



## **The Wild Fox Chan: The Practice of the Same, Critical Chan Liminality, and *Gong'an* Therapy in Times of Climate Crisis**

Chia-Ju Chang\*

### **Abstract**

Much of the way we respond to the climate change crisis today repeats our routinized old habits. For example, most people (including me) may respond to the crisis by repeating established consumption patterns, such as the use of reusable bags. While these provide relief, our basic way of life as consumers, and indeed the entire economic structure, has not changed. In other words, we are still collectively responding to an unprecedented large-scale climate crisis in a manner that is familiar to us without radically changing our cognition and our way of life. This is an interesting but unfortunate problem that humanity faces over and over. That is: when humanity is met with uncertainties in time of crisis, the response strategy is regressive. Instead of taking a radical move to revamp our way of life, we instinctively shrink back into our familiar (techno-capitalist) comfort zone of inertia and convenience, and use the easiest, low-cost ways to “save the planet” by doing token changes. What this suggests is a gap between our knowledge and action: when our human civilization is aware of its own crisis and must make changes immediately, we are caught and constrained by habitual (inert) thinking and behavior. Whether it is cultural (e.g., the scapegoat mechanism), subconscious (e.g., denial or repetitive obsessive-compulsive disorder), biological (e.g., forces like species reproduction, expansion, and maximization of resource), or karmic imprints (Skt. *vāsanā*;

---

\* Chia-Ju Chang, Professor, Brooklyn College, CUNY  
Manuscript received: 2023.01.09; Accept: 2024.01.03

Ch. *xiqi*). These habits are the basis of what I call, “the practice of the same.” Such practice prevents us from taking innovative measures to respond to the current crisis. Since these deeply ingrained habits have seriously affected our ability to respond to disasters, how then do we combat them? After articulating the array of “the practice of the same” that dictates every corner of our civilization, this paper proposes to turn to *gong’an* (Jp. *kōan*) to dismantle that dysfunctional habit of repetition. The soteriological practice aiming at realizing one’s Buddha nature provides a way to think about what I call “critical Chan liminality,” which deconditions us from the practice of the same. Here I use “Baizhang’s Wild Fox” (Ch. *Baizhang yehu*) as a case in point to illustrate how *gong’an* narrative.

Keywords: Anthropocene/climate crisis, Baizhang’s Wild Fox (*Baizhang yehu*), critical Chan liminality, *gong’an/kōan*, identification/the practice of the same

## 氣候變遷危機語境下的野狐禪： 同一性實踐和公案治療

張嘉如\*

### 摘 要

當今人類對氣候變遷危機的回應表現出令人不可思議的否認和淡漠。當我們回到問題的本身：知行不合一或知易行難，也就是，所知與實際所做之間明顯脫節時，這種癱瘓表明人類文明中的某個機制出現了問題，以至無法採取適當的行動。本文認為，問題的癥結出自人們的慣性思維和實踐。氣候變遷讓我們看到了一個有趣但非常不幸的現象，那就是：當人類意識到當前氣候危機的不可確定和不可掌控性時，我們採取的回應策略，是本能地縮回到熟悉的慣性舒適圈裡，而不是去接受不確定性背後所帶來的必要調適和改變。我們現今回應氣候變遷危機的方式，多半重複著慣性思維，不論是文化、潛意識或生物性層面，皆順應著某種同一性原則，這些同一實踐背後的代價是：我們無法以一個創新的方式來回應當前的危機。要解決同一實踐的問題，必須以解構同一性的臨界概念來突破同一性的困境。所以，在二十一世紀人類世末世的今天，我們更需要公案修行，以及公案這個文類。本文採用〈百丈野狐〉公案來作為案例探討，作為一個思考「批判式禪臨界」（critical Chan liminality）的文本實踐。公案修行讓我們進入一個「臨界閾限」，提供一個另類的認知和實踐視野。所以，公案這個文類正是人們此時此刻所

---

\* 張嘉如，紐約市立大學布魯克林學院教授

收稿日期：2023.01.09；接受日期：2024.01.03

需要的療癒工具。

關鍵詞：人類世／氣候變遷危機、百丈野狐、禪宗批判臨界、公案、同一／同一性實踐

The challenges we face in the world today, ranging from massive humanitarian crises and ecological catastrophes such as microplastic pollution of the planet's seas to the mega-extinctions happening across the globe, can come down to the problem of identification or what I call "the practice of the same." The way we respond to the climate change crisis today is largely a repetition, unconscious or conscious, of our old behavioral habits. Most people (including me) respond to the environmental crisis with our usual consumption patterns, such as using eco-bags or switching to an electric car. While these can provide relief, our basic lifestyle and mindsets as consumers, as well as our entire economic structure and ideology, are kept intact. Replacing single-use plastic bags with eco-friendly shopping bags or driving an electric car should be encouraged. However, if our environmental awareness only stays at the level of "shallow environmentalism," and fails to rise to a more critical level to reflect on what is at stake for humanity, we then cannot complain or wonder about the widening gap between environmental awareness and the worsening environmental condition.

In fact, conservationist shallow environmentalism may have been complicit in spreading the wrong message. That is: we don't need to change our current anthropocentric or capitalist epistemology in the face of the daunting challenge of climate change. We (middle-class consumers, corporations, and governments) are engaged in a collective trance of self-greenwashing to talk ourselves into believing that we can have our cake and eat it too by slightly adjusting consumption patterns. In other words, we all know that the current capitalist patterns of convenience and comfort are unsustainable, but we are only willing to align ourselves with variations of the same practice that safeguard the current status quo. This is in actuality a hidden form of climate change denial.

I submit that current climate denial, implicit and otherwise, to a large extent has to do with our repetitive inertia. Such an inertia (or *samsara*) derives from a tendency towards what I call “habitual propensity.” Habitual propensity refers to repetitive reinforcement of cognition and behavior, which results in an inflexibility to make radical alterations. To be fair, repetition is the stabilizing and sustaining basis of institutions, systems, history, and civilization, etc. However, when such habitual repetition reaches a state of equilibrium, it risks becoming an oppressive and coercive force that narrows our life experiences and imagination. Therefore, we need to be watchful of the enslavement of our own habitual propensity.

