

## Article

# Early Chan Buddhism: A Meditation Movement or New Ways of Writing about Final Authority in Tang China?

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that the long-standing assumption that Chan Buddhism began as a meditation movement is outdated and needs to be replaced by a paradigm that sees the origins of Chan in a set of literary inventions that took form in the mid-Tang era and were designed to prove that the totality of tradition was owned by certain masters of the day. These bold claims to own perfect tradition were bolstered by newly invented genealogies that worked to show that this or that master was, in effect, a descendant of the Indian Buddha, and, thus, a quasi-Buddha himself. Further finessing these efforts to take over final authority in the world of Tang Buddhism was the studied use of Daoist tropes to naturalize and soften these aggressive claims, all in order to make them more appealing to elite readers who could now be impressed by decidedly Chinese-looking portrayals of perfect Buddhism, set on the timeless ground of the Great Dao, where there could be no competition, envy, literary pretensions, or even Buddhist practices—just pure and total truth in the body of a Chinese man. In trying to make sense of this cycle of carefully rewriting the past in order to control the present (and future), it should be clear that we need to switch to a paradigm that accepts that the seductive reinvention of tradition was done consciously and with no small amount of craft and cunning.

**Keywords:** Chan; Zen; Daoism; literary seduction; authority; leadership; fantasy Buddhism



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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, it has become increasingly clear that we do not have a clear and compelling narrative to explain the genesis and development of Chan Buddhism—better known in English as “Zen”<sup>1</sup>. To the extent that we admit this problem, and then act on that uncertainty—with more debate and more research, it would seem Chan studies can look forward to a re-awakening of sorts in which a range of fresh and interesting topics come to the fore as we work to improve the historical narratives we rely on to explain the emergence of Chan Buddhism in the late seventh and eighth centuries<sup>2</sup>. For my part, I would like to contribute to that exploration with a critique of the “meditation paradigm” for explaining Chan’s origins, while also offering the outline of an alternative paradigm. As my title suggests, Chan’s origins appear better explained by literary inventions and not new meditation styles.

The assumption that early Chan began as a meditation movement appears in the earliest writings on Chan/Zen in the West, beginning in the early 20th century. However, the current version of the paradigm took form in the 1980s when scholars such as the late John McRae and Bernard Faure sought to revise the earliest and decidedly uncritical accounts of Chan that had been promoted by the likes of D.T. Suzuki, Heinrich Dumoulin, and others. The work of McRae and Faure was innovative and of lasting value for many reasons; key to their contributions was a sustained effort to incorporate the implications of the vast trove of medieval Chan texts recovered from the Dunhuang caves at the beginning of the 20th century. These texts, mostly dating from the 7th to 10th century, had been sealed behind a wall in the early 11th century and, as though in a time capsule, were all but forgotten by later iterations of tradition. Once McRae, Faure, and others began to work through these

uneearthed manuscripts, it became clear that the origins and development of Chan were *much* more complicated than the simple genealogies-of-the-masters that were concocted by medieval authors and then repeated by modernizers such as Suzuki, Dumoulin, et al.

Unfortunately, in sketching their more nuanced paradigm for explaining Chan's origin and development, McRae and Faure still assumed that Chan was born of a meditation movement<sup>3</sup>. More exactly, following the tracks of one section of the traditional narrative, they assumed that the earliest forms of Chan came to life on the lonely peaks of East Mountain in modern Hubei province, under the guidance of masters Daoxin (道信 d. 651) and Hongren (弘忍 d. 674), who instructed their disciples in new forms of meditation. Supposedly key, even in this initial phase of Chan's development, was the belief that these two meditation masters were the spiritual descendants of Bodhidharma (菩提達摩 n.d.), the Indian master who allegedly had brought perfect enlightenment to China, several generations prior. Despite the promise of this idyllic setting on East Mountain, it was soon abandoned, for unknown reasons, and the group of meditators moved to the Chinese capitals of Luoyang and Chang'an at the end of the seventh century. And, here, McRae and Faure broke with the traditional narrative and hypothesized that once at the capitols, the group's leaders turned away from the rural simplicity of Daoxin and Hongren's Chan, and took to sectarian infighting, dangerous court politics, and, in particular, arguments over who really ought to be counted as a spiritual descendent of Bodhidharma, and more distantly, of the Indian Buddha.

This final part of the McRae–Faure narrative is, unlike the rest, solidly supported by the Dunhuang texts which reveal that disputes over membership in the Bodhidharma family raged throughout the eighth century and continued even into the early Song dynasty (960–1279) when, finally, a relatively uncontested family of Chan masters was accepted as legitimate by the imperial court, and promoted in the famous *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp from the Jingde Era* (景德傳燈錄) published in 1009. With the throne sanctioning this view of Chan's historical legacy, the majority of the larger public monasteries soon came to be explicitly identified as “Chan monasteries” and were led by Chan abbots who could produce genealogical documents proving their place in an unbroken lineage reaching back, via Bodhidharma, to the Indian Buddha. In this so-called “mature” phase of Chan's developmental cycle, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Song Chan monasteries, with their close dependence on imperial authority and their increasingly bureaucratic formalities, appear to be a long way from the supposed original simplicity found at the beginning of Chan, back on East Mountain. Nonetheless, the current meditation paradigm holds that there is a fundamental continuity holding together these phases of Chan's development, and this continuity is based on the transmission of distinctive teachings and meditation practices, all of which would continue into the present in China, Japan, and Korea.

For a number of reasons that I will briefly explore below, I think it can be shown that this meditation paradigm for explaining Chan's origins and development does not fit the evidence as we have it. My goal in this essay is to briefly point out some problems with the old paradigm, while also sketching what I take to be a workable alternative by moving briskly through a body of evidence that I developed more thoroughly in two recent books, *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism* (2009) and *Patriarchs on Paper: A Critical History of Medieval Chan Literature* (2016). I do so hoping to offer readers a quicker entry into these topics, and to set up clearer grounds for debate.

The key to building a better paradigm to explain Chan's emergence is to treat Chan texts *as texts*. What this means, in brief, is that Chan texts need to be read as carefully constructed works of art which arrange for the competent reader to engage (and enjoy) the images of truth, authority, and the total ownership-of-tradition that are revealed therein. With these literary strategies squarely in view, the next phase of analysis is to historicize these literary inventions so that one can begin to see repetitions and patterns in the strategies and techniques that were employed—as it turns out, this phase of the analysis leaves little doubt that Chan texts were composed in the context of a burgeoning literary scene

defined by a steady commitment to several basic themes, the most important of which was claiming that this or that contemporaneous master was a Buddha-of-sorts, having inherited that exalted status from a member of the newly invented Bodhidharma clan. On the next level of analysis, this history of Tang-era literary techniques needs to be set next to those rhetorical strategies found in older Mahāyāna *sūtras* that were widely read in Buddhist communities in the Tang (618–907), texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Here, the question is to determine if there might not be real continuity in how truth and authority were constructed in Buddhist literature on this level of the *longue durée*. Of course, all along, one also needs to stay sensitive to Daoist and Confucian precedents that were so often drawn on by Chan authors to more convincingly present the perfect masters.

This kind of close reading and contextualization is, of course, the norm in many fields of inquiry. Chan studies, however, appears to have positioned itself somewhat outside the basic liberal arts approach to texts, since, to date, there has not been a developed tradition of close-reading Chan texts. I think it is fair to say that, besides the work I have done on a handful of Chan texts, one will look far and wide and still not find careful treatment of Chan texts as literary works<sup>4</sup>. Instead, the standard approach has been focused on extracting philosophic truths and doctrinal positions from these texts, along with clues about new styles of meditation. This unacknowledged (and, of course, undefended) choice to forego close readings has meant that we have, in advance of addressing the available evidence, locked ourselves into a perspective that has little chance to see Chan as a literary movement, even though, with a shift in perspective, that view on early Chan seems altogether logical. Thus, and this seems obvious once you point it out, if one simply asks what our evidence from the Tang sources on Chan demonstrates, the first answer ought to be as simple as this: the elements most closely associated with what came to be recognized as Chan appear in several innovative forms of literature that were put in circulation in the early and middle parts of the Tang dynasty. Then, and staying on the level of formal description, we could list these new genres associated with early Chan in the following manner: (1) genealogies of buddha-like masters who supposedly owned and transmitted that perfect enlightenment delivered from India by Bodhidharma—several to be considered below; (2) master–disciple dialogues that work at demonstrating that enlightenment is at hand—such as *The Discourse on No-mind* (無心論)<sup>5</sup>; (3) supposedly oral discourses wherein enlightened Chan masters answer questions about the final truth/s of Buddhism in real time, such as the collected “conversations” Shenhui (神會 d. 758) supposedly had with various historical figures, as found in the *Miscellaneous Dialogues of the Venerable Monk of Nanyang* (南陽和尚問答雜徵義)<sup>6</sup>; and (4) poems and songs celebrating the radical and unmediated presence of enlightenment, such as the various poems attributed to Huineng in the *Platform Sūtra*. Then, next to these genre innovations, one could also identify two new narrative inventions: (1) first-person accounts of enlightenment in real-time, such as the imperial runner’s enlightenment that he recounts, in real time, to Huineng in the *Unofficial Biography of the Great Master of Caoqi* (曹溪大師別傳)<sup>7</sup>; and (2) carefully portrayed “public events” designed to prove this or that master’s complete mastery of Buddhist truth and, thus, his full ownership of tradition, etc.—such set-pieces are found within many Chan texts from this early period and will be discussed below<sup>8</sup>. These textual inventions are stunning in their own right—for their originality, audacity, and developed intersubjectivity—but we should not miss that they all share that basic gesture of taking hold of the *voice of final authority* in the Buddhist tradition, and it is just this literary agenda that I believe best defines Chan in this early phase of its development.

Besides their verve for claiming final authority in all matters Buddhist, the early Chan texts regularly present these images of final authority in a stylized manner that is tinted with a kind of Daoist ease and rustic innocence. Here, again, there should not be much debate since the evidence is in clear view: Chan authors regularly recycled well-established Daoist terms, imagery, and themes to decorate and solidify claims that this or that master had achieved Buddhist perfection. While they also recycled Confucian tropes and forms for various purposes, the nature of the Daoist tinting turns out to be particularly telling

in terms of understanding the reader-seductions that take center stage in these various literary efforts. The crucial thing to see, on the level of formal description, is that the Chan “movement” appears as both a set of claims about the locale and ownership of final authority in Buddhism and an evolving *style* of inhabiting that zone of authority, one designed to look attractive, natural, unconstructed, and incontrovertible, with no shortage of Daoist terms and tropes setting the tone.

Put another way, early Chan authors, in a range of audacious literary adventures, presented accounts of contemporaneous masters that made them appear to be more or less equivalent to the Indian Buddha, but, somewhat ironically, they clad these new Chinese Buddhas in the familiar garb of the Daoist sage, such that the ornate and regal images associated with Indian Buddhahood were replaced with the well-worn markers associated with the down-home Daoist sage who, typically, spends his timeless days practicing *wuwei* (無為) and living a wondrously simple life, free of literary pursuits and completely uninterested in imperial approval. And, lest anyone misunderstand me, I am not rehearsing the oft-made claim that Chan’s innovative rhetoric resulted from a blending of Daoism and Buddhism on a philosophic level. Rather, I am saying that on the level of *literary seduction*, Chan authors borrowed a set of well-established tropes from Daoism—and several from Confucianism too—in order to present more captivating fantasies that detailed the manner in which certain contemporaneous men had supposedly inherited final Buddhist authority. It is, therefore, this bold and highly competitive turn in Buddhist writing that produced the distinctive quality of Chan rhetoric in which the deployment of the Daoist images of innocence and non-competition speaks not of a real Daoist turn in Buddhist thought and practice, but rather a heightened level of competition and literary cunning, playing out before the court and literati.

