars, for academic purposes, simply restrict the expression of Kōan to exchange dialogues, *yulu* (recorded words of masters) and anecdotes. However, such classification sounds broad and simple, overlooking other specific and unnatural elements of Kōans. If we dissect exchange dialogues of Kōans into parts, most conspicuously, we find that many Kōans take a form of nonverbal exchange or a question even without response, which should deserve our particular attention. Take beginning part of case 3 of *The Gateless Gate* for instance: master Gutei who only raised his finger whenever he was asked a question about Ch'an. Gutei's boy attendant began to imitate him in the same manner in front of a visitor who came to inquire about Ch'an. When Gutei came to know his boy's mischief, he cut off his finger with a knife. As the boy ran out screaming, master called him and raised his own finger as the boy just looked back. At that moment, the boy was enlightened.

The two aforementioned cases are not sufficient to provide a working definition for Ch'an Kōan, but they can suggest its essence and spirits, which propose "special transmission outside doctrine," not clinging onto words, pointing directly to the mind. So basically, a Kōan is employed by Ch'an masters as a brick for battering the gate, and assisting students to cut off their dualistic thinking, in order to inspire Ch'an pursuer. Although Kōan context is unconventional and dramatized, interestingly, behind those pronounced Ch'an mottos, we find some kind of innovative and predictable narrative modes connecting the Ch'an discourse with enlightenment, which may be explicable from the perspective of unnatural narrative theory. Generally, there are two trends dominating the study of Ch'an Kōans. One is philosophical approach, the other populated by textualists' exploring from linguistics. Unlike the philosophical investigation, the other approach tends to borrow theories, such as indirect speech act, pragmatics, rhetoric, lexical and semantic categories, aesthetics, and semiotics from contemporary linguistics to examine relevant issues in Ch'an thought. So why is a theory from postclassical narratology especially capable of getting at the Ch'an tradition?

B. Why Unnatural Narratives?

By examining different types of the Ch'an strategies of

indirect communication, such as paradoxes, tautological and poetic language, scholars show how special transmission of Ch'an is revealed in its violation of cooperative principles or communicative structures and how Ch'an Buddhism provides the resources for our contemporary inquiry into the issue of indirect communication [8]. Chinese scholar Qian Guanlian looks at how we can relate pragmatics to Ch'an Kōans. By applying the theory of indirect speech act and intentional indirectness to them, he proves that Ch'an Kōans are inferable—the rational intention is in the disguise of irrational words, and on the other hand the language use of Ch'an Kōan broadens the pragmatic perspective [9].

For language and semantic analysis, Zhou Yukai in his *The Language of Ch'an Buddhism* (《禅宗语言》) deftly reflects over different types of verbal and non-verbal languages such as body language, shouting, hitting, nonsensical language, and enigmatic language, which are frequently used in Ch'an Kōan to facilitate the ultimate purpose of awakening [10]. John F. Fisher breaks the Kōan down into categories, finding that although the Kōan differ, they carry the same message [11].

Likewise, there are some important books for the spread of Ch'an language, among which *Zen Sand* combines and translates two standard handbooks and is a classic collection of Kōan meditation to negotiate the difficult relationship between insight and language. It opens the way for understanding of East Asian culture in a broader sense. Another one is *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts* [12], which offers valuable studies of some of the most important classical Ch'an texts, including some that have received little scholarly attention, and it also reveals that literature and semantic features of Ch'an are a diverse and indispensable part of Ch'an Buddhism.

So textual analysis, as another excellent way for understanding the Koan tradition and proving they can be researched, gives inspiration for a deeper and wider understanding of Kōan contents and tradition. For an aesthetic approach, the Chinese edition of *Ch'an Aesthetics* [13] is a contemporary survey of Ch'an discourse from a perspective of comparative aesthetics, in which chapter five is devoted to the discussion of how to speak the unspeakable, but it ends up with the appreciation of poetic quality and flavor of Ch'an language. The study from this camp is comprehensive and broad, many studies present unusual features of Ch'an discourse and explore rich meaning of Koans, but it is inadequate to discuss the extent to which Ch'an masters inspire their students and how to do Ch'an with enigmatic language and symbols.

After roughly teasing out main approaches to Ch'an discourse, we are inspired and find how it is interesting and significant to study Ch'an Kōan from a different perspective. But it is regretful to find none of the academic research delves into the relationship between Ch'an Kōan and its narrative structure, and how its unnatural narrative strategies help disciples realize the mind and see self-nature.

The study of unnatural narrative has been systematically conducted within postclassical narratological framework as a reaction to "natural" narratology [14]. Pioneering research could be indebted to Brian Richardson [15], who elaborated basic concepts such as unnatural narrators, storytelling modes and unnatural temporalities. Recently, there has been

extensive research on how unnatural narratives go beyond universal understanding of temporality, space, non-communicative narration and humans. On narratologists' part, David Herman, Jan Alber and Stefan Iversen point out a large variety of applications including media, painting, poetry, autobiography, and oral narratives, but none of scholars exclusively touch upon the key issue of narrativity in Buddhist texts like Ch'an Kōan. In this manner, applying unnatural narrative method to Kōan study seems a natural progression, as unnatural narrative not only deals with fiction or hyperfiction, but also address many issues brought out by Ch'an study.

So what is the unnatural approach proposed for textual analysis of Ch'an canon? It is necessary to start with an unnatural narrative model, then proceed to use this model to analyze some classics of Koan collections, and based on research questions, deductively draw the conclusion and find out the limitations of the study.