Habitual propensity arises from different sources in the domains of biology, psychology, language, economics, culture, and ideology. They can manifest as biological species reproductions, linguistic identification, and finally, mental and behavioral habituation (either in Freudian sense of psychological repetition or the Buddhist sense of karma imprints [Skt. *vāsanā*]). Habitual propensity is an energy basis for the practice of the same. Conditioned by repetition, the practice of the same ensures certainty but at the same time it entraps our daily life experience, allowing only modifications within the status quo.

The problem of repetition, or “identification” has been a central concern in Western philosophy and critical thinking. Several social and environmental critics have pointed out the destructiveness of the practice of the same. For example, the Frankfurt School critic, philosopher and cultural critic Marcuse (1964/1991) in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* provides a critique of the totalitarian and hegemonic nature of modern industrial and consumerist society as well as the imposition of technological rationality on every aspect of public life; the Indian physicist

and ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva in *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology* extends the practice of the same to criticize the colonizing transnational capitalist practice of mono-agriculturalism and biotechnology (Shiva, 1985).

In the context of the Anthropocene end-time crisis, the geologization of the *Homo sapiens*'s practice of the same has now become a totalizing geo-colonial force which creates an irreversible climate crisis. What is more concerning now is that the practice of the same has prevented us from making necessary changes to respond to the climate crisis, which demands a break from the samsaric loop of our lifestyle and economic system, and in turn manufactures ecological suffering (Skt. *dukkha*). To appropriate and slightly alter Albert Einstein's words: we can't solve our crisis with the same habitual energy that created the crisis. Henceforth, to tackle the climate dilemma we are in, we need to first break the equilibrium of the practice of the same.

As a de-colonializing project within the fields of contemporary interdisciplinary religious studies—"contemplative studies" calls for a "cognitive turn" and "critical first person perspective" via the use of contemplative methods as a tool for addressing environmental crisis.<sup>1</sup> I suggest a turn to Chan Buddhism and *gong'an* (Jp. *kōan*)—a Chan soteriological practice that aims at realizing one's Buddha nature, or namely, freeing oneself from *samsara* (a Pali/Sanskrit term which refers to the concept of rebirths or transmigration, and denotes the meaning of repetitive or cyclicity of all life, matter, existence)—as a contemplative coaching device

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "contemplative studies" is coined by Harold Roth. See Roth (2008) "Against Cognitive Imperialism." Also, in "A Pedagogy for the New Field of Contemplative Studies," he talks about the emphasis of "the critical first-person perspective" in Contemplative studies (Gunnlaugson et al., 2014).

to break old patterns for civilizational renewal. I elaborate an approach of critical Chan/Zen liminality as a way to decondition us from the practice of the same. Here I use “Baizhang’s Wild Fox” (Ch. *Baizhang yehu*)—a narrative about a human trapped in a vulpine body for 500 rebirths—as an example to illustrate how *gong’an* narrative addresses the issue of sameness or identification and provides radical strategies in times of climate change, an era that demands change rather than sameness.

By way of analogizing the *gong’an* genre to that of the bewitching fox, I show the shapeshifting capacity of the *gong’an* narrative that operates on different levels of consciousness. It seduces and betrays, conceals and reveals, confuses and clarifies, just like the trickster fox. Such a fox-like narrative hones our skills to be vigilant and resilient; it also enables us to be open to uncertainty, discrepancy, imperfection, and non-monocentric interpretations. This is the practice of un-same that the *gong’an* coaches us by nudging us to enter a “critical Chan liminality”—a modality of criticality that operates beyond the levels of ideology and ordinary consciousness—is what we need in time of the Anthropocene or climate crisis.

## I. The Practice of the Same in the Context of Climate Change

In “Deconstructing the Turn,” Clark (2013) rethinks the so-called “representational school of ecocriticism” in the context of climate change from a deconstructive perspective. He argues that the issue of climate change essentially “deconstructs many of the assumptions of previous reliable ecocriticism. He points out that the core of the current debate on climate change is not about whether it is scientifically proven (e.g., the truth about



climate change). Rather, the focus should center on the broader humanistic and intellectual implication of what climate change means for us and what challenges has it brought concerning the human cognitive system. (e.g., the possibility of reading, interpreting, and measuring), as well as our basic assumptions, including the concept of humanity.

To challenge or deconstruct the concept of humanity, in my view, begins with the deconstruction of humanity's practice of the same. In deconstructing the notion of humanity, Clark points out the absurd nature of the practice of the same as a strategy of responding to climate "change": our inclination to respond to the present unprecedented crises in a way that is familiar to us. Clark's point is well made and here for the sake of discussion I roughly classify the practice of the same into three modes: biological, representational, and psycho-temporal. These three oftentimes overlap and hence should be understood as different conceptualization of the practice of the same.

## **1. Biological Practice of the Same**

First and foremost, one of the greatest challenges of the climate change crisis for humanity is that it hits squarely humanity's Achilles heel: the practice of the same as a result of biological evolution. Due to inertial instincts, humans as a species are biologically incapable of coming to terms with the great complexity of climate crisis. Clark (2013) writes, "Our psychotic denial of climate change implies deep-rooted human biological inevitabilities such as flourishing, reproduction, expansion, and resource maximization." We evolved in a state of scarcity and precarity, necessitating having many children to ensure survival of the tribe since many children would die at an early age. We also evolved in a world of limited nutritional

resources, thus over-eating and over-producing of food became biological imperatives that operated through our built-in desires. While necessary for the species in the past, they have become detrimental to our future, but the biological/mental urges remain.