Summing up these introductory points, I think there are good reasons for seeing Chan as the emerging ability to convincingly stage, for the reading public, the arrival of a perfect form of Buddhism, in real time, in a manner that offered the reader an exciting quid pro quo deal: in the fantasy space of these new texts, the recently invented Chan masters will present to the reader a chance to read about the direct and total ownership of Buddhist truth—a truth so close, you could almost taste it—provided you allow that the masters, as local buddhas, rightfully owned that truth in the first place, independently of this quid pro quo arrangement set up between text and reader. Of course, a key part of the seduction was to convince the audience that there was no seduction involved in generating this exchange, and it is for these reasons that Chan authors gussied up the masters with images of Daoist simplicity and non-competition; after all, how could these masters, supposedly so free of societal and literary ambitions, ever be involved in efforts to gain top leadership positions in the hierarchy of Chinese Buddhism?

Before filling in the details of this new paradigm, let me first catalogue some problems in the old paradigm. The first obvious problem is that the earliest texts that mention Bodhidharma do not promote meditation, nor do they speak of communities of practitioners. As is well known, in his first appearance in the written record—in the *Records of Luoyang* (洛陽伽藍記), from 547, Bodhidharma is set up as something of a foreign art critic whose glowing appraisal of a nine-story stupa at Yongning Monastery (in Luoyang) is to be trusted, due to his extensive international experience observing Buddhist architecture<sup>9</sup>.

In Bodhidharma’s next appearance in the literary record, we find him mentioned in a preface to a short and perplexing text called the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* (二入四行論, hereafter referred to as “*Two Entrances*”). Here, he is again set up as an international expert who can be taken as a reliable final authority endorsing this brief text’s effort to reconstruct Indian Buddhism in a manner more in keeping with Chinese tastes<sup>10</sup>. In this preface of unknown provenance but most likely written in the early seventh century, Bodhidharma is portrayed as one who, even back in India, knew exactly what the Chinese needed in order to break free of the decadent forms of Buddhism that had taken hold in China. Thus, the preface explains that Bodhidharma, with perfect understanding of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist truths, and “feeling sad and regretful about the decline of the

true teachings” in China, decided to leave India in order to deliver to China the perfect version of the true teachings, now summed up in this text called the *Two Entrances*. The preface also claims that after several years in China, Bodhidharma gave the *Two Entrances* to his two trusted disciples, Huike (慧可) and Daoyu (道育), with the preface making clear that this text was to be the be all and end all of Buddhist teachings. In short, in this version of Bodhidharma, it is a text, not a practice, that is the linchpin for securing perfect tradition’s arrival in China.

Now, it is true that there are two terms in the *Two Entrances* that some have taken as proof of a meditation tradition standing behind the text. As for the first term, both the preface and the text proper mention “pacification of mind” (安心), but it is unclear what this means, since this fairly generic term was used in a variety of ways in the Tang era, and its meaning in this text is not specified. The other term suggestive of meditation, “wall contemplation” (壁觀 *biguan*), is truly a mystery, even though one line in the preface glosses it as “pacification of mind”, which is somewhat helpful. The problem here is that while these two characters do mean “wall” and “contemplation”, the term looks like a typographical error. (In fact, this term bothered later commentators in the Tang who sought to explain it in various ways.)<sup>11</sup> The most obvious problem is that grammatically, “*bi guan*” cannot mean “wall contemplation” or “contemplation of the wall” because, like English, Chinese word order is verb–object. Moreover, when we compare this line from the *Two Entrances* to a parallel passage that appears in the *Vajrasamādhi Sūtra*, a contemporary composition which offers its own discussion of the *Two Entrances*, we find in place of the odd phrase “fixedly abiding in wall contemplation” (凝住壁觀 *ningzhu biguan*), the more sensible “fixedly abiding in awakening and contemplation” (凝住覺觀 *ningzhu jueguan*)<sup>12</sup>. The possibility that *biguan* is an orthographic error increases when we note that the Tibetan translation of the *Two Entrances* does not mention “wall contemplation” and reads the line in a manner closer to the *Vajrasamādhi Sūtra*’s version<sup>13</sup>.

Whatever the term “wall contemplation” means, we should not overlook that it only occurs in the First Entrance of the *Two Entrances*, the section of the text which is, by definition, an explanation of “entrance by principle” (入理), an approach that appears thoroughly mystical and is better described as an intellectual awakening that should not, again by definition, have anything to do with something practical like meditation. Thus, we learn that in the First Entrance, one is, in reliance on the teachings, to come to realize the truth of a deep sameness wherein “self and other, and commoner and sage, are understood to be identical; (then) firmly abiding without shifting, and without relying on written teachings, there is a mysteriously tallying with the principle, and it is without discrimination—quiescent and without action (無為). Just this is called ‘entrance by principle’”<sup>14</sup>. As should be clear, this passage seems to be describing the philosophic *content* of some kind of final awakening and couldn’t be mistaken for practical advice for developing a meditation practice. And, not to be missed, it is laden with Daoist vocabulary, a fact I will address below.

It was the Second Entrance, entering by practice (入行), that was of course dedicated to explaining actual practices, and yet it curiously does not mention meditation or wall contemplation. Instead, the Second Entrance appears rather traditional since the Daoist vocabulary is absent, and one is advised to take up four practices that revolve around basic Buddhist concerns regarding karma, past lives, suffering, and emptiness—topics noticeably absent from the First Entrance. In short, we can see the *Two Entrances* promoting two kinds of Buddhism that would seem to have little to do with one another: the entrance by practice looks like a fairly traditional form of Buddhist discipline and training, while the entrance by principle evokes a thoroughly antinomian mystical vision in which all distinctions collapse in a final quietude, whereby one *returns* to a lost wholeness—a Daoist-looking trope, to be sure. In fact, this entrance by principle appears to represent a very early version of what I call “trapdoor Buddhism” because it promises the reader that one can, somehow, suddenly drop out of the world of karma, time, training, etc., to find oneself fully ensconced in a Daoist-flavored totality—a “mysteriously tallying with the principle”<sup>15</sup>—with all Buddhist concerns forever resolved. Making sense of why this

Daoist-inflected form of Buddhism, as fantastic as it might seem to be, became of such interest to Chinese authors and their audiences, is one of the key issues for establishing a new paradigm<sup>16</sup>.

Prior discussions of the *Two Entrances* have made little headway explaining what logic brought these two types of Buddhism together in one text. Wendi Adamek, who is often insightful on Chan topics, offers the view that the text encourages a sequential movement from the first entrance to the second; but, there is no compelling evidence for this view<sup>17</sup>. McRae posits a more complicated theory in which the two entrances are to be seen as complementary, with the first entrance referring to a kind of private, yogic practice, while the second is dedicated to public, day-to-day practice<sup>18</sup>. But, again, there is no textual evidence for this reading. Faure invokes the standard Mahāyāna Two Truth theory (conventional and ultimate truth) to explain the *Two Entrances*, an approach that might turn out to be worthwhile, but he does not land on a satisfying explanation of the text's thoroughly bifurcated discourse<sup>19</sup>.

As mentioned above, I think we should see in this text an early example of two kinds of Chinese Buddhism emerging, side by side, in a symbiotic manner that is arguably elemental to Chan rhetoric. As mentioned, the first is the mystical, esoteric, Daoist-inflected form of Buddhism, apparently reserved for the masters, but also put on display to thrill and entice all competent readers who now can dream of such a wondrous end to the anxieties of Buddhist cosmology, and, in fact, maybe even dream of the end to Buddhism, since there will be no distinction between sages and commoners in this final fusion with original reality. The other kind of Buddhism, with its unrelenting concern over karma and rebirth, reflected Buddhism as it was understood by the vast majority of Buddhists, especially those without access to the Chinese literary tradition and its dreams of reuniting with the original Dao, the ultimate principle, etc.

Looked at this way, the reader is not to choose between these two visions; instead, the reader is invited to enjoy what I call “fantasy Buddhism”, in which a nuts-and-bolts karmic form of Buddhism is acknowledged, even as it is superseded by the promise of suddenly regaining a perfect Daoist tranquility in which all duality, judgment, and difference is resolved<sup>20</sup>. Thus, readers are, in effect, asked to recognize both ordinary Buddhism and this Daoist-inflected end of Buddhism, with this very pairing counted as the entry way into a form of Buddhism that would soon go by the name “Chan”. Reading this early seventh century text in this manner makes sense because soon, and in text after text, Chinese authors would produce a wide variety of literary images of just this kind of “fantasy Buddhism”, even as traditional Buddhism continued to flourish as before and was, apparently, endorsed by everyone, masters included<sup>21</sup>. The key to opening up this double vision of Buddhism was the basic Chan claim that total truth and tradition had been perfectly imported via Bodhidharma and the esoteric, man-to-man transmission system that supported that claim. Ironically, then, it was apparently with that theory of the total conservation of truth and tradition, via the lineage system, that Chinese authors felt free enough to generate new versions of final Buddhism that were fairly wild and more than a little un-Buddhist, at least on the level of rhetoric<sup>22</sup>.

Now, with some idea of where I am headed in my reading of Chan's origins and development, let's consider more evidence suggesting that early Chan did not start out as a meditation movement in the hinterland. Daoxuan's (道宣 d. 667) famous encyclopedia, *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (續高僧傳 hereafter referred to as *Continued Biographies*), gives us a number of important clues. First, in his entry for Daoxin—one of the supposed masters of that group of meditators back on East Mountain—there is no mention of a community dedicated to the practice of meditation<sup>23</sup>. Instead, we see Daoxin promoting fairly traditional Buddhist practices such as sūtra recitation, while also getting famous for taming wild animals and repelling bandits. Obviously, none of these details looks like evidence for a singular community of ardent meditators on the verge of taking the capital by storm.

However, Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies* does have two other kinds of information that ought to shape our understanding of early Chan writing. First, though he does not have many new details regarding Bodhidharma's life, Daoxuan has set him in the "meditators" section of his encyclopedia; claims that Bodhidharma taught meditation (albeit with mixed results); and repeats the claim that "wall contemplation" is a kind of pacification of mind, while also replaying much of the content of the *Two Entrances*<sup>24</sup>. Then, in an odd addendum to the section on meditators, Daoxuan (or a later author) gives a critique of Bodhidharma's apparently abstruse style of meditation, which is compared somewhat unfavorably to master Sengchou's (僧稠 480–560) meditation program. While this treatment suggests that Bodhidharma has gradually morphed into a meditation master, there is little here to suggest he was a famous monk leading a meditation movement, a fact that Eric Green has recently pointed out<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, in Daoxuan's writing, Bodhidharma still has not been linked to East Mountain or Shaolin, as he soon would be<sup>26</sup>.

The second kind of evidence in Daoxuan's encyclopedia is more provocative. After Bodhidharma's biography, Daoxuan turns to detailing Huike's life. Huike and Daoyu were, as we saw above, supposedly the sole recipients of Bodhidharma's text, the *Two Entrances*. Now, however, Daoyu is pushed out of the story as Daoxuan focuses solely on Huike. And, here, things get complicated because Daoxuan's account of Huike appears to have been roughly reworked such that the second half of the entry is completely at odds with the first half. While Hu Shi pointed this out some hundred years ago, there has been little effort to explore the implications of this curious rewriting of Huike's life<sup>27</sup>. Of particular interest is the way that the second half of Huike's biography gives us a Bodhidharma, who is now shown endorsing the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*—instead of the *Two Entrances*—as the best textual statement of truth for China. Then, in an equally brave invention, Huike is set at the top of a lineage of masters of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, even though the first part of the biography said clearly that Huike had no disciples of note, and of course there was no mention of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* in the first half of Huike's biography, or in Bodhidharma's biography.

