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“Buddhism and the Barbarian in Chinese Zen”

A Talk by Dr. Christopher Byrne at McGill University

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On February 15th, 2018, Dr. Christopher Byrne from McGill’s Department of East Asian Studies (EAS) delivered a talk “Buddhism and the Barbarian in Chinese Zen,” as part of the Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR) Lunch Lecture Series of “Buddha and the Other.” His presentation centred around the depiction of Buddhist patriarchs during the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties, as well as the reclamation of the “barbarian” label in Zen literature. The talk was attended by a variety of students and professors from the EAS, the School of Religious Studies, and the Department of Philosophy.

Dr. Byrne began his lecture by clarifying the ideological distinction between the Han 漢 and the Hu 胡, during the Han dynasty (220BCE -206CE). The Han-Hu dichotomy represented one of many ways for the Han emperors to demarcate their subjects from the others, namely, the ethnic groups on the fringes of the empire. Further depicting the people inside the empire as civilized in contrast to several barbaric ethnic groups, the Han emperors were able to advocate for the superiority of their culture. In the wake of a such Sinocentric worldview, the emperors used the term *Hu* to label the people of *Xiongnu* (匈奴), a nomad group to the North of the empire. Meanwhile, the term *Han*, the name of their

dynasty, was used to identify those who lived inside the country and engaged themselves in agriculture. Subsequently, the Han-Hu distinction reinforced the Sinocentric worldview that represented the Han people as the civilized ones while devaluing the ethnic groups as the barbaric others. From the Sinocentric perspective, the Xiongnu remained culturally inferior to the Han, regardless of being militarily powerful and skillful in warfare. When Buddhism was introduced in the country towards the end of the Han Dynasty, the deprecatory view of ethnic groups posed a challenge for Buddhist clerics, insofar as most Han literati disparaged Buddhism as the teaching of the barbarians and therefore objected to the transmission of Buddhism.

To explore the way in which Buddhist clergy tackled the anti-Buddhist critiques, Dr. Byrne fixed his focus on the development of Zen from the Six Dynasties (222–589CE) to the Tang (618–907CE), and then to the Song (960–1279CE). He examined the iconography of Bodhidharma (?–539CE), the first Chinese patriarch of Zen, who was credited by mythology for transmitting Zen in East Asia. Bodhidharma was depicted as “the blue-eyed” foreign, Hu monk from the North. The visual representation of Bodhidharma would usually highlight his beast-like features to advertise his foreignness. Similarly, the salient feature of several Zen masters became their barbarity. Drawing on chronicles and stories, Dr. Byrne related how Huineng (638–713CE), the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen, was represented as an illiterate monk from an ethnic group in the South of the Tang Empire.

Interestingly, as explained by Dr. Byrne, many Zen masters in the Tang Dynasty have learnt to play with the civilized-barbaric dichotomy, further countering the bias against Buddhism in a Sinocentric culture. By utilizing the image of an awakened barbarian, these clerics demonstrated how the civilized-barbaric distinction was nothing but a mentally constructed illusion. For instance, the “barbaric” Huineng defeated the

literate monk Shengxiu (606-706CE)—in a poetry contest hosted by the fifth patriarch, Hongren (601-675CE). The illiterate as the truly awakened encapsulated the Zen notion of Sudden Awakening; that is, the wisdom of Zen went beyond the realm of common-sense knowledge, in such a way that even the most illiterate ones could become enlightened in one blink, if they could nullify all the illusory self-other differentiations.

During the Song Dynasty (960-1279CE), Zen clerics further romanticized the image of a Barbarian. Drawing from poems composed by Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157CE), master of the Caodong School (J. Sōtō Zen), Dr. Byrne investigated how Zen monks internalized the Barbaric image of Buddhism. In one of his poems, Hongzhi described himself as a barbaric monk, whose dark blue eyes reflected the color of an autumn stream. Upon implying the non-duality between Hongzhi as a human and stream as part of the nature, the poem suggested how Hongzhi became one with non-duality, therefore embodying the wisdom of emptiness. Again, the seemingly barbarian-looking monk as the enlightened master bespoke the idea that the wisdom of emptiness should negate any mentally constructed distinctions in common-sense knowledge, such as that between the barbaric and the civilized or that between human and nature. According to Dr. Byrne, these poems were appreciated by and maintained their influence among Song literati, facilitating the clergy's networking with Confucian statesmen to win their patronage.

Towards the end of his talk, Dr. Byrne detailed how Zen masters established the iconoclastic image of Zen in their choice of embracing barbarity. Through their continuous effort to reveal the non-duality between the civilized and the barbaric, Zen eventually flourished as an indigenous development of Buddhism inside the Song empire. Nevertheless, Dr. Byrne pinpointed the issue of accessibility of Zen poetry: One could hardly make sense of these poems, if one was unfamiliar with the

philosophical denotation of certain terms and their implication to the charismatic authority of the Zen masters.