## 2. Representational Practice of the Same

The second one, the “representational practice of the same,” refers to an employment of a representational approach to create a linkage between two things, to use, for example, an image, symbol, or language to refer to a thing. Take climate change as an example, we use the representational mode to deal with climate crisis. This representational approach can be commonly observed in the scientific method of measuring, representing, reading, analyzing and interpreting climate. Clark points out that this representational approach to climate change misleads us to conceive climate warming as a scientific problem that is only to be “solved” through technological apparatus. Our current model of dealing with climate change (a representational mode) evokes the 19th century colonialist image of “the armchair anthropologist,” by “bringing the climate into the house” (or into our mobile phones), using data charts to mark out the atmospheric phenomenon outside the central air-conditioned enclave of our home or office. By way of data visualization, scientists translate, analyze, interpret, and provide a technical solution to “fix the climate,” while we consumers of signs read the weather in our palm (either our iPhone or Samsung) like the omnipresent gods. Once this way of digitizing or data-ficizing Mother Nature becomes the norm of our virtual or second reality, we become habituated into thinking that the planetary earth system is controllable. If anything, such over-reduced measurements and readings tell us more about ourselves; that is, they are a reminder of the

ego and finitude of the people behind them. Moreover, such a reading also reminds us of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of using technology to correctly predict, read, and interpret this data.

Such representational practice of the same can be seen in mainstream media culture's response to climate crisis. Take COVID-19 as an example, at the onset of the pandemic, the Hollywood film, *Contagion* (Dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2011)—an H1N1 flu virus inspired pandemic film—became one of the most viewed Hollywood films. One may wonder why mainstream culture was engaged in collective masochistic spectatorship. Beyond the masochistic pleasure, one suspects an identification impulse at work. For one thing, the representation mode of viewing in the mimetic form of life imitates art, including the similarities between coronavirus and MEV-1 (the imagined virus in the film), and other identical occurrences between COVID and the incidents in the film. The cinematic identification provides a familiarity with a mixed affect of pain and pleasure that is nonetheless assuring to us. Here the cinematic mode of representation imagines the crisis in a way that is not unlike the above-mentioned scientific visualization, which reduces a complex catastrophe to an illusory sense of controllability within the purview of the limited, and solvable, human scale. After all, as the ending shows, there is always a human hero/ine (here Dr. Ally Hextall) who will bring us out of the apocalypse.

Cultural representation plays a complicit role here. In mainstream culture such as Hollywood cinema, we often see how climate catastrophe is represented via other crises or how it is imagined as monsters that our human heroes or heroines must fight. *Godzilla* (Dir. Ishirō Honda, 1954) is a case in point, where the monster represents the potential environmental havoc unleashed by the atomic age. Furthermore, the Hollywood solution to climate

catastrophe is also no different from the way we react in our daily life. While our scientists use technologies to represent climate as controllable, the mainstream media resorts to the monster genre to represent climate threats, environmental minded consumers resort to renewable resources such as reusable shopping bags to replace disposable products. The underlying logic of identification has not changed. On the contrary, it proliferates. In addition to analogizing climate change to familiar catastrophes (e.g., comparing climate change to air pollution), the way we represent disasters is also the same. For example, we may externalize and alienate a disaster, imagining it as a monster or aliens in a science fiction movie that must be fought against and exterminated. By conceptualizing it as a familiar disaster story, scenario, and intention, our approach to climate change is a repetition of the same inertial logic. In response to unknown crises, we tend to reinforce our mimetic subconscious (a symptom of homogeneity) and seek security in uncertainty.

### **3. Psycho-Temporal Practice of the Same**

The third mode, “the psycho-temporal practice of the same,” is commonly found in people’s subconscious repetition of behavior. It operates via the mechanism of replacement. For example, Freud (1955: 145-146) writes about the “repetition compulsion” he observed in his patients: “The patient will not say that he remembers provocative and critical attitudes toward his parents’ authority, but will behave in this way toward the doctor.” In other words, the patient unconsciously repeats early life behavior in response to the condition many years later. In a way, we can see that such a replacement mechanism as a reaction against the demand for civilizational conformity where instincts are repressed (Freud, 2021), here the Freudian

therapeutic transference (an example of replacement) provides a way to break the spell of neurotic repetition. It is a mode of the practice of the same, a replacement model, which sets out to strengthen the patients' egos by helping them find new, more liberating substitutes for old forms of satisfaction.

Such a psycho-temporal practice of the same is doomed to disintegrate, because the new situation is different from the old, making these behaviors unhelpful, if not destructive. This rings particularly true in time of climate uncertainty. In recognizing the uncertainty of climate change (also known as "reality"), we respond in a manageable, predictable way. Such a response is also found in international organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). While scientists have recognized the sudden and unpredictable nature of climate change as a symptom of long-term meteorological observations, the IPCC paradoxically emphasizes a predictable and progressive orientation of human behavior in climate change. The point here is that our perceptions and inertia limit our ability to respond realistically to climate change.

If we frame our climate response from a psychoanalytical perspective, it becomes obvious that our psychological habitual propensity conditions us to repeat earlier memories of comfort, instead of breaking the patterns and seeking solutions under conditions that require a creative response. In a way, we can see that the Freudian solution of replacement such as transference can be viewed as a form of differential repetition to bring forth innovation. However, when this process of differential repetition is inhibited by an overly powerful "super ego" (that is, the overwhelming, non-negotiable "Law of the Father"), it will produce neurotic distress, and then emerge in a repetitive, compulsive pattern of behavior. Take the behavior of recycling as an example, though such behavior seems innocent and praiseworthy and

without a doubt, should be encouraged, however, being overly obsessed with conservation (like myself who practices to an obsessive degree with a great deal of guilt) may indicate that one is suffering from the above-mentioned neurotic distress triggered by the entrapment of the capitalist Law of the Father.

