



Figure 2. This drawing by Sozan Genkyō shows a similar rendition of the corpse-discovery episode. (Special thanks to Stephen Adliss for drawing this work to my attention.) It contains a variant of the *Wis-men kuan* verse: “Not falling into causality, not obscuring causality / Two sides of the dice of the same color.”

### *The Kōan’s Context*

The fox kōan is distinctive for several reasons involving issues in philosophy, folklore, and monastic rules. First, in the spirit of the dictum that Zen is “a special transmission outside the teachings” (C. *chiao-wai pieh-chuan*; J. *kyōge betsudō*), most kōans avoid reference to a specific doctrine. But in contrast to koans notable for their compressed style of expression disdaining formal doctrine—by focusing on a single phrase, word, or syllable, often absurd or incongruous, as a reflection of nonconceptual, ineffable truth—the fox kōan is one of the few cases that explores a basic Buddhist concept. It focuses on the meaning of the morally determined process of cause-and-effect (Skt. *hetu phala*; C. *yin-kuo*; J. *ingō*), rewards and punishment, or benefits and retribution, as well as the question of attaining transcendence from causality that is apparently denied by Pai-chang’s pivot word.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the philosophical analysis is accomplished, not in terms of an abstract, logical argument, but through a brief yet complex narrative structure derived from folktales about fox spirit possession and



Figure 3. This informal drawing of the kōan's dramatic corpse-discovery scene by a modern Sōtō Zen thinker shows Pai-chang alone and unaccompanied by the assembly of monks. It is particularly interesting in depicting a gaunt, ascetic master seeming to emanate from the burning corpse while performing a mudra (symbolic hand gesture) over the body. From Kichizawa Ian, *Shōbogenzō zenkō* (Tokyo: Daihorinkaku, 1974), p. 333.

exorcism that brings to the surface a supernatural and pietistic element in Zen discourse. Although numerous koans feature animals—such as Chao-chou's "Does the dog have Buddha nature?" Nan-ch'üan's "Cutting the cat," Wu-tsu's "Pushing the buffalo through a window," and other cases containing animistic elements—the fox kōan is perhaps the only case concerning the deeds of a shape-shifting creature that makes a human appearance.<sup>7</sup> In accord with this thematic element, the koan is also a rare example of Zen literature dealing with the notion of previous

lives. Generally, Zen writings do not consider the topic of a master explicitly remembering or claiming to be a reincarnation of a prior existence, a motif prevalent in other genres of Buddhist literature.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the kōan puts great emphasis on the role of several ritualized institutional elements of Zen monasticism: the styles of sermons delivered by Pai-chang (both in the opening scene when the fox appears and at the conclusion when the master receives the slap); the interaction between teacher and pupils who are either respectful or brash; the symbolism of the abbot's staff that uncovers the vulpine corpse; and the function of mortuary rites for Buddhist priests. The staff (C. *chang*; J. *jō*; sometimes referred to as C. *chu-chang* or J. *shujō*), a seven-foot-long, untrimmed stick that every Zen master traditionally cut for himself in the mountains, represents the structure and charisma of the master's authority. It is an important symbol of the abbot as a mountain steward—for every temple is considered a mountain and has a mountain name (such as Pai-chang and Huang-po), even if located in an urban environment, as well as a spiritual leader capable of taming wild nature.<sup>9</sup> In some cases the staff—along with the ceremonial fly whisk (C. *fu-tzu*; J. *hossu*) carried by masters while sitting on the “high seat” during their formal sermons and other ceremonial occasions—is given metaphysical or supernatural implications. It is referred to by Dōgen, who was fond of raising up the staff and then casting it aside during his lectures, as the “embodiment of the true nature of reality.” There are also reports of staffs and fly whisks turning into dragons or being used to subdue threatening spirits, though this is no doubt intended to be taken in a symbolic or demythological sense. In a concluding remark to a sermon discussing the fox kōan, Dōgen echoes Yün-men and others in asserting: “After living on this mountain for many years, my black staff transforms into a dragon producing wind and thunder.”<sup>10</sup>

