Making History: Chan as an Art Form

Overview: History Versus Life

Making history was, from the beginning, essential to the emergence of Chan, and thus it is worth clarifying several important elements at work in the process of writing (and reading) history. The first thing to see is that writing history represents a doubling of reality: in addition to the everyday world that we live in, where our senses are engaged in a fluid and continuous manner, the writer of history works to evoke scenes and events that, though invisible, can be made to appear to the reader as integral parts of reality, albeit in the past. In this overlay of the past onto the present, the way we get back to those past events is via imagination and fantasy. In the writing of history, then, there is a kind of alchemy at work in which words disappear as they magically turn into quasi-visible events, and these events then are given various meanings that can be shaped for the audience’s instruction and entertainment. In short, however fictional or factual a history might be, it is born of imagination—the author’s and the reader’s.

Put this way, we can begin to see how much intelligence, self-control, and linguistic dexterity is involved in producing a captivating history of an event or figure. Better still, we can appreciate how the skills needed
to write history reflect the growing human ability to *artify the world*, that
talent to remake the given-of-the-world in new and dramatic ways, and
to then hand those complex art fantasies over to others.\(^1\) Why this mat-
ters for understanding Chan literature is that one wouldn’t be far wrong
in describing Chan as a gradually solidifying set of literary gestures
designed to enhance—and organize—the present, by carefully design-
ning and curating images of an imaginary past.

Although it is relatively easy to see that the early accounts of Chan in
the West were largely off mark because they took the literature evoking
the past patriarchs and their teachings to be a clear window into the
reality of the Chan tradition, it takes a bit more wherewithal to appreci-
ate the craft and intelligence of these authors who so painstakingly com-
posed that literature for their sophisticated and well-read audiences.
Perhaps this oversight is to be expected since, after all, Chan literature
was designed such that the art of writing history would disappear as the
reader peered *through* the carefully constructed narratives, thinking he
could thereby see into a departed, but still visible, world where the
patriarchs spoke and acted in tantalizing ways that gave the impression
that they were totally free of the Buddhist literary traditions, even
though it was only in literature that they could behave like this.

**ASSUMPTIONS TO AVOID**

Taking Chan texts as artful reconstructions of the past means stepping
away from a number of assumptions that have shaped past discussions.
The first assumption to avoid is that Chan is best defined as the “school
of meditation.” Now it is true that the Chinese character for “Chan”
means meditation—since it is a shortening of *chan na*, which was used as
a sound-translation of the Sanskrit word for meditation, *dhyāna*—and
yet in the mid-Tang the word *chan* shifted from meaning “meditation”

\(^1\) Here I have been much influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s *What Is Literature?* (1948;
to signifying something more like “perfect” or “enlightened.”

Thus, up until the mid-seventh century, a chan master (*chanshi*) was a monk who focused on meditation, instead of, for instance, focusing on sutra exegesis, or magic, or monastic discipline (*vinaya*). Then, in 690, in a biographic stele cut at Shaolin Monastery for a certain monk named Faru, we find previously unrelated masters linked together in a lineage of truth-fathers who supposedly descended from Bodhidharma and, ultimately, from the Indian Buddha. In this genealogy, which arguably is the first “Chan” lineage, we can see that the term “chan master” has shifted from “meditation master” to that fuller sense of “perfect master,” one who has inherited a perfect form of Buddhism from Bodhidharma. Thus, somewhat ironically, what came to be known as the “Chan tradition” (*chanzong*) only emerges when *chan* stopped meaning meditation and took on this sense of “perfect.”

Another assumption to sidestep is that medieval Chan texts are simple, uninfl ected statements of truth offered, cost-free, to anyone who can read them. While a small number of Chan texts can be read in this manner, most Chan texts present complicated agendas that require the reader to involve himself in various kinds of ideological and partisan thinking. Hence, it seems unwise to read Chan texts simply for their “philosophic” import without considering other things that might be going on in the text, things that might rather shift what one takes to be the “philosophy” of the text. Likewise, to start off by assigning pure and simple motives to the Chan authors is to ignore how history writing in China, even back in the earliest sources from the Warring States era, was so often a highly politicized project.


3. For refl ections on the politics of writing history in the earliest Chinese sources, see David Schaberg’s *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Mark Edward Lewis argues in a
were somehow separate from the wider Chinese culture of artfully shaping the past to improve the present seems unjustifiable.

Third, and in a more nuts-and-bolts manner, we ought to avoid accepting information from later sources that isn’t findable in earlier sources. This is because, as mentioned, it is clear that Chan authors regularly rewrote the past. Thus, if the earliest accounts of Bodhidharma don’t mention that he belonged in a lineage of truth-fathers, we shouldn’t believe later accounts that put him in that role, especially when we see that the newer versions of the story also keep changing, getting richer and more beguiling with each retelling. In line with this issue, we should be wary of accepting claims that attach a text to a long-dead figure. Thus, if the only evidence that person $x$ authored text $y$ shows up several decades, or several centuries, after the person’s death, chances are the attribution is unreliable. Actually, attributing texts to long-dead cultural heroes was a very standard practice in the centuries before Buddhism arrived in China and thus it was that so many of the Chinese classics got attributed to Confucius. Similar forces seem at work in the Chan tradition: in some cases it appears as though someone thought that an important master would look better if he had a text attached to him; in other cases someone thought a favored text would look better if it was attached to an esteemed patriarch.