The above-mentioned three modes of practice of the same oftentime overlap because they derive from the same logic of repetition. Regardless, from here it becomes clear that the question of how to respond to climate uncertainties is not a mere scientific question or quest, but also something that humanists must play a role in. The logic behind scientific and technical solutions is still conditioned by human thinking and consciousness, which is the logic and practice of the same. In the face of the uncertainty of climate change, we continue to position ourselves as subjects who read and interpret nature as data, in a conviction that objectified nature can be controlled through the control of nature as texts. When we draw analogies or equations between present and past disasters to create a sense of familiarity and control, this sense of security often has nothing to do with solving environmental problems but is a form of denial.

## II. Logic of Identification and its Deconstruction

In Western metaphysics, the conceptual basis of the practice of the same can be philosophized as identification thinking ( $A=A$ ) or the logic of sameness. And we can say that classical Western metaphysics, which heralds modern science, is bound by such identification principles. From the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides's (515-450 BCE) "identification of

thing” all the way to Hegel’s dialectics of “absolute identity of subject and object,” we see the impulse toward sameness at work. This logic of identity attempts to achieve truth through the identification of words and the nature of things, avoiding contradictions at all costs (e.g., the difference between the individuality or emptiness of things, the transmutation of space and time).

Our identification propensity explains the disparity between environmental awareness and environment deterioration. The paradox here is that when crises require us to break out of our old inertia to respond creatively, we collectively revert to the principle of sameness/identification to respond to unmanageable crises in our familiar methods. To break the spell of identification, one way is to commit to the practice of nonidentity by way of deconstructionist methodologies, which seek to expose the myth of identification. For example, the Swiss linguistic-semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) linguistic structuralism pointed out the arbitrary relationship between *signifiant/signifier* and *signifié/signified* (Culler, 1976: 18-19). Cultural workers such as psychoanalysts, the Frankfurt social and cultural critics, the post-structuralist philosophers, and post-colonial environmental activists have provided a diagnosis of various human practice of the same.

In critiquing the practice of the same, the Frankfurt school thinker T. W. Adorno (1903-1969), like his other Frankfurt colleagues, employs negative methodology to deconstruct the logic of identification. Adorno’s (1973) negative method aims to expose the difference between things (reality) and concepts (representation), emphasizing the non-conceptual, individual, and particular nature of things themselves. Negative dialectics confronts contradictions that arise when direct experience or reality (such as climate change) collides with our concepts or expectations (data, reading, and

interpretation). Adorno's method of negation challenges the unassailable Law of the Father governed by the principle of sameness (e.g., today's capitalist technological Anthropocene system), highlighting the uncertainty and uncontrollability of non-sameness (reality). Such negative dialectics (together with, for example, Marcuse's "great refusal") have the potential to guide our society out of collective (capitalist-Anthropocene) inertia and repetition compulsions in the face of crisis.

Adorno's criticism of the conceptualization of the sameness of things can be seen in his "conceptual fetishism" and the "logic of disintegration" (i.e., the disintegration of the concept of the subject of knowledge due to the non-identity of things). His negative dialectics reminds us of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century teachings of Nāgārjuna. We can say that this Indian Buddhist philosopher's method is the most radical form of "negative dialectics." Nāgārjuna uses the method of negation to destroy all false perceptions and identifications of self, self-nature, materiality, and language, to manifest the Buddha mind. From the viewpoint of "dependent origination" (Skt. *pratīyasamutpāda*; Ch. *yuanqi*) all things in the world are predicated on "emptiness" (Skt. *śūnyatā*; Ch. *kongxing*) that is, once conditions change, nothing remains. Here, in thinking about Anthropocene healing, we can retool the conception of dependent origination to refer to the illusory nature of language and concepts that ossify forms of relationships, which are otherwise fluid in their non-identity state, hence, can never represent the true state of things.

Such a practice of the same is also seen in language, as Saussure's linguistic structuralism informed us that language itself is governed by a logic of imitation. This logic binds us to a movement of sameness that prevents us from coming close to reality. While Western philosophers have misinterpreted



this repetition as a sign of coherence (or truth), Nāgārjuna instead questions such a principle of identification or sameness because it prevents us from seeing reality. At the same time, our fixation on the conceptual identification of things and experiences leads to violence and domination over human or non-human others (Ch. *feiren*; Skt. *amanuśya*), which is the source of suffering in the world. Whether it is things and concepts (e.g., our limited perceptions of COVID-19 or environmental disasters), past and present (e.g., the projection of our past traumatic experiences onto our present partner relationships, limiting our imagination in choosing a mate), present and future (e.g., our present perceptions of the climate change crisis and projections of the future), none of these can be reconciled. Contradictions, differences, individuality, and unknown uncertainties are bound to arise.

In the current age of the capitalist Anthropocene, to free oneself from the practice of the same becomes a deconstructive project of decolonialization. While it helps alleviate Homo sapiens's ongoing expansion of the practice of the same ethnically and geo-ecologically, the deconstruction itself is what is needed. In this sense, we can see a conversion of secular and soteriological projects via that deconstruction.

To conceive *gong'an* study as a project of deconstructing the practice of the same, we shall first turn to the Buddhist unconscious minds, informed by the Yogācāra School of Mahayana Buddhism. According to the Yogācāra School, our deeper layer of consciousness, the *alayavijñāna* (Ch. *alaiyeshi*), the Buddhist equivalent of an impersonal and collective unconscious, is comprised of the subliminal, pre-emergent or pre-linguistic memories, habits, or symbols, which Yogācāra would call the seeds or *bijas*. As an impersonal and collective unconscious, it “is a subliminal reservoir of memories, habits, tendencies, and future possibilities.” (Jiang, 2006: 8) These *bijas* condition

our experiences of life and the production of meaning; they are rooted in the pre-discursive realm, even before we are born, but society expects us to make them fit pre-established public meanings.

From a Chan Buddhist standpoint, the pre-discursive realm, or the “upstream of the mind,” is what prevents us from seeing the real and taking proper actions without the projections of *bijias*, be it the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance, the four erroneous views or cognitions as elucidated in the *Diamond Sutra*, all of these seeds or habitual energy, have a tremendous impact on the wellbeing, now survival, of our downstream material realm or the external environment (Ch. *waijing*).