Like nearly all accounts of the masters of the classical period of Zen in the Tang era, the kōan case—sometimes known as “Pai-chang and the wild fox,” “Pai-chang's fox kōan,” the “koan of great cultivation” (C. *ta-hsiu-hsing*; J. *daisūgyō*), or the “kōan of not obscuring causality”—was published in a variety of sources in the Sung era over two hundred years after Pai-chang's death. It was subsequently discussed in several koan collection commentaries in China, including the *Wu-men kuan* and the *Ts'ung-jung lu* (J. *Shōyōroku*, 1224, case 8), as well as by numerous Japanese masters, including Dōgen, who wrote two *Shōbōgenzō* fascicles exclusively on the case with contradictory readings

in addition to a citation in the *Mana Shōbōgenzō* and comments in the *Eihei kōroku* and *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*,<sup>11</sup> along with Ikkyū and Hakuin, among others. Moreover, the fox kōan has been treated extensively in the vast pedagogical materials of the late medieval and early modern Sōtō sect referred to as *shōmono* (also known as *kikigakishō*) collections of commentaries on the major kōan sources, including the *Wu-men kuan* and *Ts'ung-jung lu*, that are extant today in photo-facsimile editions.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the kōan is cited in the Tokugawa-era commentary on one hundred cases—the *Dōryūroku* (case 71)—and has been interpreted in numerous scholarly studies and masters' homilies on traditional kōan collections in the modern period.

The fox koan initially appeared as a dialogical anecdote contained in the section on Pai-chang's life and teachings in the bio-hagiographic "transmission of the lamp" (*C. chuan-teng*; *J. denin*) text, the *T'ien-sheng kuang-teng lu* (*J. Tenshō kōtōroku*, 1036), which was the second main example of the genre of genealogical historical anecdotes following the groundbreaking *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu* of 1004.<sup>13</sup> Both texts were imperially commissioned and geared to an audience consisting in large part of public scholar-officials. The *T'ien-sheng kuang-teng lu* was not simply an extension of the better-known *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu*, which stressed the role of Tang-era masters. Rather, it developed a new approach to Zen self-identity emphasizing the continuity of the sect into the Sung era. After this edition, the kōan text underwent considerable revision until eventually two main versions emerged: the *T'ien-sheng kuang-teng lu* version (hereafter *TKL*), which appears with minor modifications in Pai-chang's recorded sayings text, the *Pai-chang yü-lu* (*J. Hyakujō goroku*), and a subsequent version with enhanced philosophical and folkloric elements appearing in the *Wu-men kuan* (hereafter *WMK*) and elsewhere, including both *Shōbōgenzō* fascicles. The *WMK* version apparently was cited from the *Tsung-men tung-yao ch'i* (*J. Shūmon Tōyōshū*), a relatively obscure but highly influential transmission of the lamp text of 1093.<sup>14</sup> A close look at the two versions indicates that as the standard text evolved during the course of a couple of centuries of composition and editing in the Sung era, all areas of religious significance—the philosophical issue of karmic causality, the supernatural pattern of exorcism, the rituals of Zen monastic life—were considerably strengthened by revisions and emendations.

The original version contained the basic structure of folklore imagery. Subsequent editions continued to revise the text with additional plas-

ing, such as referring to the monk as a “*fei-jen*,” a term used in tales of the confession of foxes and other anomalous, shape-shifting entities as being less (or, in some cases, more) than human. Another example of change is the *WMK*’s inclusion of several references to the fox reincarnations lasting “five hundred lifetimes”—a mythical image that defies logical analysis in evoking a subjective, even dreamlike, nature of the perception of time.<sup>15</sup> Additional modifications in the *WMK* version enhance the ritual aspect of the narrative: references to the monastic institutional structure (including the rank of functionaries like the abbot and rector or the role of buildings like the Nirvana Hall), the sense of the etiquette of deference by junior disciples (as in the fox/monk’s bowing to his superior, Pai-chang), and the cremation of the fox corpse taking place after the midday meal in accord with Buddhist tradition.

The references to the abbot’s staff, the assembly’s bewilderment that no monk has been sick, the bowing by the *fei-jen*, and the cremation do not appear in the *TKL* version. Although the *TKL* says that the fox/monk asked for a burnt offering, a typical ancestor rite, it does not refer explicitly to a request for “Buddhist rites.” The *TKL* version remarks that other monks “gathered some firewood and burned the fox” without using the explicit term for “cremation” that implies a ceremonial performance. The *TKL* does, however, contain two important ritual features that were deleted in the *WMK* version. First, it begins by referring to Pai-chang’s sermon as a formal *shang-t’ang* (J. *jōdō*) lecture in the Dharma Hall. Second, it says that “Pai-chang instructed the monk in charge of rules to strike the clapper and announce that the assembly would participate in the practice of communal labor (C. *p’u-ch’ing*; J. *fusei*) by burying a deceased monk after the midday meal.” The reference to “communal labor” evokes a crucial requirement for monastic behavior delineated in Pai-chang’s monastic rules text that is further suggested by anecdotes in his recorded sayings. Thus the *TKL* must not be overlooked but should be interpreted side-by-side with the *WMK* version.