Huike's descendants in this newly invented lineage, as detailed in that dubious second section of Huike's biography, turn out to be quite interesting: they are presented as rustic, anti-culture heroes, living off the land, sewing their own sandals, and chopping wood, etc., while also laying claim to a final and esoteric reading of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, with the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* held up as the most perfect statement of Buddhist truth<sup>28</sup>. In short, Bodhidharma is now presented as the origin of a conduit of initiated masters who can give the final version of tradition in the form of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. And, as just mentioned, these descendants of Bodhidharma and Huike are decorated with a range of anti-culture motifs that most readers would have associated with traditional Daoism or even the rustic utopianism of the fifth century poet, Tao Qian (陶潛)<sup>29</sup>.

In short, a fantasy space is opening up here in which the arrival of the final form of tradition is guaranteed by a mysterious lineage back to India, via Bodhidharma. The unparalleled efficacy of this conduit is underscored with details of how the masters of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* did not involve themselves with literature (except for the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*) or normal Buddhist practices, even as they somehow mastered all of Buddhist thought and literature, happily keeping to themselves and living off the land. In depicting these masters in this fashion, the whole arrangement would have likely appeared attractive to Chinese readers who, for the most part, can be assumed to have been well aware of the Daoist texts that promoted sages-of-simplicity and their insouciant mastery of tradition and daily life<sup>30</sup>.

And, in all this, we should not miss that the Daoist simplicity of the masters of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* works well to distract from the cunning of the historian who, with his own mastery of culture and literature, shaped these images of the alluring all-natural masters, and tucked them into Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*<sup>31</sup>. Thus, obviously, I am arguing that the deployment of these Daoist memes and tropes was fully conscious and, equally important, that these Daoist idioms only figure in these texts because of their seductive

power, and, thus, do not represent some basic Chan message that *predates the text*. Instead, it is *because* the Chan authors sought to take control of final Buddhist authority that they employed this charming Daoist rhetoric, encouraging readers to indulge in these new fantasies regarding the splendid and innocent ownership of Buddhist truth and tradition, out in the vast stillness of the hinterland<sup>32</sup>.

Standing back from these details in Huike's amended biography in Daoxuan's encyclopedia, one might be forgiven for thinking that this narrative qualifies as the first Chan text since (1) it built an esoteric conduit of authority behind normal tradition; (2) it promises an enlightened final reading of tradition via the fetishized *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*; (3) it knowingly rewrote an older narrative to borrow its cachet of authority; and finally, (4) it wrapped the entire project in a Daoist glow of simplicity, directness, and self-reliance.

Without expecting to define the precise moment of Chan's inception, it nevertheless seems true that by mid-seventh century, Bodhidharma's use as a reliable voice-of-final-authority was clearly gaining traction. Of course, it was just this role that he was to be given, in the coming decades, in the earliest genealogies that are normally counted as the first Chan texts; in fact, this is the role he will play down to the present. However, previous scholarship has not recognized the continuity in the literary *uses* of Bodhidharma in these very disparate textual settings in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, or the casualness with which Bodhidharma was passed around from text to text as he was attached to various agendas that needed endorsement by an Indian authority figure.

In this light, the altered Huike biography is particularly valuable for writing a critical history of Chan because besides representing the third time Bodhidharma has been repurposed, it is also clear that this repurposing was accomplished in an underhanded manner: someone (it could not have been Daoxuan) slipped this version of events into a high profile text in a manner that completely violated what Daoxuan had already set down for Huike's biography. It is indeed this enthusiasm for carefully rewriting the past to gain hold of the voice-of-final-authority in the present that will be the hallmark of Chan literature. This third rewriting of Bodhidharma will quickly be followed by many more, and they all appear composed in just this clever and underhanded manner. Now, if we had read this material with a clear sense of the sequence of textual articulations, this copy-cat gesture of stealing someone else's claim to final authority would have been obvious from the get-go, and it would have been central to our definition of Chan. In short, we should have recognized the ironic fact that for Chan genealogists, the only good ancestors worth attaching to a new master were *someone else's ancestors*, provided those ancestors had already been accepted, in some measure, by the public.

Turning to another type of evidence that argues against Chan originating in a meditation movement, we have to consider how the transmission of enlightenment, man-to-man, was explained in Chan texts. Here, it is plain as day that transmission is written about as a magical and wholly unthinkable *gift*—that wondrous moment when total truth is bequeathed from the master to his disciple, who, in that instant, becomes a master himself. Never is it said that this transmission had anything to do with practice or meditation. Instead, transmission appears set up to solve the most basic problem of moving absolute authority from the Indian Buddha down to a current Chinese master. In this light, historical claims regarding the sudden transmission of total truth into the present have to be seen as emerging due to China's distance—physical, cultural, and linguistic—from India, and from the overabundance of contradictory sūtras and wildly disparate voices of authority that had taken root in China. Consequently, this claim to transmit total truth into the present looks like a good example of religion taking care of itself, and not about spirituality or experience<sup>33</sup>.

Let's take a close look at how this works in the earliest free-standing Chan text, a biography carved in stone for master Faru at Shaolin Monastery (the full title of this text is 唐中岳沙門釋法如禪師行狀), shortly after his death in 689<sup>34</sup>. In this rather involved narrative that no one else has bothered to close read, we see the figure of Bodhidharma put to work in a more explicit manner, since now he appears as the pivot between a lineage

system in India and one in China<sup>35</sup>. Thus, what, at first, promises to be the life story of Faru, in fact, opens up into a grand history of how the essence of Buddhism moved from ancient India into the precincts of what was arguably China's most prominent monastery of the day: Shaolin<sup>36</sup>. The key claim is that this master Faru received the total truth of Buddhism via master Hongren, who lived on East Mountain in Hubei, and who had supposedly inherited that final wisdom from his master Daoxin who, himself, was then connected back to Bodhidharma via masters Sengcan and Huike. Sengcan, by the way, is listed at the top of Huike's disciples in the supplementary section of Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies* that gives the biography of Fachong (法冲 n.d.), a late seventh century master of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, who, in this mini-narrative, seems intent on absorbing the cachet of authority seen residing in the figures of Bodhidharma and Huike<sup>37</sup>. Seeing that the figure of Sengcan reappears in the Faru biography, and just in the context of trying to hook a current figure back to Bodhidharma and Huike, suggests that the authors of the Shaolin stele drew not just details from several sections of Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*, but were also mimicking literary strategies for taking hold of Bodhidharma and other sanctifying ancestors, strategies that were already clearly in view in the Huike material in Daoxuan's encyclopedia<sup>38</sup>.

Looking more closely at the Faru biography, we see what I believe is the earliest description of Chan transmission: in the first moment of meeting Faru, master Hongren did not say anything, but, based on prior karmic connections, "gave him the Dao" (授其道). Though earlier in the narrative, we had been told that Faru had been sent to Hongren to learn a *samādhi* (a generic word for a settled meditative state), here, in their first meeting, there is no talk of *samādhi* or meditation—it is just a case of Hongren "zapping" him. And, if you do not like the term "zap", you are probably underestimating the magic of this crucial moment on which the whole narrative hangs, the moment when the fullness of tradition moves from the past into the place where it needs to land: in the body of Faru who, once he dies (if he ever existed), will be buried in a stupa next to Shaolin Monastery and decorated with a portrait of the Indian Buddha and given a "Buddha stele" (佛碑) on which this very narrative of his life was carved<sup>39</sup>. Consequently, the point of Faru's biography seems to be to prove that Shaolin is the best monastery in the land because it recently hosted Faru-the-Buddha. The Shaolin monks would make similar claims to preeminence in the famous stele of 728 (皇唐嵩岳少林寺碑), so it is reasonable to interpret similar motivations in the Faru stele<sup>40</sup>. (It seems to me that if Chan studies had gotten off to a more reasonable start, the role of Shaolin Monastery, and its close connections with the imperial court, would have been front and center in our discussions of the origins of Chan.)

Another point that is often overlooked is that the Faru stele does not say that Faru led a community of meditators from East Mountain back to Shaolin or the capital, as the McRae and Faure narrative supposed. In fact, according to the stele's account, Faru came to Shaolin secretly, and only some ten years later revealed his full Buddha status in a grand teaching moment when all the monks of the nation spontaneously came to Shaolin Monastery and identified him as the most recent owner of this newly invented version of ultimate tradition. And, again against the assumption that meditation was the central concern of these early masters, when Faru climactically teaches all the monks of the nation, he does not teach them meditation, but rather he "imprinted their minds secretly with the dharma of One Seal and thereby the mundane world was no longer manifest, and instead it was the dharma realm"<sup>41</sup>. He zapped them with perfect truth, in other words, and this proves for readers that Faru was, in fact, the unique holder of the totality of tradition since, as he transforms the mundane world into the dharma realm, believing readers have to conclude that Hongren really did put the totality of truth and tradition into Faru back on East Mountain. Here, then, we have a supposedly historical account of a Chinese buddha, one in which the authors' audacity in presenting Faru as a buddha is cloaked by staging this grand teaching scene in which the fundamental claim of the text—Faru's inheritance of Buddhahood from Hongren—is presented as *an already established fact* known by all the

monks of the nation, a gesture which, of course, would make believing readers think that Faru's biography has not invented anything new at all<sup>42</sup>.

Appreciating the craft involved in sculpting these scenes in which Shaolin's aggressive privatization of tradition was wrapped in the gauze of innocence and a spontaneous national celebration is, I believe, another important piece of evidence in evaluating the level of craft and cunning at work in Chan writing. Such craft also appears in the way that the narrative underscored Faru's innocence and simplicity with an appeal to various Daoist tropes. For instance, we are told that Faru "held on to his [spiritual] roots (守本), and was completely simple (全朴)." And, "externally, he hid his fame and talent, and internally he harmonized the mysterious forces (玄功)—this is, basically, the way of keeping close to it, and such is the manner of lofty simplicity."<sup>43</sup> In short, in a surprising twist of fate, just in the middle of this story documenting Faru's inheritance of Buddhahood, he has also been portrayed as a typical Daoist sage, one who hides his virtue and manifests absolute simplicity, while maintaining a mystical union with cosmic forces. Again, if Chan studies had gotten off to a good start, this curious pairing of Daoist and Buddhist perfection would have been a central concern in historicizing the birth of Chan.

There is another key problematic in the Faru narrative that warrants careful consideration: Faru, as a perfect Chinese buddha, is presented as one naturally above everyone else due to his magical inheritance, but he is also clearly set above the imported sūtras, a claim that likely would have appeared rather shocking in Tang-era China. However, a close look at the narrative's phrasing makes it clear that the two key events in Faru's life—his enlightenment and his teaching—are made up of snippets of recycled literature, much of it from Buddhist sūtras but also from the Chinese classics. So, his most notable actions are literally made of the sacred literature that his magic enlightenment has supposedly made superfluous. Recycling hallowed literature in this manner appears as another example of deploying previously established voices-of-authority, but, now, instead of simply relying on Bodhidharma's growing symbolic heft, our author has turned Faru's life history into a xylophone of sorts, such that each mini-passages, as it echoes Buddhist and Chinese classics, rings with the tones of previously established value and authority. The full complexity of the situation only comes into view when we remember that this clever recycling of choice bits from China's favorite literature is done in a narrative that claims that real tradition is not in words or texts, but rather moves man-to-man and mind-to-mind, as announced at the top of the narrative<sup>44</sup>. Getting a bead on this very workable contradiction is essential for all things Chan.

