

# Book Review

## *No-Gate Gateway*

### *The Original Wu-Men Kuan*

Translated by David Hinton

Shambhala Publications, 2018

Review by Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe)

My wife and I once gave a birthday gift of a new recording of J. S. Bach's Saint Matthew Passion to her church's choir director. My wife expressed to the choir director, "I hope you don't already have this one." He replied, "You can never have too many versions of the Saint Matthew Passion." Likewise, we could say that you can never have too many translations of the kong-an collection, Wu-Men Kuan.

Wu-Men Kuan (K. Mu Mun Kwan) is a collection of 48 kong-ans that was compiled in the thirteenth century by Zen Master Wu-Men (K. Mu Mun). Most of the cases are interchanges between Zen masters and monks or short anecdotes about various Zen masters. Wu-Men also makes use of a few sutra stories and Chinese folktales, which he turns into kong-ans. Wu-Men adds a short comment and poem to each kong-an in the collection.

Most of the previous translations have additional commentaries by modern Zen masters or translators. These commentaries are for the most part taken from formal talks given by Zen masters during group retreats. Zen Master Seung Sahn's translation, however, has no commentary, and he chose only to include the kong-an itself and Wu-Men's poem, leaving out Wu-Men's comment. Later, when Zen Master Seung Sahn included some of the kong-ans from the Wu-Men Kuan in his kong-an collection *The Whole World Is a Single Flower*, he wrote his own brief commentary to each kong-an, as well as questions for the reader to ponder. Zen Master Seung Sahn once told me that he considered the Wu-Men Kuan the clearest of the various classical kong-an collections, and the most helpful for students.

The translation by David Hinton differs from previous translations in a few respects. The subtitle is "The Original Wu-Men Kuan" and this reviewer wonders whether Hinton views the previous translations as other than "original." In his introduction Hinton says that however valuable the commentaries of other translators are, "they dwarf the text itself, domesticating it and diluting the immediate poetic impact." Further, "By presenting only the text itself in its native philosophical context this translation tries to respect the book's inherent value as a self-sufficient literary work."

The jury in my head is still deliberating as to whether some of these comments are subtly pejorative. When Hinton refers to the "native philosophical context" of the text, he is primarily referring to Taoist thought. It seems as if he views Buddhist thought as secondary or ancillary. Zen Master Seung Sahn would sometimes say that when Indian Buddhism met Chinese Taoism, Zen was born, but he seemed to view Buddhism as primary and the nature imagery of Chinese Taoism as a down-to-earth way of representing what In-

dian Buddhism had portrayed through vast cosmic images.

The fact that Hinton seems to put Taoist thought first might also influence some of the choices he has made in translating certain terms. Having compared parts of Zen Master Seung Sahn's translation with the five or six other translations that I have looked into, I find that the differences are not particularly significant. With Hinton's translation, however, at times the flavor does seem somewhat different. To cite a few examples, let's start with case 1 of the Wu-Men Kuan, "Jo-Ju's Dog."

"A monk asked, Jo-Ju, 'Does a dog have Buddha nature?' Jo-Ju said Mu!" (C. Wu). In Zen Master Seung Sahn's translation, he has "Mu!" and in parenthesis "(No)." Thomas Cleary just has "No." Literally mu or wu means "no" or "nothing," which is similar to the Sixth Patriarch's phrase "originally nothing" (not a thing). Hinton, on the other hand, translates wu or mu as "absence." Does a dog have Buddha nature? Jo-Ju said "Absence." Hinton also insists on translating personal names literally, so that Master Jo-Ju, for example, appears as "Master Visitation-Land."

In case 2, "Pai Chang's Fox," an old man asks Zen Master Pai Chang for help. Yamada Roshi translates this as "Now I beg you Master please say a turning word on my behalf and release me . . ." Aitken Roshi also has "Please say a turning word for me." The term "turning word" has the meaning of suddenly pointing the mind to see clearly. Hinton by comparison translates this as "a hinge-phrase that will liberate me."

One final example, in case 8, "Gye Chung's Cart," the poem translated by Zen Master Seung Sahn begins "Where the wheel of mind activity turns, even a Master falls into ignorance." Hinton's translation is "There where the loom of origins wheels around . . ." This is not to say that the other translations are better or more accurate, or truer to the "original" than Hinton's. The process of translation is a difficult art, many Chinese characters are open to a variety of interpretations, and it is clear that Hinton has given much deliberation to his choices.

Although Hinton has no commentary to each kong-an in the original text, he does have an extensive introduction, 31 pages to be exact. If one reads the introduction, one could be influenced to see the kong-ans and Wu-Men's comments and poems from Hinton's perspective, which might "domesticate and dilute" the impact of the text, similar to how Hinton accuses the extensive commentaries of previous translations of doing. Putting that aside, why not take a look at David Hinton's *No-Gate Gateway*, and see if it opens any gates for you? ♦