### III. De-Conditioning the Practice of the Same

#### 1. The Importance of the Kōan Genre

In the West, mainstream culture tends to view the exotic Chan Buddhism as a practice as a form of “just sitting” (Jp. *shikantaza*) or mindful meditation. This quietist and mindful practice, which promotes the stillness of the mind and mindedness without a catalyzation of transcendental knowledge (Skt. *prajñāpāramitā*), is limited as a critical tool that targets the practice of the same with its uncritical quietist tendency. This is not to mention the capitalist appropriation of traditional mindful practice. Unfortunately, the popularity of contemporary appropriation of mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) in the West marginalizes Chan’s emphasis on seeing one’s own Buddha Nature—obtaining the wisdom that shatters the delusory of self-

other dualism, one of the significant causes of the ecological crisis.<sup>2</sup> It also tempers the activist (or the Buddhistic) potentiality of Buddhism.

Quite different from quietist or mindful practice of meditation, Chan *gong'an* practice invites an onto-epistemological breaking-through via the so-called enlightenment experience (Ch. *kaiwu*; Jp. *kenshō*), which usually takes the form of a “sudden eruption of the real.” With this one is able to glimpse for a very brief moment into fundamental reality. To gain and recognize this experience requires mental discipline, not to be mindful, but quite on the contrary, the ability to lose oneself in the realm of a deeper and empty state of consciousness (Ch. *wuxin* or “no-mind”) while maintaining a lingering, investigatory sensation of doubt. The element of doubt in the context of *gong'an* meditation is a liminal sensation that is induced when the mind enters a borderline space of thinking and non-thinking with concentrated mental vigilance.

The idea of liminality is important in understanding the Chan way of engaging or solving a problem. The term “liminality” originated from its Latin root “limin,” which means “threshold.” It refers to a “betwixt and between” or in-between state, a transitory and transformative space, the non-identical state or the basis of language, logos and civilization. Take the problem of the practice of the same as an example. The way *gong'an* solves this problem is to enter this unfamiliar in-between liminal mental state

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, John Cage, influenced by D.T. Suzuki, declared that the purpose of art (including music) was “to sober and quiet the mind...” (Baas & Jacob, 2004: 166). David McMahan points out the modern appropriation of traditional “mindfulness” into a form of self-therapy where the practice of mindfulness is repurposed and reconfigured as “a technique for self-discovery, self-discipline, self-transformation, and physical and mental health outside of formulation.” See McMahan (2008: 184).

beyond logic and reasoning. Only when we transcend the humanist scale of analytical thinking can we begin to engender a fresh perspective. The Chan way to engage complexity is to tap into a larger domain of consciousness, be it the Buddha mind or impersonal cosmic consciousness, which demands a process of de-identification.

This way of problem solving which I call “critical Chan liminality” is crucial in the Anthropocene end-time. Not only do we urgently need the profound wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā*, which is characterized by an understanding of fundamental emptiness of all phenomena, we also need a set of “critical liminal toolkit” to catalyze a “deep resistance” against capitalist appropriation for promoting the dangerously addictive and irresponsible practice of the same. While *gong’an* studies coaches us to solve problems from a deeper mind that produces transcendental wisdom, the quietist or mindful meditation is short of such activation of a complicated working of the Buddha mind. In this light, it is not hard to see that the Western mindfulness practice maintains the current status quo of current oppressive system (or the practice of the same), instead of transforming it.

In the following, let me turn to a specific *gong’an* to further crystalize the notion of critical Chan liminality and to demonstrate how this genre can help decondition us from the practice of the same. “Baizhang’s Wild Fox,” the second *gong’an* from the *The Gate of No-Gate* (Ch. *Wumenguan*), a *gong’an* collection compiled in the early 13th century by the Chinese Chan master Wumen Hueikai (1183-1260), is a case in point. The first half of this *gong’an* is as follows:

*Whenever Master Baizhang gave a dharma talk in front of his assembly, an old man always attended the talk, standing far afield. When the*

*community dispersed, he left as well. One day he didn't leave. The master asked, "Who are you?" The old man answered, "A long time ago I resided on this mountain as abbot. Once a student asked me whether a great adept still falls into cause and effect. I answered no, a great adept does not fall into cause and effect. As a result, I was reincarnated as a wild fox for five hundred years. Now I ask the master to please give me a turning phrase so that I may be free of this vulpine body." Then he asked Baizhang, "Does a great adept fall into cause and effect or not?" The master said, "A great adept does not ignore cause and effect." With these words the old man had a great awakening. He bowed and said, "I've been released from the wild fox body." (Wumenguan, CBETA, T48, no. 2005, p. 293a16-24; trans. by Chia-Ju Chang)*

This gist of the *gong'an* evolves around false cognition ("does not fall into cause and effect") and its consequence (namely, 500 rebirths or repetition in the same lifeform). In this *gong'an*, the practice of the same is thematized, emerging in the form of reincarnation. Here, an explicit connection between cognition (epistemology) and repetition (practice) is also established. So here we see, in the case of this fox *gong'an*, how this "narrative of enlightenment" serves as a diagnostic tool in identifying the cause underlying a practice of the same, as well as strategies of breaking it. An ethical dimension of epistemology is evinced, that is, the way we perceive and understand the dharma or the world has a causal and long-term consequence, hence, epistemology matters. Here, the *gong'an* nudges us to tend to the onto-epistemological dimension of our existence or the Anthropocene crisis: What traps us in the loop of samsara? How do we free ourselves from samsara or the practice of the same?

