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Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism

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Review of *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism*

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Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism. By Albert Welter. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 334 pages, ISBN: 978-0195175219, US \$55.00 (cloth).

On page four of *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism*, Albert Welter identifies the shibboleth that constitutes the implicit target in the investigation that is to follow:

Zen propagandists and apologists in the twentieth century sold the world on the story of Zen as a transcendental spiritualism untainted by political and institutional involvements. The world, even the academic world ensconced in a tradition of skeptical inquiry, often reveled in this clever artifice. Enthralled with the Orientalist fantasy of a suprarational, mystic wisdom that transcended the supposedly mundane, superficial logic of Western dualism, Zen came to represent a true spiritual purity, untempered by the passage of time and the vagaries of place.

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This should sound familiar to readers who, like myself, were first exposed to Zen literature by popularizing Western works such as Paul Reps's *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, a work so unquestioning of its sources that it leaves the names of its Tang dynasty Chinese protagonists in Japanese form. Reading books such as this, and even later, more scholarly studies such as those of Heinrich Dumoulin, one might get the impression that the Chan tradition was the creation of meditating monks living in small rural communities whose depth of enlightenment, gained through the "direct transmission" of the Buddha-mind from their masters, enabled them to break all conventional boundaries and use "crazy wisdom" to enlighten others. Freed from all needs and wants, they remained aloof from political power, following the examples of the first Chinese patriarch Bodhidharma and his lineal successor, the sixth patriarch Huineng, who refused to kowtow to the wealth and power of emperors and refused all secular honors, keeping their religious attainment free from the taints of the world.

Until the discovery of the manuscript treasures of Dunhuang, which brought to light original writings by many of these characters, the primary sources available for reconstructing the thought and practices of these masters was a class of literature called "transmission of the lamp" (Ch. *denglu*, literally, "lamp records"), and it is these texts that are the subject of Welter's close scrutiny. Out of this study emerges a picture substantially different from the received myths of early Chan.

In his reading of these texts, Welter pays close attention to the regional and historical frame within which these texts were compiled, and discovers multiple interests, religious, cultural, and political, that intersect in them. Welter focuses on three texts in particular, the *Zu tang ji*, (Patriarch's Hall Anthology, 952), the *Jingde chuandeng lu* (Jingde-era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp, 1004), and the *Tiansheng guangdeng lu* (Tiansheng-era Expanded Lamp Record, 1036). As stories pass

from earlier to later texts, Welter notes several evolutions as characters are added or omitted, lineages emphasized or sidelined, and secular political figures take over the compilation from earlier monastic compilers. The story that emerges is the story of a tradition struggling to define itself in a changing world, rulers looking for a form of Buddhism that would suit their political interests, and literati contesting the nature and content of China's literary heritage: the three classes of player that form the title of the book.

Contrary to the apolitical image of Chan, the tradition had been political since the late Tang, when the East Mountain teaching, represented by Shenxiu, went to the capital and gained fame and patronage (p. 27-28). The attack on Shenxiu's lineage engineered by Shenhui sought to take this patronage away from Shenxiu's school, and its success could not have happened without the aid and complicity of interested officials. With the fall of the Tang dynasty and the beginning of the Five Dynasties period, Chan persisted and flourished in regional centers, and it became important to seek the patronage of local warlords and pretenders to imperial dynasties now that the center was gone.

Chapter three deals with the *Zutang ji*, a work produced in the Min region (modern southern Fujian province) by two disciples of Zhaoqing Wendeng (884-972). Wendeng's progenitors went back to the monk Xuefeng Yicun (822-908), a monk who had provided valuable service to the Min ruling house. One of Xuefeng's disciples, Yunmen Wenyan, and a grand-disciple, Fayuan Wenyi, were progenitors of two of the "five houses" of classical Chan. In this light, the *Zutang ji*, as a text coming from Min, may have been sponsored by the Min state to control and legitimate the lineages of Chan monks that they preferred, that is, the line from Shitou Xiqian through to Xuefeng Yicun. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *Zutang ji* emphasizes the importance of this lineage and at-

tempts, sometimes rather creatively, to link it unilineally to the sixth patriarch Huineng.