The next genealogy that puts Bodhidharma to work as the voice of final authority was written by Du Fei (杜朏), perhaps two decades or so after Faru's Biography<sup>45</sup>. In Du Fei's aptly titled text, *The Record of the Transmission of the Dharma Jewel* (傳法寶紀), the transmission of total truth in the Bodhidharma lineage is defined as the secret sharing of an esoteric gift — that "dharma jewel", to be exact<sup>46</sup>. Du Fei goes further in defining the nature of truth-transmission when he likens it to learning the practice of alchemy directly from a Daoist immortal.<sup>47</sup> That Du Fei thought this analogy would help bolster his case for this newly invented form of Buddhist authority suggests that Chan rhetoric was taking shape in the shadow of previously established Daoist esoteric rites, in which the key elements of tradition were said to be secretly transmitted from celestial masters to their disciples. And, given that Du Fei was writing during a time when Daoists and Buddhists were fiercely at odds with one another, it is hard to imagine that Du Fei was casually tossing off an ill-considered analogy here<sup>48</sup>.

In Du Fei's account of the descendants of Bodhidharma, he gives special attention to developing a Daoist profile for master Hongren. Thus, we learn that Hongren was quiet and withdrawn, and stayed silent when he was insulted; he spent his days in menial work with the servants and then spent his nights in meditation, and, best of all, "Although he never looked at the Buddhist scriptures, he understood everything he heard."<sup>49</sup> While some might want to pounce on this mention of Hongren's nocturnal meditations as proof of the centrality of meditation in early Chan, in fact, this detail looks more like part of a

stock profile of the simple, humble Daoist sage who inverts the social order and nurtures his inner spirit in a concealed manner. And, as with the *Biography of Faru*, Du Fei never allows that meditation was part of the transmission moment or that meditation was required in order to receive transmission. Hongren's all-night meditation is just proof of his toughness and his disdain for normal culture, and, in particular, proof of his ownership of total tradition, free of literature.

In 1992, T. Griffith Foulk, one of my PhD advisors at the University of Michigan, pointed out that Du Fei's text appears designed to take Faru's imaginary ancestors, as found in the Shaolin stele considered above, and attach them to a different monk, Shenxiu (神秀 d. 706), a figure who, at the beginning of the eighth century, was surely the most well-known monk in China. In short, Du Fei seems to have lifted the basic outline of Faru's lineage in order to give this celebrity monk—apparently much fêted by Empress Wu—a perfect pedigree, whereby his own supreme status, and not Shaolin Monastery's, was guaranteed by supposedly having received perfect tradition from Hongren<sup>50</sup>. Of course, to make this transmission look believable, Du Fei had to invent historical connections between Hongren and Shenxiu—connections which appear entirely vague in Du Fei's text—and, of course, he also had to push Faru out of the picture so that Shenxiu could stand alone as the singular buddha of China. This undermining of Faru's status is particularly evident in the Du Fei's account of the lineage.

To get a sense for why Foulk's view on Du Fei's basic agenda is likely correct, let's consider several telling details in Du Fei's version of the Bodhidharma family. First, Du Fei, in his account of the other six masters in the Bodhidharma family, has the transmission happen just before the patriarch dies. With Shenxiu, however, reception of transmission from Hongren is set decades before Hongren's death, and without any details given. Equally problematic, while all the prior transmissions in the lineage were given to but one descendant, Du Fei has Faru and Shenxiu positioned as co-inheritors—dharma-brothers, as it were. Then, after Hongren dies, Du Fei has Shenxiu announce, presumably for the reader since no setting or interlocutor is mentioned, that he cannot immediately take over the teaching responsibilities because “there was a prior transmission”. The problem here is that Du Fei is acknowledging an awkward and potentially illegitimate overlap in this system of inheritance that, hitherto in his narrative, has always been singular. The way that Du Fei resolves this dubious-looking dual inheritance from Hongren is to recount how Faru, instead of transmitting the dharma-jewel just before dying—as all the other masters do in Du Fei's narrative—supposedly tells his disciples, “After [my death] you should go study under Chan master Shenxiu...”<sup>51</sup>. In effect, Du Fei has cancelled Faru's right to transmit the dharma-jewel that he inherited from Hongren, while also turning him into a signpost for Shenxiu's authority.

Besides this careful replotting of the history of Bodhidharma's family, Du Fei claimed that the late Shenxiu had secretly transmitted the “precious jewel” before dying, giving the impression that the narrative was set up to support the next cycle of claiming ownership of that final form of authority<sup>52</sup>. The point, then, of Du Fei's essay was not just to coronate Shenxiu as the king of Buddhism by connecting him to the Bodhidharma family via Faru's (imaginary) ancestors, but also to set up the format necessary for the next “king” to take the throne.

Actually, Du Fei's efforts to encourage public expectation for the transmission of final Buddhist authority seemed to have worked, since, in a short while, several high profile masters would claim to be Shenxiu's descendants—most notably Puji (普寂 d. 739), but several others as well. Perhaps, we even ought to say Du Fei's ritual and symbolic architecture for establishing Buddhist kingship, and for moving it forward in time, was too successful since, in the coming decades, Shenxiu would be a lightning rod for various future authors to link into the Bodhidharma lineage; most notably, the late eighth century *Platform Sūtra* develops a complex narrative that undermines Shenxiu's kingship and coronates, in his stead, the illiterate Huineng (惠能 or 慧能 n.d.). (See below for more details.) Without, for the moment, addressing those developments, we should conclude that from

the early decades of the eighth century, there is solid evidence of a budding talent for publishing “open secrets” about the now-privatized nature of final Buddhist authority which, of course, was the basic agenda at work in constructing these lineages. The reason for publicizing this new privatization of Buddhist truth is that—as with property—all claims to ownership only work when those *not owning the property* recognize the validity of the claim, and that is why Chan authors were forever trying to excite the reading public to support a theory of Buddhist enlightenment that naturally excludes everyone not in the Bodhidharma family<sup>53</sup>.

As Du Fei went about his business of stealthily attaching Shenxiu to the (imaginary) Bodhidharma family, he also went out of his way to undercut prior published statements that claimed the *Two Entrances* or the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* were the items that Bodhidharma transmitted to Huike. Looking closely at Du Fei’s dismissal of these older attempts to deploy Bodhidharma’s voice-of-authority, it is again clear that Du Fei is a wily author fully aware of the power of preceding literary statements and, yet, unabashed in his efforts to undermine them<sup>54</sup>. If my colleagues in Chan studies had read Du Fei’s text with an eye on his verve for reinventing, yet again, the Bodhidharma story, we would not have gotten lost thinking that it was Shenhui (神會 d. 758) who, some decades later, was responsible for upsetting the claims of the so-called Northern School that was taking shape around the legacy of Shenxiu.

Once one reads Du Fei closely, his attacks on the earlier Bodhidharma narratives are obvious, and, thus, we ought to see that Du Fei, like the other “historians” of the Bodhidharma family, appears as yet another author wrestling with his predecessors in order to take hold of the voice-of-final-authority<sup>55</sup>. Without situating Du Fei’s *The Record of the Transmission of the Dharma Jewel* in this context, my comments above might seem unnecessarily suspicious; however, once one sees the text as the fifth rewriting of the Bodhidharma legacy, this level of suspicion seems warranted. And, when, several years later, another author, Jingjue (淨覺 d. 750?) produced a text that seems aware of Du Fei’s work, and deploys a similar set of lineage-stealing strategies, we have to conclude that early Chan was written into existence by a steadily expanding pattern of authorial desires dedicated to taking hold of final authority in Chinese Buddhism. Somewhat ironically, then, what is being transmitted, from author to author, is just this desire (and talent) to rewrite theories of transmission.

Near the end of Jingjue’s genealogy of the Bodhidharma family *A History of the Masters and Disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (楞伽師資記)<sup>56</sup>, Jingjue cites a long passage from an otherwise unknown text, *A Record of the Men and Teachings of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (楞伽人法志), that explains how Hongren, just before his death, explained that he had given two transmissions of final authority in his life, with one going to Shenxiu and the other to Jingjue’s own master, Xuanze (玄蹟 n.d.), who, of course, supposedly then handed it on to Jingjue<sup>57</sup>. Thus, in effect, as Jingjue slides his supposed master Xuanze into the Bodhidharma lineage, he has repeated Du Fei’s gesture of setting up Shenxiu as Faru’s “brother”. For those who might want to believe these claims about Xuanze, it has to be said that Jingjue’s case is not helped by the fact that his supposed master, Xuanze, is not mentioned as a disciple of Hongren’s in any sources unrelated to Jingjue, and that Jingjue gives his readers no information about Xuanze’s life and death. And, surely, if Xuanze existed and was a national treasure equal in stature to Shenxiu, he would have left some mark in history, and certainly Du Fei would have taken pains to downgrade Xuanze’s status or push him out of the picture in order to secure Shenxiu’s singular status. Finally, it does not help matters that Jingjue claims that it was Xuanze who authored this very version of events at Hongren’s death in which Xuanze’s status as Shenxiu’s equal is announced<sup>58</sup>.

There are many interesting new elements in Jingjue’s version of the Bodhidharma family, and I will return to several of those issues below, but, for now, it is worth pointing out that Jingjue saw fit to further spruce up Hongren with more Daoist glamour—he even puts these claims to Zhuangzian perfection in Hongren’s own voice:

Someone asked [Hongren], “To study the Dao, why is it that you don’t settle down in cities and towns, and instead live in the mountains?” Hongren answered, “The timbers for a great hall come from the remote valleys (幽谷), not from inhabited areas. Because they are far from humans, they have not been chopped down or damaged by their axes. One by one they grow into giant things: only then are they fit to serve as ridge beams. Thus we know to rest the spirit in remote valleys (栖神幽谷), to stay far from the hubbub and dust [of the cities], to nourish our [true] nature in the mountains (養性山中), and to always reject mundane affairs. When there is nothing before the eyes, mind is, of itself, peaceful. From this the tree of the Dao blooms, and the fruits of the Chan forest come forth.” The Great Master Hongren sat alone in purity. He produced no written record, but he explained the mysterious principle (玄理) orally or transmitted it to people in silence<sup>59</sup>.

With all this Daoist-sounding vocabulary, and the very recognizable riff from the *Zhuangzi* about trees that survive only due to their distance from society, it is not hard to see what Jingjue was trying to do, but it would also seem highly likely that he picked up the idea of doing so from noticing the Daoist elements that Du Fei had added to Hongren’s profile<sup>60</sup>. In short, here is evidence suggesting that Chan authors read each other critically and tried to best the competition by repeating versions of just those rhetorical gestures deemed powerful, exciting, and successful in the work of their predecessors. If one reads these genealogical texts following these basic gestures of appropriating other authors’ constructions of final authority, the basic engine of Chan writing becomes clear. So, in another round of irony, even the riffs on the Chan masters’ supposed Daoist innocence and non-competition are being stolen and repurposed to increase the texts’ seductive appeal. In fact, deploying these cultivated images of innocence and insouciance will only get more pronounced in the following decades.

The most famous case of trying to take hold of Bodhidharma’s legacy comes some two decades later, in the middle of the eighth century, when Shenhui invented Huineng, the illiterate Buddha from the outback who was supposedly Hongren’s only *real* descendent and, no surprise, was set up to serve as Shenhui’s own spiritual father. Though Shenhui got the famous poet-painter Wang Wei (王維 699–761) to compose this newly updated version of Hongren’s transmission of final authority, and though Huineng was decked out as a full-on Daoist sage who would go on to mesmerize readers to this day, Shenhui’s place in the Bodhidharma family was soon papered over as others sought to take his place<sup>61</sup>.

Actually, for those who think I am overemphasizing the literary cunning of these texts, I should add that the various accounts of Huineng’s supposed relationship to Hongren indulge in several conspiracy theories to explain Huineng’s secretive and previously unknown inheritance of Hongren’s perfect enlightenment<sup>62</sup>. The real kicker in these conspiracy theories is that they take pains to explain to the reader how it was that, earlier, mistaken versions of Hongren’s descendants were put before the public. This is, arguably, a pretty advanced mode of handling public relations, one full of intersubjective guile and finesse since the reader not only comes to see how it happened that there were two versions of Hongren’s descendants in circulation, but he also comes to love the new version and disparage the other version/s once he accepts the historicity of the new story. This is, in effect, the fundamental logic structuring the biographical section of the *Platform Sūtra*, and even though the various conspiracies around Huineng are plain to see in the text, decades of modern scholarship have ignored this arrangement and what it suggests about how Chan authors were writing their various histories.

