SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS TO A STUDY OF RHETORICAL DEVICES IN CHÁN YÜLÜ 禪語錄 ENCOUNTER DIALOGUES

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In the few last decades, Chán texts in general, but texts from the yûlû and Lamp History genres specifically, have been scrutinized for historically reliable, ‘authentic’ traces, as supposed to later ‘fabrications’ and ‘forgeries.’ While these certainly are interesting questions that have advanced our understanding of the development of Chán Buddhism, my reading here will take a different approach to these texts. I will try to take the received texts seriously as texts, and will try to understand what kind of image of the Chán School is created in these texts, what kinds of questions seem important and what solutions are proposed in these texts. In short, my reading will be closer to the reading of these texts as literary works than as historical narratives, with the primary goal of understanding how these texts function. I will, thus, not argue about what parts of a text are trustworthy and what parts not, but will rather just take the text at face value. Furthermore, for the sake of brevity, in quotations and discussions I will just say ‘Mâzû said’ or ‘Linji shouted,’ as if these were actual facts reported, rather than each time add in parentheses ‘this is what the text says, but of course we cannot know for sure if this really happened as reported.’

The text under consideration here is the Jingdé chuándēng lù 景德傳燈 錄 (hereafter: JDCDL) of the year 1004, a text not usually considered part of the yûlû genre in a narrow sense, as yûlû only started to appear later in the 11th century.1 However, these distinctions are mostly relevant to the overall structure of a yûlû, the context of its composition and the constituent parts. At a more basic level, the part of the yûlû that deals with the interactions of a master with his disciples and visitors is structurally very similar to the entries for a master in the so-called Lamp Histories, of which the JDCDL is the paradigmatic text; this is what has been called kien mondo 機緣問答

1 For a more thorough discussion of the yûlû genre, its constituents and development, see Wittern 1998:51–87.
Meaning of the Coming of the Patriarch

One of the most frequent, if not the most frequently asked question in the Chán records is the question about the ‘Meaning of the Coming of the Patriarch.’ In effect, this is a rhetoric shorthand to an inquiry about the meaning and essence of the Chán teaching (to be understood also to be a question about the specific teaching), as expounded by the interlocutor who receives the question.

To give an estimate of the importance of this question in the Chán records, I will provide figures derived from queries against the CBETA database (in version 19 of February 2008). These figures should, of course, be considered just as a rough estimate and not much more, but they will provide a slightly firmer ground than just a gut feeling after having read some of the texts. For the searches reported here, I selected a subset of the texts with the help of the CBETA categorized catalogue, which includes all the texts in Category 17, Chánzōng būlèi 禪宗部類 and also the texts from Subcategory 14, Chánzōng zhuàn 禪宗傳 of Category 18 Shízhuàn būlèi 史專部類, altogether 344 texts with almost 28 million characters; the maximum distance for ‘near’ searches (+ sign in rows 3 and 4 of Table 1) has been set to 15 characters.

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2 See Yanagida 1983:185–205 and especially 204 (n. 25), where the first compound for ‘encounter’ is defined.
3 The CD-ROM version has been used here, which is distributed free of charge, but can also be downloaded from http://www.cbeta.org/download.
4 The character counts are not available directly from the CD-ROM version, they have been made using the XML files available from the CBETA website using a script written for that purpose.