According to conventional interpretations that view the kōan narrative as primarily emphasizing the philosophy of causality rather than ritual or folklore elements, the keys to understanding the case are the linguistic tool of Pai-chang’s pivot word and the iconoclastic gesture of Huang-po’s slap. The fox kōan seems like a typical Zen “encounter dialogue” (C. *ch’i-yan wen-ta*; J. *kien-mondō*) in which the fox/monk admits to an impasse blocking his awakening and is liberated by Pai-chang’s teaching.<sup>16</sup> The encounter dialogue is a style of pedagogy: a spontaneous repartee

through which a master brings about the transformation of a disciple who stands on the verge of enlightenment and needs just one more insightful comment to create the breakthrough. Encounter dialogues generally rely on impenetrable, absurdist, or non sequitur language or physical demonstrations—shouting, striking, pointing one finger, cutting off a finger, leaping from a high pole—to trigger an unmediated liberation from conceptual fixation.<sup>17</sup> There are actually three dialogues in the case record: one between the fox/monk in his former incarnation (or the former Pai-chang) and a disciple; a second between the former and current Pai-chang; and a third between Pai-chang and Huang-po. The pivot word in the second conversation is a specialized method that fulfills the dialogical process in spontaneously transforming the roots of ignorance into the source of wisdom. In this instance, Pai-chang liberates the fox/monk's misunderstanding by a deceptively simple affirmation of cause-and-effect derived from intriguing wordplay that transmutes an erroneous view into a correct one. The argument is that an intellectual understanding alone—that is, correct thinking about the causal/noncausal ground of morality—is sufficient for release from transmigration and the attainment of enlightenment. The kōan's final dialogue offers a characteristically Zen nonlogical resolution of the philosophical dilemma—a dramatic nonverbal expression of how, from the standpoint of reason and conventional language, the basic concern remains unresolvable.

Yet the dynamics of the exchange between the fox/monk and abbot recall countless examples of folklore—many of which were integrated into the vast corpus of popular Buddhist morality tale literature known by the Japanese term *setsuwa bungaku*—based on the possession and exorcism of magical animals.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the conventional disciple who internalizes the lessons learned from the teacher, the fox/monk who has endured punishment for a duration calculable in mythical time cannot be released from his *fei-jen* status through his own efforts alone. Instead he relies on the master's recitation of a phrase with mysterious power; only this esoteric utterance can free him. Thus the kōan narrative reflects an altogether atypical encounter with the presence of the anomalous and the efficacy of the supernatural—an ideological exchange between Zen scholasticism and the otherness of disparity encompassing the occurrence of impurity and the possibility for reconciling the threatening through unconventional (including magical) means. At the same time, the kōan endorses monastic order through the abbot's dismissal of the intruding fox. This action evokes the image of Pai-chang as a strict moralist who lived

by the (no doubt apocryphal) motto emphasizing communal labor, “A day without work is a day without food,” and who is said to have created the first monastic rules code of the independent Zen sect. The kōan achieves this emphasis on monasticism by borrowing from and yet transforming—in the name of refuting—indigenous folklore beliefs about supernatural powers that represent eremitic and daimonic forces of disorder, disruption, and transgression.

Thus the fox kōan focuses not so much on the issue of causality in a speculative, metaphysical sense as on questions involving supernaturalism and ritualism: who, or what, is the anomaly that appears before Pai-chang? How is the abbot ritually effective in liberating him (or it)? Why does the prospect of the fox/monk’s funeral cause consternation among the disciples? And for what reason does Pai-chang suffer from the blows of his student after delivering a successful remedy for the ancient monk? These questions lead beyond the confines of the case itself. They take us into an investigation of how a philosophical understanding of karmic causality interacts with popular religiosity in giving shape to monastic rules and rituals during the formative period of Zen as an independent Buddhist institution during late Tang/Sung China.

### *Folklore Morphology*

In the traditional and modern debates on causality and ethics, there is an element that is rarely addressed directly: the fox kōan expresses a topos of folklore also found in *setsuwa* literature based on the possession of a person by a demonic nonhuman spirit and the need for exorcism through ritual enactment. Indeed the kōan narrative bears a striking structural or “morphological” affinity, to borrow a term from Vladimir Propp’s analysis of comparative folklore, with stories and art about the appearance and exploits of shape-shifting, trickster foxes who seduce, betray, or possess unsuspecting victims until they are eliminated by an exorcistic performance.<sup>19</sup> In this colloquial mythic cycle, recorded in dozens of literary and artistic forms of expression in both the high and popular cultures, foxes intrude on the spirits of vulnerable people or transfigure into human form. They appear as an irresistibly beautiful vixen or a wayward, irregular priest—either as a means of deception or punishment or mockery of sacred ceremony or, in some cases, out of compassionate motives such as providing a widower with a spouse or teaching a bodhisattva-like moral lesson. Some foxes, such as the infamous demonic