Thinking more about these Chan conspiracy theories, we should also see that the way they stage supposedly historical events to advance sectarian claims matches narrative strategies found in two of China’s best loved sūtras, the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrtinird-eśa*. In both these Indian narratives, recounting supposedly historical events reveals an alarming conspiracy in which the reader learns that the final form of perfect Buddhism was purposefully hidden behind the mundane version of Buddhism—the only one hith-

erto known—that was handed out to the benighted masses<sup>63</sup>. If we had read these two narratives more carefully, and addressed their artful conspiracy theories, especially in the context of generating fantasy forms of Buddhism, then these Chan gestures would have been easier to spot and would have, in effect, appeared somewhat traditional. However, by failing to treat Buddhist literature as literature—in India and in China—we missed a chance to reckon some surprising continuity in the artful reinvention of tradition and, in particular, a chance to see the steady and highly stylized efforts that went into producing seductive images of final and fantastic forms of tradition, with all the authority and final closure one could dream of suddenly at hand.

Summing up, in all this rewriting of Hongren and the Bodhidharma clan, there is no mention of the various masters practicing meditation in order to receive enlightenment. Nor do we see any special teaching or content that is supposedly being transmitted *inside* the lineage. Instead, what is being transmitted, over the decades of the eighth century, are the literary tricks to convincingly rewrite the history of the Bodhidharma family, and even to write oneself into the family. Thus, Chan, even at this early stage, appears as the radical privatization of truth and tradition that leaves ordinary Buddhists with little to do but worship the newly recognized local buddhas and, of course, long to take hold of these final truths that, nevertheless, will only be available to them in fantasy. After all, if enlightenment is set up as a singular gift, bequeathed from master to master, how could that special transmission be the basis for sharing out a new form of Buddhist practice that would somehow take non-lineage members to enlightenment? It cannot be. And, in fact, this separation of the masters from the masses was clearly announced by the likes of Du Fei and Shenhui<sup>64</sup>. It is for these reasons that I believe Chan has to be counted as a complex public relations campaign, organized by elite authors who sought to control images of final Buddhist authority, while making those new claims to own truth and tradition appear legitimate, natural, and lovable in the eyes of the public.

In rethinking the origins of Chan, we would do well to remember two other basic facts. First, it would not be until the 12th century that a practical discussion of meditation figured in an important Chan text, the *Zuochan yi* (坐禪儀 “Principles of Seated Meditation”), appended to Zongze’s (宗謁 d. 1107) famous work, the *Chanyuan qinggui* (禪院清規 “Chan Monasteries’ Rules for Purity”)<sup>65</sup>. Here, finally, we get basic instructions on seated postures, along with techniques for building up one’s powers of concentration, etc. But, further underlining the fact that practical meditation was not the distinctive thing that made Chan Chan, it turns out that these useful directions for actually practicing meditation have been lifted from Zhiyi’s (智顗 538–597) famous discussion in his *Shorter [Treatise] on Cessation and Insight* (小止觀), written in the late sixth century<sup>66</sup>.

In fact, in another rare moment when a Chan text offers practical advice on meditation—in Jingjue’s *Record of the Masters and Disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, discussed above—we see that when master Daoxin is shown discoursing on practical meditation, he too is in fact recycling, in a condensed form, instructions from Zhiyi’s *Shorter [Treatise] on Cessation and Insight*<sup>67</sup>. That Chan authors casually recycled elements of Zhiyi’s meditation instructions, in the Tang and the Song, hints at a much larger problem that Foulk pointed out long ago: it would seem that the basics of Chinese monastic practice were largely shared by all monasteries<sup>68</sup>. Thus, in the Song dynasty, whether a monastery was labelled “Chan” or “Tiantai” or “Vinaya” meant little in terms of day-to-day activities, including the styles of meditation practiced. What was distinctive was the leadership and the different branding strategies used at the abbot level. The situation in the Tang was presumably different, but, as is widely admitted, there was no special institutional setting for Chan practice, suggesting again that Chan was primarily a discourse, one designed to organize new forms of leadership, with little interest in defining unique forms of practice.

The final point counseling against taking Chan to be a meditation movement comes into view when we note that when the topic of meditation does come up in Tang texts related to Chan, it is almost always in the context of a virtuoso performance, whereby a master is shown negating the value of meditation along with the other normal practices

of Buddhism, all in order to prove that he and the other masters in the lineage are holders of a higher, thoroughly unthinkable, form of Buddhism. In such cases, without recognizing the well-worn trope of negating tradition in order to prove mastery of it—a strategy well-established in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and the *Diamond Sūtra*—any reading of these early Chan dismissals of meditation will land wide of the mark. Again, if you follow the literary trends, you will not get lost, as Śāriputra did, trying to figure out how one was to practice no-meditation<sup>69</sup>.

The central problem has been that Chan studies functions in accord with a “myth of innocence”, to borrow Burton Mack’s (1988) phrase for describing how Christian studies approaches the gospels and early Christianity<sup>70</sup>. Thus, in standard presentations of Chan’s invention and development, there are never any real actors or authors with clear agendas and desires; instead, everything just sort of happens on its own—naturally and innocently, almost with a kind of Daoist ease. Some have pushed further on this front, claiming that the very notion of “authors” is a modern invention and not applicable to the medieval period<sup>71</sup>. In yet another effort to erase actual authors, the late McRae regularly wrote about a deep Chinese spirituality that was expressing itself in Chan texts, mystically composing texts in a kind of *mythopoesis* (“myth-making”) that was not historically accurate, but was nonetheless of great spiritual import precisely because it welled up from the timeless wisdom of the masses and not from a particular author<sup>72</sup>. More recently, Mario Poceski has hoped to replace specific author–editors by evoking “communities of remembrance” who, rather accidentally, composed and edited Chan texts based on their joint creative remembrances<sup>73</sup>. As I have been pointing out, these efforts to sanitize the invention of Chan will not work and reflect a basic failure to face a range of facts about Chan texts and their place within the larger Mahāyāna history of reinventing tradition *within the fantasy-space of literature*. Moreover, once one understands how Daoist tropes were strategically deployed in Chan literature—even in the earliest texts—it would seem that this modern assumption of innocence in the making of Chan needs to be understood as a clear case of falling prey to tradition’s seductive charms, rather than some carefully considered approach.

The paradigm I am offering not only covers the evidence in a much-improved manner, but it also opens the door to addressing a set of rather fascinating problems regarding the way Chan authors, named and unnamed, put themselves in charge of creating images of final authority. Thus, when one tracks, century by century, the evolution of discourse records for various Tang masters, as Mario Poceski and Albert Welter have done, we can see that it is the wild, outrageous, and free-wheeling elements in their supposed performances that slowly got added into the records, long after the masters were dead. Thus, Welter convincingly shows that the much admired Chan-master Linji was created as a wild iconoclast some three hundred years after a more staid version of Linji had been depicted in print; Poceski shows a similar track of invention for Mazu<sup>74</sup>. And, though Albert Welter is right to label this kind of writing a “fictionalizing process”, he does not take the next step to ask, how exactly did this fictionalizing process take place?<sup>75</sup> Who was in charge? And, what should we make of a tradition of mostly nameless author–editors serving as ventriloquists for the perfect masters, tarting up their pronouncements of final truth, even as they made these masters claim over and over that only those in the lineage had the right to speak of final truths? In short, once we agree that, in effect, “Zen is in the pen and not in the master”, a whole set of issues around irony, bad faith, and the literary skill of cloaking writing with ever more enticing forms of faux orality ought to become unavoidable points of debate and discussion.

## Conclusions

The above evidence would seem sufficient to portray Chan as a slowly evolving form of “fantasy Buddhism” that was knowingly deployed for various public relation reasons, from the early Tang dynasty onward. With even a modicum of close reading and contextualization, one can see that at each turn, Chan authors worked skillfully to give readers a sense for a transcendental form of Buddhism that, though always defined as the special

purview of the masters, was also held up for the faithful to appreciate and long for. In building this two-tier format, there was always that work-a-day world of normal Buddhism, with sūtra recitation, meditation, and merit-making, etc. that served as the punching bag for that other kind of Buddhism that is completely impossible—that wondrous Buddhism of the masters who transmit perfect truth and mastery-of-tradition with no techniques at all, and are certainly free of dependence on the reality of Buddhism on the ground, with its various kinds of social, economic, and political entanglements. Thus, obviously, *according to their literary profiles*, the masters do not meditate on truths to realize them, or read and reflect on the sūtras to deeply comprehend them. Instead, they give each other total truth with a whack on the head, or a pithy comment out in the courtyard—techniques which are simply romanticized versions of that zapping that we saw so clearly in the earliest Chan texts. Flipping through the classic Song Chan texts, such as the *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp from the Jingde Era*, one sees over and over just this cliché: the masters move Buddhist truth forward with non-Buddhist means, thereby rendering the final version of “real” tradition more exciting to behold, and yet also more private and forbidding.

If we ask why Chinese authors, century after century, put so much effort into curating this fantasy form of Buddhism—and the mountains of Chan literature are proof of this obsession—I can suggest four possible answers: (1) this literature was essential to organizing authority since every master of stature needed his own discourse records to demonstrate his mastery of the two forms of tradition, and to prove that he had received total truth from the lineage ancestors; (2) this literature engaged and excited the gentry whose support and funds were needed, and who probably liked Daoist-flavored literature as much or better than the imported sūtras, while they also enjoyed being titillated with the possibility that they kind of got the punch lines in the clever vignettes and the perplexing koans that evoked that final form of tradition that I dubbed “trap-door” Buddhism; (3) this literature re-enchanted regular Buddhist practice with thrilling anecdotes that were regularly rehearsed in the public monasteries in front of ordinary monks who might have found such displays interesting, provocative, and, perhaps, even useful to their practice; and, finally, (4) Chan literature opened up a dream space for elite authors and readers to mix and match various elements of the wider Chinese tradition in order to produce a kind of living museum of Chinese values. Summing up these points, we ought to see that Chan literature regularly evoked nostalgia for a prelapsarian state, in which the Great Dao was the only reality to reckon with, even though fantasizing about regaining that timeless totality in no way blocked enjoyment of all those perfect father-son transmission moments, transmissions that kept ideal tradition living in real-time while also dramatizing Confucian values in new and alluring ways. Somewhat surprisingly, then, it was within the horizon of Chan literature that these comforting fantasies of Daoist completion and perfect Confucian filial piety were brought together and made more visible and enjoyable<sup>76</sup>. In all this, we have to see that Chan literature served as a big tent for staging a magical form of Buddhism that articulated so many Chinese values and desires, even as that fantasy form of Buddhism lived side by side with “old school” Buddhism, and supported it in several fundamental ways.

If one were to sketch a quick history of the field of Chan studies, it would seem that the arc of accepted knowledge in the field has a specific shape, whereby we have moved steadily away from treating Chan texts as reliable historical statements regarding actual events, discourses, and practices—as Dumoulin and others did—towards reading Chan texts as a kind of lightly fictionalized literature that, though at times unreliable for historical facts, still has to be considered innocent and earnest in terms of its intent; this was, in essence, how McRae and Faure proceeded in their research. The arguments I have presented here push one step further along this arc to read Chan texts as knowingly orchestrated fantasies, designed to produce specific reader effects that have little to do with the practice of real Buddhism, but nonetheless were shaped to produce certain outcomes that were seen as crucial for the viability of Buddhism in China. In short, I am arguing for a well-developed sense of irony and cunning in the production of Chan literature.