The *Zutang ji*, while not serving the interests of the line emanating from Mazu Daoyi (709-788), still respected his "new style" of Chan, thus legitimating a vision of Chan that would compete to be the identifying characteristic of the Chan school for the next century. Mazu's Chan involved all the behaviors and teaching devices associated with Chan's "golden age": beating, shouting, nonsensical answers, and a tendency to see Chan as separate from other forms of Buddhism. The opposing side, represented by such figures as Shenxiu, Guifeng Zongmi, and Yongming Yanshou, saw Chan as one part of an integrated Buddhism that included scriptural exegesis, ritual, and all other traditional activities. With the appearance of the *Jingde chuandeng lu*, a new vision of Chan as a "separate transmission outside the teachings" and in competition with standard Buddhist practice will come to prominence, but it is already visible in the *Zutang ji*.

The *Jingde chuandeng lu* is important in this narrative as a transitional text. Originally written by the monk Daoyuan (d.u.), a monk residing in the Wuyue kingdom under the title *Fozu tongcan ji* (Collection of the Common Practices of the Buddhas and Patriarchs), the text served the interests of the Fayen lineage in that region, and, as the title indicates, depicted Chan as a part of a harmonious larger Buddhist picture. However, the literatus Yang Yi (974-1020) redacted the text and re-worked it to suit a number of new exigencies: (1) the needs of the new Song dynasty to use Buddhism as a force for centralization of authority and good relations with neighboring Buddhist nations; (2) the interests of the Linji lineage then dominant around the capital; (3) the needs of the new dynasty to establish its own cultural style (*wen*) which led to the compilation of many different literary anthologies, of which this text is only one example; and (4) the needs of literati-officials who were espousing a

concept of *wen* as free, spontaneous expression against other officials who favored the more rigorous and antiquarian "ancient culture" (*guwen*) style.

All this would lead to the establishment of the "Chan master" as a distinct literary character who could fulfill these requirements. He was free and spontaneous, and so served the liberal *wen* faction in their struggle against the *guwen* partisans at court. He was untainted by any need for political power, and so did not threaten the authority of the dynasty or its bureaucracy. He was Buddhist, and so could be brought forward when the need arose to show that the empire supported Buddhism. He made for entertaining reading, which suited the needs of a newly-literate reading public. Finally, he asserted the superiority of the Linji lineage and its "golden age of Chan" style, thus suiting the then-dominant faction.

However, and this is the point to which Welter's opening salvo speaks, he did not correspond to the reality of late-Tang and Five Dynasties masters. Welter compares the image of the "crazy Chan master" depicted in the *Chuangdeng lu* genre with the writings of the actual masters and finds that when allowed to speak for themselves they come across as fairly conventional Buddhist monks. (Even as sober a monk as Yongming Yanshou [904-975] comes across as a dispenser of crazy wisdom in this literature.) He also notes repeatedly that, despite the depiction of these masters as above the blandishments of worldly accolade, they routinely accepted invitations to court, received purple robes and honorary titles, and had monasteries built for them by rulers and officials.

The *Jingde chuandeng lu*, being a composite text written within one context and later edited for another, is a bit awkward. However, the *Tiansheng guangdeng lu*, written by another literatus-official, Li Zunxu (988-1038), exhibits no such awkwardness. By the time this text appeared in 1036, the main lineaments of Chan literature were fully on dis-

play: encounter dialogues, the *gong'an*, the enlightenment verse, the editorial comments on the master's sayings, and so on. Banished now were historical contextualization and biographical detail; these were replaced by *yulu*, or recorded sayings. If a work like *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* presents the deeds and words of crazy Chan masters as timeless teachings entirely lacking in concrete contexts, it is because that is how they came to be seen in the works compiled in the Song period by officials with a literary agenda and issued under the auspices and reign-titles of the Song court.

That is the gist of the argument. Welter's text is tightly written and repeats itself only infrequently, allowing him to present his findings in the short space of 200+ pages. For the most part, his contextualization of the *denglu* literature is convincing, though not always. For example, he has a bit of difficulty explaining why texts that he understands as advancing the interests of specific lineages should include fairly exhaustive entries for monks in other, competing lineages. In this connection, on page 211 he states:

While unilineal models had the obvious advantages for providing an unambiguous model for determining orthodoxy, they stifled potential growth by insisting that other lineages lacked credibility. With the rapid growth of Chan and its development into regional movements, already apparent in Zongmi's day, it became beneficial to accommodate different regional manifestations to encourage Chan's growing popularity.

This seems to assume that Chan lineages, while in competition with one another, also realized that they needed a certain level of cartelization to compete... with whom? Other forms of Buddhism such as Tiantai and Pure Land? Other traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism? This argument needs more support and articulation to be convincing.

However that may be, this book, along with the recent work by Mark Halperin (*Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960-1279*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006) and a forthcoming study by Morten Schlütter, will advance our knowledge of Chan history tremendously. Welter's book will be required reading for many years to come.