As a narrative that derives from Chinese folklore,<sup>3</sup> one of the main characters here is the old man, who is in fact a fox in disguise. The fox symbol can be widely found in many folk cultures and mythology. It is often imagined as a capricious, bewitching, shapeshifting trickster figure or as a spiritual guide, an agent of more-than-human wisdom that provides insights that transcend the narrow purview of humanity. The fox character, however, in this *gong'an* narrative marginalizes the trickster or shaman aspect of vulpine symbology, as it is overshadowed by a specific cultural coloration that is predominately Confucian—the anthropocentric Confucian vision that is concerned with proper hierarchical boundaries and unambiguous naming (Ch. *zhengming*), ranking, or identification. Such a Confucian practice of the same has a propensity for identity and a distaste for nonidentity, as exemplified in the phrase of “confuses purple for red” from *The Analects*. An orthodox, humanist reading divests the subversive potentiality of the wild fox, who is the Anthro-civilizational Other, a liminal figure that signifies both wildness and animality. “Falling into the body of the fox” functions as a trope of the “fallen sage” or a failed teacher who “confuses purple for red” (i.e., mistaking “not falling into the karmic law” for “not dismissing the karmic law”). Here we see how animals (fox) as metaphor (to think of identification in metaphoric terms) become a surrogate for the falling of humanity, not different from the snake in the Garden of Eden. When we metaphorically designate animals and wildness as a site of deviation (e.g., the incorrect view), it has an effect on the material realm. In the context of the current

---

<sup>3</sup> Heine writes, “The koan narrative bears a striking morphological affinity with folklore tales in medieval China and Japan dealing with the exploits of shapeshifting, trickster foxes who seduce or possess unsuspecting victims and can only be eliminated by ritual exorcism.” See Heine (1996: 259).

sixth species extinction, it is imperative to inject a critical posthuman and multispecies discourse to redeem the wild fox Chan!

## 2. Rethinking the Wild Fox Chan (yehu chan) in the Age of the Sixth Extinction Event: Multispecies and “Animetaphor”

From the analysis above, we can see that, in breaking the loop of repetition, the narrative also works on the epistemological level. With this epistemological consideration, here I delve into a non-anthropocentric epistemology in *gong'an* or in Buddhism in general to further disentangle the practice of the same. Here the “one realm four views” (Ch. *yijing sijian*) helps articulate a hidden, vulpine perspective embedded in the fox-human figure. Two examples come to mind. The Ming Dynasty Chan Master Yongming Yanshou (904-976) in *Xinfu zhu* (“An Exegesis to the Ode of the Heart”) uses water as an element that opens to the perceptual and experiential interpretation:

*“People see only water, ghosts see pus rivers, heaven sees colored glass, fish and dragons cave houses.” A variation of this also found in the Ming Dynasty, where a Yogācāra monk and scholar, Mingyu’s (1544-1633 CE) Cheng weishi lun suquan (“The secular interpretation of Cheng weishilun”) states that “the same water is seen by the celestial beings as the precious land of glaze, by the human beings as the clear water, by the hungry ghosts as the river of pus and blood, and by the fish and dragons as their homes.” (Xinfu zhu, CBETA, X63, no. 1231, p. 143b20; trans. by Chia-Ju Chang)*

Ecocritic Timothy Morton supplies a modern variation of this inadvertently when he says “A shower of rain is a bath for this bird. It’s a spawning pond

for these toads” (Morton, 2017).

From the elaboration of “one water, four views,” we see how Buddhism can be part of the decolonialization project that deconstructs the Homospeciest vision and practice of the same.<sup>4</sup> The cluster of *Yogācāra* texts is in sync with contemporary multispecies studies. Both aim to dismantle anthropocentric hierarchy, promote equality for all sentient beings across all existences, and affirming divergent worldviews and lifeworlds beyond the human realm. “One water four view” provides a textual basis for developing Buddhist multispecies ethics.

Now moving beyond the scope of multispecies epistemology, from a posthumanist perspective, such a more-than-human epistemology (as illustrated in “one realm/water four views”) has yet to dismantle speciesist thinking altogether despite its deconstruction of anthropocentric and monospeciesist epistemology that shapes our planet. Here a rigid speciesist boundary still needs to be further dissolved, even the idea of species itself.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, how do we think beyond our current categorization of things? can we think of animals not as animals but as metaphors? Or vice versa, can we think of metaphors not as metaphors but as animals? Here let me begin with Lippit’s (2008) discussion of “animal metaphor”/“animetaphor” to help think through a new alliance. In thinking about animal as metaphor, Lippit argues that “the animal functions not only as an exemplary metaphor but, within the scope of rhetorical language, as an

<sup>4</sup> The contribution of the “Buddhist more-than-human epistemology” informed by the Buddhist cosmology of the six realms of existence ranging from gods to beasts, and demons further supports the animistic or supernationist vision of multispecies studies where these non-human entities are deemed as part of natural reality.

<sup>5</sup> Here we can see, in the context of multispecies studies, the term “species” refers to an assemblage of intimate relations of things. See van Dooren et al. (2016: 5).



originary metaphor.” He further elaborates,

*One finds a fantastic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor—the animal is already a metaphor; the metaphor an animal. Together they transport to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression: animal and metaphor; a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition not a metaphor; antimetaphor—‘animetaphor.’ The animetaphor may also be seen as the unconscious of language, of logos. (Lippit, 2008: 165)*

This mysterious, if not puzzling, passage with regards to the relationship between animal and metaphor proposes an alternative ordering, classification, and configuration of things. Here, animetaphor is what gives birth to language, logos, or shall I say, “human” civilization? How then do we ingest the idea of animetaphor or “metaphor made flesh” from the perspective of Buddhist transmigration so as to formulate a “Buddhist animetaphor.”

First, animetaphor prompts us to think about animal liminality. To conceive animetaphor in a mythological trope, the figure of centaur comes to mind. The half human, half animal mythical creature borders at threshold of humanity (the signifier or metaphor) and animality (the signified); they are where humanity and animality meet, a liminal mesh that not only “transport to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life,” but also pushes the language (logos and civilization) into a precarious zone of uncertainty, which is not a deadening zone. On the contrary, it is a lively zone where things come alive, where, as the etymological root of the word animal suggests “energy” or “breathe.” When humanity is put to sleep (or in the Chan sense of the phrase, “the great death”), the suppressed “non-humanity” or wildness/wilderness comes alive. Whenever there’s a large-

scale catastrophe that drives humans out of former habitats, for example Chernobyl, the Korean Demilitarized Zone, or even roads and freeways during the early weeks of COVID-19, wilderness returns.