While the shape of this arc would suggest continuing movement towards a more critical assessment of Chan literature, in fact, here in 2024, it seems that many Chan scholars are still reluctant to let go of the historical reality of various claims in Chan literature, or, at the very least, want to continue assuming that there was a basic innocence to all the literary inventions. Within this uncertain paradigm, it is also clear that many scholars have not accepted that Chan and meditation, in China at least, had little to do with one another<sup>77</sup>. (Dahui's promotion of *kan huatou* for his literati friends in the 12th century would seem to be the exception that proves the rule<sup>78</sup>.) In short, Chan studies seems at an impasse, unable to pick a path forward that promises the best perspectives on the evidence as we have it.

To get a sense for the confusion in the field—and I have admittedly picked a particularly glaring example—one could turn to Sam van Schaik's recent book, *The Spirit of Zen*, published by Yale Press in 2018, in their "Sacred Literature Series". With the imprimatur of Yale Press, one would expect a critical approach to the topic, and, yet, in this work, Van Schaik presents himself as something of a modern Chan master who, somehow, has the authority to discourse, in a final way, on Chan/Zen doctrines and practices, and of course its "spirit". He opens up his discussion, in the preface, with encouragement for those who might want to start a meditation practice (p. xi), and then turns to give readers his version of the final truths of Chan (and Buddhism at large) for eighteen pages of the first chapter, titled "The Practice of Zen". Blending his voice with quotations from sūtras and Chan texts, Van Schaik gives supposedly authoritative views on everything from impermanence and the Four Truths to the nature of the bodhisattva path and the fundamental purity of mind, etc. And, from the outset, we learn that Van Schaik knows what Zen enlightenment is and how to get there. For instance, he writes, "In Zen, the path from samsara to enlightenment is not a journey from A to B, but a gradual realization of something that has always been there in our day-to-day awareness. We have everything we need for awakening right here in our own minds, so there is no need to rely on gods or other supernatural aids." (pp. 4–5) Van Schaik also claims to understand the fundamental nature of everybody's mind:

To say our mind is pure from the beginning is only to say that the way we normally engage with the world is not fundamentally what we are. The ingredients of our anxieties and irritations—clinging to our own selfish needs, categorizing other people and things according to our own desires and fears—are part of a repeating pattern, but they are only one particular expression of our awareness, which is fundamentally pure. This awareness simply *is*—always present but obscured by our own confusion. This pure awareness is there for everyone, but is like a pearl hidden by dirty water; only when the water is allowed to settle can we see the pearl. It is the practice of meditation, which is key to all Zen traditions, that allows the dirt to settle and the waters to become clear. (p. 5)

After the eighteen pages of preaching ex cathedra, Van Schaik turns to more mundane topics such as "Zen and the West" and "The History of Zen". Then, in the second half of the book, Van Schaik gets to the more nuts-and-bolts business of translating Jingjue's *A History of the Masters and Disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, one of the early Chan texts discussed briefly above. It would take a separate article to work through what is and is not well established in Van Schaik's discussions. But, even if there are, on and off, reasonable academic reflections and useful bits of information, especially about Dunhuang manuscripts, the die was cast in the opening chapter of the book: Chan is what Van Schaik says it is, and that is that. In a particularly bold moment near the end of this introductory chapter, (p. 17), Van Schaik defines "the spirit of Zen" by trotting out the famous four-lined formulation of Chan's perfect nature, produced to solidify Chan's claim to be the preeminent school in Song-era China:

If Zen can be summed up in a single phrase, it is this one: 'A special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded on words or letters, pointing to one's mind, so that we might see into our own nature and attain Buddhahood'. This formulation of the essence of Zen is from the twelfth century, but it expresses the principles of the earliest Zen texts as well. Awakening is found not through study

or intellectual exercises, but through directly engaging with reality itself. Moreover, this cannot be done alone; it is achieved through ‘transmission’ between teacher and student, the teacher pointing out the truth to the student, with or without words.

So, in the end, there is not a glimmer of light between what tradition claims to be true for itself, and what the supposedly critical scholar of Chan, Van Schaik, claims to be true. And, obviously, there is no discussion here of where this self-justifying definition of Chan came from or what it was intended to do, even though the polemics of this position have been discussed in various reliable publications since the late 1990s<sup>79</sup>. Worse, without addressing the nature or value of this definition of Chan, Van Schaik jumps into the fray to give the reader the need-to-know “facts” on how to achieve enlightenment: it turns out Chan really is final truth, and Van Schaik is not shy about reminding us of how it all works.

That Yale Press thought it was a good idea to publish this kind of book that blends sermonizing the “universal” truths of Chan with supposedly critical accounts of Chan’s history probably has more to do with current financial anxieties in the world of academic publishing than demonstrating any strong commitment to promoting Chan masters schooled at the University of Manchester. On the other hand, when, in the prestigious *Journal of Religion*, Professor George Keyworth (PhD, UCLA) breathlessly endorses the book, describing it as a “remarkable Trojan horse-like academic book”<sup>80</sup> because it promises to engage three kinds of readers: (1) undergraduates and Zen practitioners in the West (a rather telling category, to be sure); (2) academics in Chan studies; and, (3) those interested in Dunhuang texts, we have to conclude that at least one wing of modern Chan studies is eager to regress to the early stages of the field when authors, such as D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, fused their voices with the masters of traditional Chan/Zen, implicitly asking their readers to treat their views as no different than those of the Chan sages of yore<sup>81</sup>. While confusion over scholarship and apologetics remains a major problem throughout religious studies, it is still troubling to see academic discussions of Chan tip this far into self-aggrandizing proselytization.

Coincidentally, in 1936, Alan Watts published a book called *The Spirit of Zen*, and a quick look through Watts’s discussion, written when he was but twenty-one, would suggest strong parallels with Van Schaik’s approach, particularly in terms of posing as a voice of final authority on all matters Buddhist and Chan/Zen. Ironically, it is precisely enthusiasm for this style of discourse that is the real “spirit of Zen” —speaking and writing as though one were an enlightened Buddha, and hoping that people would take that claim seriously. Perhaps, then, we ought to see Van Schaik’s discourse as deeply traditional, albeit now cast in the modern form of the “burden of the white roshi” who, besides enjoying offering discourses on final truths, feels obligated to push back against those historians, like me, who, he feels, have been altogether too critical in describing the invention of Chan<sup>82</sup>.

Whether or not Van Schaik’s *The Spirit of Zen* should be taken as a reliable indicator of the future in store for Chan studies, we still ought to note that it is of a piece with several deeply conservative trends in religious studies that will make it hard to bring the arguments I have sketched here into the classroom and into the normal space of liberal arts debate. In particular, many of my colleagues in religious studies seem to believe that religion has to be presented as innocent, authentic, wholesome, uplifting, etc. in order for religious studies to rightfully take its place at the banquet of the liberal arts, where, let’s be honest, it has often been made to feel unwelcome<sup>83</sup>. And, yet, in the case of Chan studies, if we let go of the Pollyanna perspective and shift to reading Chan as a consummate art form—one born of centuries of desire, envy, and calculated reinvention—we would, no doubt, more easily regain our bona fides in the liberal arts tradition since the case of Chan represents such an compelling example of authors consciously interlacing real and imaginary forms of tradition in a living and reproductive manner, a blending that seems to be elemental in many religions and political movements. Making sense of that living body of practical knowledge, with all the irony and double vision it requires, would seem to be topic of great interest within the sphere of the liberal arts, as well as within religious

studies, at least as it was originally conceived<sup>84</sup>. There is much more to say about all these points, but let me conclude by saying it is high time we took a more realistic approach to religious fantasy and all the effort that goes into producing it and curating it.

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## Abbreviations

T = Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經 [Buddhist Canon Newly Compiled during the Taishō Era (1912–1926)]. 100 vols. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, Watanabe Kaikyōku 渡辺海 旭 et al., eds. Tōkyō: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934. Digitized in CBETA (v. 5.2 or updated, <https://www.cbeta.org> accessed on 10 January 2024) and SAT Daizōkyō Text Database (<http://21dzk.l.u-Tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php> accessed on 10 January 2024).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at the virtual conference “How Zen Became Chan: Pre-modern and Modern Representations of a Transnational East Asian Buddhist Tradition” hosted by the University of British Columbia and Yale University, 29–31 July 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> This essay is dedicated to my dear friend, Professor Kurt Fosso, of Lewis & Clark College’s English Dept. For decades now, conversations with Kurt have inspired my thinking and writing. He also edited an early version of this essay and improved it substantially.
- <sup>3</sup> For an overview of McRae’s historicization of early Chan, see [McRae \(2003\)](#), pp. 11–21, and chp. 2). For one version of Faure’s history of early Chan, see [Faure \(1997\)](#), pp. 1–5).
- <sup>4</sup> Some might think that Faure’s study of *A History of the Masters and Disciples of the Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* (楞伽師資記), in [Faure \(1989\)](#), counts as a close reading, but given that he never clarifies how the text works as a literary product, or how it is was designed to engage readers and the competition, I would have to disagree. As others have noted, Faure, despite his wide-ranging talents and impressive erudition, never settled on a reading strategy for approaching Chan texts. In a promising essay, [Faure \(1986a\)](#) began to sketch a literary account of Chan, but then turned away from that approach.
- <sup>5</sup> For discussion and relevant references, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), pp. 183–94).
- <sup>6</sup> See [Cole \(2009\)](#), pp. 226ff).
- <sup>7</sup> For a translation of this passage and discussion, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), pp. 130–36). I should add that the *Discourse on No-mind*, just mentioned above, also has a developed poetic statement expressing the experience of enlightenment in first-person voicing. As it turns out, that poem regularly employs Daoist-sounding terms and idioms; for more discussion, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), pp. 187–94).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, the artfully staged account of Shenhui “debating” master Chongyuan at The Great Cloud Monastery in Huatai, presented in the *Treatise Defining the True and False in the Southern School of Bodhidharma* (菩提達摩南宗定是非論); for discussion, see [Cole \(2009\)](#), pp. 235–42; [2016](#), pp. 103–107). As usual, no one else has noted the literary construction of this event; consequently, all prior scholarship on the “debate” assumes it was a real historical event even though that seems far from likely.
- <sup>9</sup> For a translation of this passage, see [Broughton \(1999\)](#), pp. 54–55). For discussion of this passage, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), pp. 27–28).
- <sup>10</sup> For an annotated edition, see [Yanagida \(1969\)](#). For the Taishō version of the text, as found in section 30 of the *Jingde chuandeng lu*, see T no. 2076, 51: 458b. For an English translation, see [Broughton \(1999\)](#), pp. 8–12); see also *ibid.*, p. 121, n.12 for a useful discussion of the various surviving manuscripts of the *Two Entrances*. For McRae’s translation, see [McRae \(1986\)](#), pp. 102–5). For McRae’s reflections on the text, see [McRae \(2003\)](#), pp. 28–33). For a close reading of the text, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), pp. 28–38).
- <sup>11</sup> For a useful survey of attempts by medieval and modern scholars to make sense of this term, see [McRae \(1986\)](#), pp. 112–15).
- <sup>12</sup> For this passage in the *Vajrasamādhi Sūtra*, see T. no. 273, 9: 369c.7; for an English translation, see [Buswell \(1989\)](#), pp. 215–16). I believe it was McRae who first pointed out this parallel; see [McRae \(1986\)](#), pp. 118, 308n27). For more discussion, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), pp. 31–32).
- <sup>13</sup> For more details on the Tibetan translations of the *Two Entrances*, see [Broughton \(1999\)](#), pp. 67–68). In Daoxuan’s *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, we can find mention of “wall contemplation” — in Daoxuan’s comparison of Bodhidharma and Sengchou’s teaching styles (T no. 2060, 50: 596c.9)—but Daoxuan does not clarify what the term means. For a translation of Daoxuan’s passage, see [Broughton \(1999\)](#), p. 66). For more discussion of the Sengchou–Bodhidharma comparison, see [Greene \(2008\)](#).”
- <sup>14</sup> For McRae’s translation of this difficult passage, see [McRae \(1986\)](#), p. 103); for Broughton’s rendering, see [Broughton \(1999\)](#), p. 9).
- <sup>15</sup> For a brief discussion of “tallying with the principle” in Daoism, see [Cole \(2016\)](#), p.34n26).