In light of this approach to Kōans, we come to know that many revolutionary practices employed by Ch'an master form a sharp contrast with religious ends used in other Buddhist branches that usually conform to a conventional doctrinal teaching. For the conventional Buddhist teaching represented by Mahayana Buddhism that follows India modes, salvation is based on the Noble Eightfold Path, which rejects theistic argument that there is a mystical being or an omnipotent creator. So, it emphasizes the importance of sutras, doctrines and religious knowledge, while Ch'an Buddhism prefers a "special transmission outside the doctrine, no dependence on words," which thereby generates many creative means of teaching and elements correlating to the feature "unnaturalness". As we have mentioned, for unnatural narratives, unnaturalness may develop in many levels of narration, as well as at the level of temporalities, space, acts of narration, or mind representations. Ch'an Kōans provide a large corpus for such study.

According to unnatural narratology, a narrator or a narratee in certain discourse may be an animal, a machine or a mythical entity. Bearing this in mind, we find lots of examples in Ch'an discourse. For instance, the second Kōans case in the *Gateless Gate* collection is concerned with an event happening between the master Baizhang and a wild fox. The wild fox in form of an old man appeared in the main hall where the master Baizhang delivered everyday sermons and the fox asked master a probing question about karmic causality. At this point, we encounter the third-person narrator in a human shape, but as the fox recounted its unfortunate experience, the story gradually unveils more details about the transformation from a human being to an animal and its reasons. As reader, we are amazed at such ironic narrative in text of Ch'an Buddhism, and we have to create a new cognitive model to transcend our real-world knowledge to comprehend this, but there is no extra description of whether the master felt shocked or not at his listener as a fox resembling a real human being. Actually the master was extremely composed when he dealt with the whole incident, as compared with his disciples. In the last part of the Kōan, when he informed all of his disciples that there would be a funeral service for a dead monk, his disciples felt very confused and cast doubt on it, for they thought everyone was in sound health in the monastery.

However, it turned out that a dead body of a fox was at the foot of a rock on a mountain, and Baizhang performed the ceremony of cremation for "him".

In addition to fox, such interaction between human and animal (or nonliving things) is common in Ch'an narratives, including serpents, dog, cat, horse, donkey, duck, etc. we regard this as one piece of unnatural narratives, because the case sounds physically and logically impossible for a soteriological teaching in real world. In other words, the represented scenarios should be impossible with regard to the "known laws governing the physical world or standard human abilities", as said by Jan Alber.

The word "unnatural" sounds unnatural, but some narratologists also use similar expression such as "against narration", "de-narration", "extreme narration", to deviate from mimetic framework of real word, and to reflect some aspects of unnaturalness in narratives. Hence unnatural narratives, as one of branches of postmodern narratology, can be identified as those texts that violate mimetic conventions by providing wildly improbable or strikingly impossible events. And Brian Richardson also holds that a work will not be considered unnatural unless it has a significant number of antimimetic scenes [16]. For Kōans of Ch'an discourse, they deconstruct the mimesis of actual speech situations and present logically or humanly impossible scenarios. Such prominent features just echo the unnatural in postmodernism, pointing to the challenges as well as opportunities to connect Ch'an text with unnatural narratology.

III. DIRECTIONS FOR AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF CH'AN KŌANS

Postclassical Narratology, contrast with Classical Narratology, is marked by many new perspectives on the forms and functions of narratives. Among its wide research applications such as cognitive study, rhetorical narrative, feminism, and unnatural narrative, we single out the "Unnatural Narrative Theory" for textual analysis of Ch'an Kōan. To move this type of research forward, three main objectives need to be clarified: 1) to explore the way how Ch'an masters attempt to go beyond any fixed linguistic framework by employing Kōan system as a means to achieve their religious goal; 2) to try out if a postclassical narratological approach complement the discourse analysis of Kōan; 3) to be aware of the connection between key thoughts of Ch'an discourse and unnatural narratology in the process of analysis.

To be specific, first, we need to explain the basic theoretical framework adopted. Therefore, clarifying what the term "unnatural" means within the framework of postclassical narratology and how it correlates with Ch'an Kōans will become the first step for further analysis of textual examples. Then, some distinct aspects of unnatural narratives like unnatural story worlds, unnatural minds and unnatural acts of narration should be examined with Kōan cases to inform basic mottoes of Ch'an and to prove how "mind is sealed with mind" from this perspective. Finally, a result can be drawn to illustrate that realizing one's innate status as an enlightened being, though it is not logically soluble and beyond conceptualization and words, is still anchored within its narrative discourse. Hence we may reveal the role of

postclassical narratology in analyzing Ch'an Kōans and demonstrate another way of probing and understanding the Ch'an wisdom.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper outlines the basic theoretical framework of unnatural narratives, which may serve as a new research paradigm to open up some questions like the following: What fresh vitality postclassical narratological approach can bring into the study of Ch'an Kōans? Has the Ch'an Kōan brought radically new forms of narrative? What are distinctive narrative structures of Ch'an discourse that suggests the transmission of the dharma outside the Buddhism scriptures? How "unnatural" is a Kōan system in conveying tacit truth and cuing disciples to realize the mind and see self-nature? It is impossible to find all of answers in one paper, but undoubtedly they will invite more attention and encourage further research. Moreover, it is of some importance to examine the part played by unnatural narrative in studying Ch'an Kōans, which may enhance the development of interdisciplinary approaches to its study, and possibly help achieve a better understanding of various aspects of religious experience. Specifically, to gain an understanding of how Ch'an Buddhists applying Kōan for teaching from another perspective will add a new dimension to the Buddhist teaching, and promote the study to the interface of postclassical narratology and Ch'an Buddhism.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest to this work. We declare that we do not have any commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in connection with the work submitted.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Wu Amiao came up with the conception of the work and drafted the paper; Ellen Y. Zhang gave the critical revision of the paper. Wu Amiao and Ellen Y. Zhang both had approved the final version of the paper.

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