In this sense, an animetaphor is dangerous, as Mary Douglass would agree, as the “metaphor made flesh” is an impure, heterogeneous being (either an amalgamation of human or fox), this figure is a “liminal persona” (“threshold person”; here person can refer to a human or non-human) who “elude[s] or slip through the network of classifications that normal locate states and positions in cultural space.” (Turner, 1969/1991: 59). Normative paradigms, visions, and practices such as the conception of well-defined speciesist boundaries are tentatively suspended, momentarily decontextualized from the logic of identification. This is the space of Morton’s dark ecology, characterized by melancholic affect and ethics, which is quite in sync with the other deconstructive scholars.<sup>6</sup> Such a liminal darkness may well be the crack, as the Canadian singer Leonard Cohen (1934-2016) invokes in the song *Anthem*, where the light shines through.

The fox man character in the *gong’an* embodies this liminal animetaphor. Being an outsider of humanity, as the narrative has it that he would appear apart from the assemblage during Baizhang’s sermon, the fox old man signifies a pre-civilizational, indeterminate state of non-identity. The liminal status prompts different readings. For example, while the fox inside the human wilds the human, the human inside the fox humanizes the fox. The collapse of speciesist category or the fluidity across species opens the

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, Claire Colebrook in contemplating on the lack of foundations that leads to a nihilistic affect as a more ethical (or paradoxically, more responsive) move than the opposite that derives from a foundation coming from good reading and thinking. See Clark (2013: 21).

narrative up to various non-normative and liberating interpretations. Master Wumen's enigmatic statement about the old man's joyful becoming-animal becomes sensible: "if we understand..., we will understand how this old man has enjoyed five hundred rebirths as a wild fox." (Sekeida, 1985: 32). At this level, the posthumanist Chan approach to the theme of "becoming animals"<sup>7</sup> (both metaphorically in human language and literally in the Buddhist sense of transmigration) subverts conventional antagonism toward animal lifeworlds.

In the economy of the Buddhist multispecies and posthuman hermeneutics—one that is also informed by the idea of transmigration. Here flesh and metaphor collapse on the trans-temporal dimension, which makes the fluidity of interpenetration or intermingling of metaphor and animal possible: the humanity (the old man) is the metaphor for animal (fox), the animal is the metaphor for humanity. As an animetaphor, we can regard the fox aspect of the old man as an enfleshed (or "in/carnated) embodiment of *vasana* (residual habitual energy or propensity), reified in the animal form.

In thinking beyond conventional categorization of things, shouldn't we also extend the consideration of metaphor to that of genre to examine the mutual infusion of animal (here fox) and the genre of *gong'an* to see how animals as *gong'an* and *gong'an* as animals? As I will show below, the *gong'an* genre refuses to be assimilated into any existing order due to its "transcendental otherness" and serves as a liminal space to contain animal

---

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1986: 13) in *Kaflia: Toward a Minor Literature* explain the concept of "becoming animal" as follows: "To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out a path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of de territorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs".

*jouissance*.<sup>8</sup> A collapse in categorical thinking about genre and animal should hence be considered.

### 3. *Gong'an* Narrative as Fox

A narrative as capricious and cunning as *gong'an* is likened to fox the trickster. As a lively narrative in the sense of its soteriological functionality, we can say that the liveliness of *gong'an* imbues and injects life (animal) energy. It is a genre that allows us to enter a liminal realm to experience *jouissance* from which the radically rejected object of abject derives and where the meaning collapses. As fox the trickster, if we take the narrative at face value, we are then tricked by the delusory façade of textuality (the surface-orthodox layer). Only through piercing through the surface of the text to get beneath the coercive “fallen sage” reading of the narrative can we then enter a deeper layer of the text that taps into the liberatory liminal dimension. In this substratum of consciousness, the fox is a psycho-metaphor, or “inner fox,” which from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, symbolizes repressed childhood memories, the basis of our compulsive practice of the same. From a *Yogācāric* perspective, the inner fox symbolizes *bijias* from the beginninglessness. These hidden elements trap us in the spellbound “fox lair.” Here the 500 reincarnations serve as a temporal trope of repetition or delusory repetition in the form of samsaric loop. From this psychological standpoint, we can interpret Baizhang’s encounter with the wild fox

---

<sup>8</sup> The theory of abjection by the French philosopher Kristeva (1982), which stands in contrast to Lacan’s concept of the object of desire, serves as a reference point to discuss the fox character’s abjection and enjoyment (*jouissance*). This vulpine character represents untamed animality and disgust (as in the form of corpse, the ultimate abjection) that is precluded from the symbolic realm of humanity.

(appearing in the form of the old man) as a neurotic eruption of the hidden habitual energy or *vasana* that has emerged from the *alaya* consciousness or, in the Freudian sense, the repressed memories from childhood that demands the Chan master's attention and response.<sup>9</sup>

If we read the second half of the *gong'an* narrative. After Baizhang gave a turning phrase per request of the old man, the old man was liberated and asked Baizhang to perform a proper funeral ceremony for him. In the aftermath of this fantastical event, Baizhang recounted the whole story. Upon hearing this, his disciple Huangbo asked, "In the olden days, the ancient gave only one wrong answer, which led to 500 rebirths as a wild fox. What if he gave the correct answer?" No sooner had Huangbo finished the question than his teacher motioned him to come forward. Without waiting for his teacher to act, Huangbo boxed his ear. Master Baizhang clapped his hands and said, "There is a red-bearded man in the West, and there is a red-bearded man here! I didn't think there was one here!" (Sekeida, 1985: 31).