- 16 There were nine manuscripts of the *Two Entrances* found at Dunhuang, again suggesting that it had lasting appeal throughout the Tang.
- 17 For her discussion of the *Two Entrances*, see [Adamek \(2007, p. 141\)](#).
- 18 See [McRae \(2003, pp. 28–33\)](#).
- 19 See [Faure \(1986b, pp. 23–28\)](#).
- 20 In imagining that Chinese Buddhism generated a thoroughly romantic and imaginary double of itself, I have been encouraged by Wu Jiang's assessment of the situation in late Ming Chan when literati figures began reading Song-era Chan texts and then urged their local monks to behave in accord with those wild literary models they were so impressed with; the results were, unsurprisingly, chaotic and even farcical. For his discussion, see [Wu \(2008, pp. 245ff\)](#).
- 21 Working from Jonathan Z. Smith's perspectives, Robert Sharf argued that just this gap between real and imaginary tradition is a key element in the life of Buddhism, and other traditions; see [Sharf \(2005, p. 15\)](#). For a discussion of similar rhetorical structures in high profile Mahāyāna texts (in China), see [Cole \(2005\)](#).
- 22 While various forms of fantasy Buddhism were typically found in the context of claims about the masters' descent from the Indian Buddha, one can find other texts that work up versions of this bipolar view of the Buddhist tradition without making lineage claims. For instance, in playful dialogue texts such as the *Discourse on No-mind* (Wuxin lun T no. 2831, 85: 1269a), there is no mention of lineage inheritance, but such texts nonetheless produce a voice of final authority that confidently claims ownership of the final truth of Buddhism, and offers the reader the impression that access to that final truth—often painted in vivid Daoist colors—is fully available, even as little or no practical advice is given. For my reading of the *Discourse on No-mind*, see [Cole \(2016, pp. 183–94\)](#).
- 23 For McRae's translation of Daoxin's entry in Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*, see [McRae \(1986, pp. 31–32\)](#). As others have pointed out, Daoxin was likely chosen to fill out the Bodhidharma lineage because Daoxuan's entry for Daoxin mentioned that he designated Hongren to lead in caring for his stupa, suggesting, thereby, a lineage of sorts, even if that connection between Daoxin and Hongren was not at all related to the Bodhidharma "family".
- 24 For McRae's translation of Bodhidharma's entry in Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*, see [McRae \(1986, pp. 17–18\)](#).
- 25 See [Greene \(2008, esp., pp. 77–78\)](#).
- 26 Du Fei is the first author to place Bodhidharma at Shaolin Monastery; for a translation of this passage, see [McRae \(1986, p. 258\)](#).
- 27 For his comments, see [Hu \(1935, pp. 194–235\)](#). For McRae's discussion of Huike in Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*, see [McRae \(1986, pp. 21–27\)](#).
- 28 For McRae's discussion of Huike in Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*, see [McRae \(1986, pp. 21–29\)](#). See, also, [Broughton \(1999, pp. 56–65\)](#).
- 29 For useful reflections on pre-Chan utopic thinking, see [Chiang \(2009\)](#).
- 30 The *Daode jing* was, arguably, one of the most read books in the Tang dynasty, and was even included on the imperial exams in the mid-eighth century. For an account of imperial support for the *Daode jing* during the Tang, see [Kohn \(2019, pp. 159ff\)](#). She writes, "In 731, the emperor [Xuanzong] decreed that all officials should keep a copy of the text at home and, elevating it to the status of "perfect scripture" (*zhenjing*), placed it on the list of materials required in the civil service examinations. In 741, he expanded this policy by founding a "College of Daoist Studies" in each prefecture and set up a new system of Daoist-based government examinations." (Ibid., p. 161).
- 31 Some might think that this second half of Huike's biography, with all its rather involved and exciting claims about Huike's lineage of all-natural masters, simply represents Daoxuan's effort to update the Huike entry, having received new information. This seems most unlikely since there is no effort to reconcile these two versions of Huike, and when we remember that this interpolated section on Huike closes out by mentioning that there is another relevant entry on the Huike lineage—and there is in fact an appendix that presents a certain master Fachong (法冲 n.d.) as the most recent descendent of this lineage, and which specifically refers back to the Huike entry—we ought to conclude that these two linked pieces of writing about Huike and the lineage of the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* represent a highly partisan effort to completely rewrite the earlier Bodhidharma–Huike material, something that Daoxuan would have, no doubt, taken a dim view of. Thus, it seems best to conclude that these additions represent another example of someone rewriting older published material in order to take hold of the authority and allure that had been growing around the figures of Bodhidharma and Huike. For more discussion of master Fachong and his supposed place in the Bodhidharma–Huike lineage, see [Cole \(2016, pp. 39–40, 46–50\)](#).
- 32 Of course, even back in the *Daode jing*, cloaking power and privilege in comforting and attractive images of nature and cosmic mystery were repeating literary tropes, so there is a deep cultural "rhyme scheme" at work here as Chan authors recycled those Daoist tropes to make their own claims to final authority look attractive and acceptable. For a reading of the *Daode jing* that explores how the rhetoric of nature and simplicity was deployed within the promise of increasing cultural power, see [Cole \(2006\)](#).
- 33 For those uncomfortable with the idea of "religion taking care of itself", I should mention that just as Chan authors were, throughout the Tang and Song dynasties, inventing this vision of a perfect, immaculate, woman-free patriarchy of truth and final authority, other Chinese authors were writing up various texts explaining how every mother was to go to hell, and that she could

only be saved by her son's donations to the Buddhist monasteries—surely another case of religion taking care of itself by inventing a universal tax on life. For more discussion, see Cole (1998, 2013). Exploring how these two complex Chinese Buddhist inventions—Chan and the sin-of-life—fit together is the topic of my next book.

For an edited version of the Faru's biography, and very useful footnotes, see Yanagida (1967, p. 487ff). For an analysis of Faru's biography, see Cole (2009, chp. 3).

To generate the image of a lineage of truth-holders, the author/s of this stele seem to have drawn simple biographic elements from Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies* and attached them to a totally unrelated lineage mentioned in Huiyuan's early fifth century preface to the *Meditation Sūtra*. Just this verve for mixing and matching material drawn from completely unrelated material will continue to be a hallmark of Chan writing throughout the eighth century. For discussion of Huiyuan's preface and the lineage therein, see Greene (2020, p. 209). See also Morrison (2010, chp. 1).

For discussion of Shaolin Monastery and its close court connections, see Cole (2009, chp. 3).

For more discussion of Fachong and related references, see Cole (2016, pp. 46–54).

See note 37.

A photograph of the stele and Faru's stupa can be found at this website: <https://fo.china.com/foxsgd/20001286/20221129/25692550.html>. (accessed 10 January 2024).

For a translation of the famous Shaolin Stele of 728, see Tonami (1990).

For full translation of this teaching scene, see Cole (2009, pp. 102–3); for more analysis of the place of this teaching moment in the narrative, see *ibid.*, (pp. 105–6, and 111–14).

In sociological terms that Pierre Bourdieu developed, one could say that the authors of this scene have cleverly generated an image of a perfect kind of “rite-of-institution” whereby the totality of Chinese monks converge on Shaolin Monastery to function as a finale plebiscite—they alone have the natural right to recognize Faru as the leader of Chinese Buddhism. Here, of course it is not that Buddhist enlightenment is getting *mixed with politics*, as some might aver, but rather that the presence of Buddhist enlightenment, in the narrative, is itself the effect of Shaolin's political aspirations.

For these passages in the stele, see Cole (2009, p. 102); for more discussion of these Daoist tropes, see Cole (2016, pp. 66–67).

For more discussion of the importance of recycling literature in Chan narratives, see Cole (2009, pp. 111–14).

For a critical edition of Du Fei's text, see Yanagida (1971, pp. 330–435). For the Taishō version, see T no. 2838, 85: 1291a. For an English translations, see McRae (1986, pp. 255–69). For a close reading of several key sections of Du Fei's text, see Cole (2009, chp. 4).

In the *Biography of Faru*, the monks gathered at Shaolin Monastery metaphorized Faru's status as teacher of the nation by claiming he was the most recent possessor of an “incomparably great jewel” (無上大寶), which perhaps gave Du Fei the idea to metaphorize the transmission of enlightenment as the transmission of a jewel. For that passage in the Faru biography, see Cole (2009, p. 102).

For more discussion of this Daoist trope, see Cole (2016, pp. 71–72); for a translation of this passage, see McRae (1986, p. 257).

In an equally explicit reworking of a Daoist trope, Du Fei gives an account of Bodhidharma magically returning to India on his death day and meeting a Chinese official at the border; his disciples hear of this distant encounter and dig up his tomb only to find it empty. For a translation of this passage that clearly presents Bodhidharma performing the Daoist maneuver of “escaping from the corpse” (尸解), see McRae (1986, pp. 259–60).

Translation from McRae (1986, p. 263). For more discussion of Hongren's supposed Daoist ways, see Cole (2016, pp. 79–81).

For Foulk's assessment, see Foulk (1992, p. 21).

McRae (1986, p. 265).

For translation of this moment in the narrative, see McRae (1986, p. 266).

In considering how this ownership of tradition is handled in Du Fei's text, let's not miss that the suddenness in these stories of transmission is not the suddenness of meditative awakening, it is the suddenness of a kind of gift-giving that instantaneously transforms an ordinary person into a buddha. For instance, Du Fei writes that after Huike offers his arm to Bodhidharma, to prove his sincerity, Bodhidharma, “suddenly caused his [Huike's] mind to directly enter (直入) into the dharma realm.” This is clearly another case of zapping, but with some impressive gore gained by rewriting an earlier version of how Huike lost his arm to bandits, a story that itself seems to have been a rewriting of an earlier story about one-armed Lin. For more discussion of this famous anecdote, see Cole (2009, pp. 136–42).

For more details, see Cole (2016, pp. 73–78).

For overview of this cycle of reappropriating Bodhidharma and his supposed lineage, see Foulk (2007).

For a critical edition of Jingjue's text, see Yanagida (1971, pp. 48–326). For the Taishō version, T no. 2837, 85: 1283a. For a good French translation of the text with very helpful notes, see Faure (1989). For an accessible English rendering, see Cleary (1986, pp. 19–78). For a close reading of several sections of Jingjue's text, see Cole (2009, chp. 5).

In this complicated account of Hongren's end-of-life pronouncement, the author of this text, which is inserted into Jingjue's text, claims that Hongren explained to his gathered students that he had given some kind of transmission to ten figures, though

Shenxiu and Xuanze are singled out as his uniquely endowed descendants. Thus, at the end of this scene we are told that Hongren said to Xuanze, “You must guard and cherish your combined practice. After my nirvana, you and Shenxiu must make the Buddha-sun radiate anew and [make] the mind-lamp shine again.” (T no. 2837, 85: 1289c16); I have worked from Cleary’s rendering; see [Cleary \(1986, p. 69\)](#); for Faure’s translation, see [Faure \(1989, p. 166\)](#).

58 There is an interesting parallel here to consider here. Jingjue is the first author to write himself into the Bodhidharma lineage—he writes of his enlightenment at the hands of Xuanze in the introduction to his text—and he likewise has Xuanze writing in *A Record of the Men and Teachings of the Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* about the moment when Hongren publicly recognized Xuanze as his leading disciple, along with Shenxiu. In either case, the authors (Jingjue and Xuanze) set themselves up as both historians and Buddhas since they alone give written accounts of how they got to be Buddhas. As suggested above, I believe there are reasons for thinking that Xuanze did not exist and that Jingjue wrote both these accounts, and thus it is not surprising that the two narratives, though ostensibly from different pens, share this new audacity. For more discussion of the problem of master Xuanze, see [Cole \(2009, pp. 194–98\)](#).