Huangbo's iconoclastic act of boxing his teacher, which without a doubt is a gesture of an anti-Confucian teacher-student hierarchy, is in fact a classical technique commonly found in the Ancestral Chan (Ch. *zushi chan*). It is heuristic device that aims to produce an awakening effect. Other examples come to mind: Zhaozhou's great shout, Mazu nose-twisting, Juzhi finger-cutting, Deshan's stick, Rinzai's great shout, to name a few. The experience of "enlightenment" is triggered when the practitioner is temporarily suspended from a habitual way of thinking and practice. Here we can say that these non-verbal, strange actions transform the *gong'an* narrative

---

<sup>9</sup> This interior, psychological reading of the otherworldly fox/monk character is also indicated in Heine's (1996: 259) rhetorical question as "the deluded side of Pai-chang [Baizhang]".

into a liminal performance, where new or spontaneous responses to the same old familiar pattern of practice help inject new energy and fresh insights.

Huangbo's subversive action, highly praised by his teacher, not only provides food for thought about Chan's emphasis on the importance of anti-authority for renewal, the spontaneous yet disruptive gesture demonstrates the value of defamiliarization, contradiction, paradox and even nonsense in sabotaging the vision or practice of the same, here the "conceptual proliferation" (Skt. *papañca*; Ch. *xilun*) as seen in his deceptive question ("What if he gave the correct answer?"). As both Adorno and Nāgārjuna would argue, contradiction, paradox, and negation are closer to truth or reality than identification. Non-identification is also a way to escape the trap of representation or language imitation, because it is open to the dynamic world of experience. It de-categorizes things (de-identifies humans as humans, for example), thereby producing unknown, creative things, and injecting new points of view. The *gong'an*, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" serves as a compelling example that invites us to think beyond our habitual association with the idea of hand-clapping. It prompts us to explore and appreciate alternative interpretations of sound and hand-clapping. Therefore, the key to our solution is not how to regulate and solidify the principle of identity, but how to use the element of contradiction or paradox to loosen it. At the same time, these seemingly nonsensical actions shatter what Charles Taylor calls "the buffered self," leading us into the deep consciousness of "the porous self." This ontological porosity and cognitive plasticity may be what we need to survive in time of Anthropocene uncertainty.

## IV. Conclusion

It is true that although Chan Buddhism in the West has served as “the finger that points to the Moon” to guide Western civilization that is in decline. Chan/Zen has inspired intellectuals since the time of Allen Watts, Burton Watson, D.T. Suzuki, the Kyoto School, Gary Snyder, to name a few. The theme of the intimacy between humanity and nature has been reinforced in Chan literature with its emphasis on the communion with the pre-industrial vision of a pristine Nature or what Morton (2007) calls “the beautiful Soul.” (*Ecology without Nature*). In times of the 21st century Anthropocene-climate crisis, this beautiful soul syndrome has become a prison that bind us in the addictive and delusory samsaric realm like capitalism, which blindfolds us from seeing our climate reality.

In this paper, I zoom in on the ingrained habits, or what I call, “the practice of the same”—as part of beautiful soul syndrome one could say—that hinders our ability to take innovative measures in response to the crisis. To combat this, I turn to *Linji* Chan (Jp. *Rinzai*), the iconoclastic school of Chan Buddhism, as an alternative to Western mindfulness practice as *phármakon* for our current crisis. This practice, exemplified by the case of “Baizhang’s Wild Fox,” helps to dismantle the habit of repetition and allows us to enter a threshold that blurs the boundary between humanity and non-human realms, offering alternative perspectives. This state of critical Chan liminality is proposed as a necessary approach in times of climate change, an era that demands change rather than sameness. Such Chan liminality, a borderline or non-identity thinking that needs to take place in an altered state of consciousness brings us out of the all-too-human scale and tunnel vision of calibration of things that leads to the Anthropocene crisis.

## References

- Wumenguan* (《無門關》), CBETA, T48, no. 2005.
- Xinfu zhu* (《心賦注》), CBETA, X63, no. 1231.
- Adorno, T. W. (1973). *Negative Dialectics*, E. B. Ashton (Trans.), New York: Routledge.
- Baas, J., & Jacob, M. J. (2004). *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- Clark, T. (2013). "The Deconstructive Turn in Environmental Ecocriticism," *Symploké*, 21, 1-2: 11-26.
- Culler, J. (1976). *Saussure*, Glasgow: William Collins Sons.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1986). *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, D. Polan (Trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Freud, S. (1955). "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through," *The Case of Schreber; Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 12: 1911-1913.
- (2021). *Civilization and Its Discontents*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Gunnlaugson, O., Sarath, E. W., Scott, C., & Bai, H. (Eds.). (2014). *Contemplative Approaches to Learning and Inquiry across Disciplines*, Albany: SUNY Press.
- Heine, S. (1996). "Putting The 'Fox' Back in The 'Wild Fox Koan': The Intersection of Philosophical and Popular Religious Elements in The Ch'an/Zen Koan Tradition," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 56, 2: 257-317.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, New York: Hyperion.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Jiang, T. (2006). *Contexts and Dialogue, Contexts and Dialogue: Yogacara Buddhism and Modern Psychology on the Subliminal Mind*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Lippit, A. M. (2008). *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, Minneapolis:



University of Minnesota Press.

Marcuse, H. (1964/1991). *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston: Beacon Press.

McMahan, D. (2008). *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Morton, T. (2007). *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Boston: Harvard University Press.

— (2017). “Subscendence,” *e-flux Journal*, 85, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156375/subscendence/>

Roth, H. (2008). “Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies,” *Religion East and West*, 8: 1-26.

Sekeida, K. (1985). *Two Chan Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, New York: Weatherhill.

Shiva, V. (1985). *Monocultures of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*, London: Zed Books.

Turner, V. (1969/1991). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Van Dooren, T, Kirksey, E., & Münster, U. (2016). “Multispecies Studies Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities*, 8, 1: 1-23.