59 T no. 2837, 85: 1289b14. This translation is based on Cleary’s rendering ([Cleary 1986, pp. 66–67](#)) with minor changes. For more reflections on this passage, see [Cole \(2009, pp. 205–6\)](#). For a French translation that explores how this passage draws on the *Zhuangzi*, see [Faure \(1989, pp. 162–63\)](#).

60 Jingjue also claimed a Daoist-looking past for himself in the introduction to this text, writing: “Then, I immersed my spirit in the mysterious silence, and nurtured my nature on remote cliffsides, holding solely to the mind of purity, embracing The One, facing the valleys.” (余乃潛神玄默。養性幽巖。獨守淨心抱一冲谷。 T no. 2837, 85: 1298a29. I am reading 冲 in the sense of 對, “facing”, and that would set up a nice parallel with the preceding line regarding practicing on the remote cliffsides. One could also take 冲谷 to mean something “surging into the valleys”, but this seems less likely. For another translation, see [Cleary \(1986, p. 21\)](#); for Faure’s rendering and useful references to the various Daoist allusions in this passage, see [Faure \(1989, pp. 93–94\)](#). Faure’s translates the final phrase as: “j’embrassai l’Un au fond d’une vallée déserte”).

61 For an annotated edition of the text, see [Yanagida \(1971, 539–57\)](#). For reflections on Wang Wei’s biography of Huineng, see [Cole \(2009, pp. 214–21\)](#). For an alternative translation, see [Jorgensen \(2005, pp. 145–51\)](#).

62 For more discussion of conspiracy theories in early Chan, see [Cole \(2016, chps. 5 and 6\)](#).

63 I explore the role of conspiracy in these two narratives in [Cole \(2005, chps. 2, 3, and 6\)](#). For a shorter discussion of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s conspiracy theories, see my [Cole \(2021\)](#).

64 Du Fei sets up a clear divide for how truth was to be shared by the masters when, at the end of *The Record of the Transmission of the Dharma Jewel*, he claims that the masters taught the general public Buddha-name recitation (念佛名), but as for transmission of the dharma, it was “treasured in secret by both master and disciple”; see [McRae \(1986, p. 268\)](#). Shenhui famously counted enlightenment as a kind of kingship, emphasizing that there could only one king at a time; for more discussion, see [Cole \(2009, pp. 257–60\)](#).

65 For a translation of Zongze’s *Chanyuan qinggui*, see [Yifa \(2002\)](#).

66 For discussion of this problem, see [Bielefeldt \(1985\)](#).

67 For discussion of this passage, see [Greene \(2020, pp. 215–20\)](#).

68 For this rather stunning point, see Foulk’s discussion in [Foulk \(1993, pp. 165–67, 175, 180, 191–92\)](#).

69 In chapter 5 of *Chan Before Chan*, Eric Greene develops the theory that Chan is best defined as a new way of writing about the authority of signs gained from mediation—“the semiotics of meditative experience”; see [Greene \(2020, p. 208\)](#). He writes, “Early Chan School proponents saw (and wanted others to see) their new approach to meditation not as a new way to practice meditation, but as a new semiotic ideology of meditative experience. They rejected as meaningless an entire class of such experiences, the concrete visions that had long been reported by meditators and recognized as at least sometimes being the signs of meditative attainment. This reorientation of meditation arguably worked in concert with the notion of the Bodhidharma lineage, which provided a way to legitimize the authority of a new line of chan masters without requiring them to claim or be attributed with meditative visions or indeed concrete meditative experiences of any kind.” [Greene \(2020, p. 230\)](#) While the other chapters of Greene’s book seem solid and creative, I think his evidence for defining Chan in this manner is wholly unconvincing—one need only think of the raft of eighth century Chan texts that clearly do not fit under this rubric, not to mention those from later periods. In fact, even his key source for this theory, Jingjue’s *A Record of the Masters and Disciples of the Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*, evinces a wide range of agendas that stray far from simply redoing “the semiotics of meditative experience”. Actually, given the thematic chaos of Jingjue’s text, it seems unwise to argue that these passages on meditation, supposedly spoken by Daoxin, have any real bearing on the work. To see this, just imagine the text without those passages—nothing would change in the overall import of the text because those riffs on meditation are not integral to the other sections of the text or Jingjue’s basic agenda of being recognized as a Chinese buddha.

70 In fact, one might be forgiven for thinking that we have been reading Chan from a Christian point of view, not simply one shaped by “Protestant Suppositions” as Gregory [Schopen \(1991\)](#) put it in his critique of the study of Indian Buddhism, but some thing better described as a Jesus-hangover: that lingering readiness to believe in the perfect man—the perfect son, really—with his perfect ownership of truth and tradition, standing free of literature, artifice, and connivance, and being able to deliver to the believing reader a facsimile of that wholeness of truth and tradition. This perverse conviction that traditions could work like

this naturally comes linked with a ready willingness to overlook the literary framework needed to make that fantasy of gaining access to the truth of pure patriarchy appear plausible and highly desirable. For more discussion, see [Cole \(2015, esp. chps. 2 and 3\)](#).

71 This is the point Van Schaik wants to make in the case of Jingjue; for his comments, see ([Van Schaik 2018](#), pp. 56–57, 60–61). Van Schaik, following James Robson, also doubts whether we can assume a basic author–reader relationship in which authors shaped their messages anticipating how readers would receive those messages. Apparently, Van Schaik and Robson are ready to believe that Chan authors wrote their texts without considering that their works might, in fact, be read. Of course, once one reads these texts closely, it is clear how much care was put into shaping readers’ reception of the content; and, as I have shown in various publications, those techniques of seduction were apparently recognized for what they were by other medieval authors, and repeated in a knowing manner, suggesting a high level of authorial awareness and irony. Van Schaik and Robson also seem to have missed the basic point that *lineage claims only work when those outside of the lineage accept the claims*, and, thus, the reading public, however little we may know about it, has to be taken as the destination of Chan writing. For Robson’s comments on the problem of Chan authors’ audiences, see [Robson \(2012, p. 335ff\)](#).

72 I detail McRae use of mythopoesis to explain Chan composition in [Cole \(2020\)](#). The following statement gives a sense for McRae’s position: “The contents of Zen texts should not be evaluated using a simple-minded criterion of journalistic accuracy, that is, ‘Did it really happen?’ For any event or saying to have occurred would be a trivial reality involving a mere handful of people at one imagined point in time, which would be overwhelmed by the thousands of people over the centuries who were involved in the creation of Zen legends. The mythopoeic creation of Zen literature implies the religious imagination of the Chinese people, a phenomenon of vast scale and deep significance.” This passage is from [McRae \(2003, p. xix\)](#), but similar claims can be found throughout McRae’s writing.

73 Mario Poceski’s commitment to this theme of innocence can be found when he explains the ongoing rewriting of Chan material by evoking Robert Bellah’s “community of memory”, in which a large number of interdependent people — with no apparent distinction in status — supposedly lend a hand in expressing their new understandings of Chan. See [Poceski \(2015, esp. pp. 24–28\)](#). In fact, Poceski thinks we ought to see Chan texts as composed just as the gospels were, since the gospels “can be understood as literary expressions, presumably based on oral traditions, of the disciples’ remembrances of the words and acts of Jesus, as they were handed down within early Christian communities.” ([Poceski 2015, p. 26](#)) Why this quaint model would be appropriate for Chan is never explained. Actually, this model of community remembrance likely will not work for the composition of the gospels either; for a review of this problem, see [Cole \(2015, chps. 2–3\)](#). And, just to point out one problem, in *Mark*, the oldest gospel, Jesus’s disciples are presented as weak, egotistical, hard-headed, unreliable, unfaithful, etc., and, thus, the author of the Markan narrative can hardly be assumed to be simply drawing on their “community of memory” for his version of Jesus’s life and teachings.

74 For Poceski’s useful analysis of Mazu’s records, see [Poceski \(2004\)](#).

75 For Welter’s comments, see [Welter \(2008, p. 139\)](#). Elsewhere he writes of Chan texts as “the product of collective Chan consciousness” (*ibid.*, p. 109), which leaves things rather vague. Despite this shortcoming, this book has many other excellent arguments.

76 Just this perspective on recycling Confucian values has to be in place when we see that in the manuals (*qinggui*) for running Chan monasteries, we find details on how the masters were to move around the dharma hall in accord with the Confucian *Book of Rites*’s prescriptions, and how the masters, and not the ordinary monks, should be granted highly involved funerals whose ritual details are explicitly drawn from the Confucian classics, with special attention paid to the master’s spiritual sons dressing in Confucian mourning gear and performing mourning as “filial sons”. For more discussion of the Confucian elements in Chan funerals, see [Cole \(1996, esp. 310–11\)](#). For a wider discussion of Confucian elements in Chan monasteries, see [Yifa \(2002, pp. 74, 86–94\)](#); for a translation of the instructions for the deceased abbot’s “filial sons”, see [Yifa \(2002, pp. 217–18\)](#); for more reflections, see also [Yifa \(2005, esp. pp. 125, 129–34\)](#).

77 James Robson’s review of *Fathering Your Father* ([Robson 2012](#)) is a good example of this continuing confusion. For my response to his review, see [Cole \(2022\)](#).

78 For discussion of this problem, see [Schlütter \(2008, esp. chp. 5\)](#).

79 For a thoughtful and detailed account of the politics involved in this famous four-line slogan, see [Foulk \(1999\)](#). Early on in the essay, (*ibid.*, p. 220), Foulk writes, “The entire discussion of Ch’an as a ‘separate transmission’ of the Buddha’s wisdom—a transmission not relying on sūtras—took place within the context of polemical claims and counterclaims concerning the historicity of the Ch’an lineage.” Similarly, Foulk argues that “The controversies that simmered in the Sung over the status of the Ch’an lineage as a ‘separate transmission’, in short, were more about securing prestige, patronage, and special privileges within the Buddhist order than about practical matters of monkish training or spiritual cultivation.” (*Ibid.*, p. 221). Van Schaik, whose graduate work was in Tibetan studies, clearly has not yet familiarized himself with the basic secondary literature in the field.

80 For this passage from Keyworth’s review, see [Keyworth \(2021, p. 291\)](#). Keyworth is far from being peripheral in world of Chan studies; for instance, he is one of the co-editors for the recently established *Journal of Chan Buddhism*. That he thinks Van Schaik’s book is to be appreciated as a Trojan horse-like entity would suggest he somehow imagines the book smuggling violent elements into academia in a way he approves of.

- <sup>81</sup> Keyworth is not the only scholar to endorse Van Schaik's presentation of Chan/Zen. Professor Timothy Barrett of SOAS, also enthusiastically reviewed the book, claiming that the eighty-page introduction "provides an overview [of Chan/Zen] as helpful as any in what is now a fairly crowded field." (Barrett 2019, pp. 193–95).
- <sup>82</sup> For Van Schaik's critique of what he takes my position to be, see Van Schaik (2018, p. 60ff). Here is not the place for me to respond to Van Schaik's criticisms.
- <sup>83</sup> For a useful account of this problem in religious studies, see the work of Russell McCutcheon (1997), beginning with his ground-breaking book, *Manufacturing Religion*. He recently published an essay reviewing the trajectory of his thinking since that book's appearance: "The Field, at the Moment, Is Up for Redefinition: Twenty Five Years of *Manufacturing Religion*." McCutcheon (2023).
- <sup>84</sup> For an account of how the secular-humanist agenda of religious studies, established in the late 19th century, has been steadily eroded by scholars avoiding the more troubling aspects of religion, see Smith (1982, esp. pp. 110ff).

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