The fourth assumption to dodge is essentially a version of the myth of the Fall in which one imagines that Chan started off innocently enough as a loose set of practical teaching and techniques that meditation masters used to enlighten their disciples, and only later got entangled in politics, ancestor-thieving, and the textual production of bogus historical claims. In this approach, it is taken for granted that Chan texts, regardless of how convoluted they might appear, still have to be imagined to have emerged from real communities of dedicated Chan “practitioners”

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similar vein in his *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); see, esp., chap. 2, “Writing the Masters.”
and the experiences that they had. Although this framing of Chan’s origins certainly appeals to modern forms of nostalgia, it seems much more likely that Chan began as an expanding swirl of literary claims in which narratives about perfect masters produced more narratives about perfect masters, with little to suggest that these newly produced sketches of the masters had much to do with them or their pasts. Likewise, it is far from clear how much impact these stories had on the day-to-day practice of more solidly established forms of Chinese Buddhism.

Approaching Chan with an emphasis on its creative writing helps us face another problem: as the recent scholarship by Mario Poceski and Albert Welter makes clear (see chapter 8), the most typically zenny elements of the Chan masters’ biographies were, by and large, added in long after their deaths. Obviously this means that it was the historians who were inventing the masters and their exciting antinomian ways. This is particularly interesting when, as mentioned above, we see that the new content for the masters’ profile makes them look less and less like they belonged to the literary tradition—the very tradition that was, of course, writing them into existence. Apparently, then, the latter-day authors invented their spiritual ancestors as their opposites, and they no doubt knew the value and charm of such an inversion. In short, generation after generation, Chan authors fed a literary tradition that prided itself on staging scenes of its absence.

A final assumption to avoid is the idea that Chan developed in a vacuum. As is well known, the various forms of Chan writing that emerged in the Tang and Song eras relied heavily on Daoism and Confucianism for language, style, logic, institutional arrangements and much more. While acknowledging these tangled borrowings is essential to writing a

4. Except for T. Griffith Foulk’s work, recent discussions of Chan—however critical they might be of other aspects of Chan’s history—still regularly assume that the “Chan movement” began as a meditation community practicing under Hongren (601–74) on East Mountain, in Huangmei, and only later moved to the capital, where it became corrupted by court intrigue. In Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), I point out several good reasons for not accepting this mythic origin for Chan.
good history of Chan literature, it also opens up several problems. First, though it makes sense to use these terms “Daoist” and “Confucian” in a loose way, it is difficult to precisely define the ideas, commitments, and practices that were characteristic of these groups, especially over their many centuries of change and development. Thus one has to be content with weak claims such as, “Well, yes, notions of spontaneity and non-action (wuwei) regularly appear in texts associated with Daoism, but the ideas are found in other places as well.” The key is simply to appreciate how fluid boundaries were and how often important language was recycled from one zone to another, even though certain linguistic associations and patterns of partisanship were maintained over the centuries.

This issue of recycled material becomes more problematic when we recognize that, to varying degrees, Daoism and Confucianism were shaped by Buddhism and by each other. Naturally, this kind of multidirectional influence can be hard to keep track of. At any rate, one can’t simply claim that Daoist thought and literature influenced Chan writing in the Tang when, in fact, the Daoism of that era was already heavily influenced by centuries of borrowing from Buddhist sources and thus was hardly a “pure” Daoism at all. Nonetheless, within these rounds of exchange, I use “Daoism” (or “Daoist”) as shorthand for a set of ideas and perspectives that celebrates a powerful and comforting wholeness in the universe, a wholeness that Daoist thinkers thought they could rejoin and even, to some extent, control. In the earliest phases of Daoist writing, such a project of cosmic reunification might be set within the context of more efficacious ruling strategies, as in the Daode jing, or in more relaxed lifestyle choices, as found in the Zhuangzi. In either case, these pre-Han cosmologies lacked notions of rebirth, karma, and hell and were, by and large, rather optimistic about the universe and our place in it. It is just this confidence regarding a reunion with a perfect, original wholeness that I take to be central to the category “Daoist,” even though Daoism was soon combined with many Buddhist ideas and practices, along with a host of other practices of unknown or unclear origins, such as fasting, sexual yoga, alchemy, exorcism, and so on.
The term “Confucianism” is only slightly easier to work with. I use the term to refer to ideas, texts, and practices that took their inspiration from Confucius and his numerous commentators, and claim an unbroken connection with the glories of China’s past, however that past might be construed. Central Confucian concerns had to do with effective governance, terminological exactness, orderly patriarchal reproduction of families—elite and common—and proper ancestor worship. Confucians also, at times, gave voice to confidence in a cosmic totality, as did the Daoists, but never let that vision of the whole overshadow more pressing concerns regarding the maintenance of the literary and ritual traditions that flowed from Confucius and other like-minded “sages” of the past. Chan authors borrowed much from the Confucians in terms of strategies for inheriting the value of the past, but it is also true that by the Song, self-styled Confucian thinkers had absorbed significant ideas from Chan, and in particular adopted a version of the Chan claim that tradition could be passed down through the ages in a perfect manner.

Tracing out these borrowings will be, for some, a satisfying pursuit—it certainly confirms how organic cultural inventions tend to be. However, for others, acknowledging all this borrowing and reborrowing ruins the fantasy that Chan was something pure, simple, and un tarnished by sectarian competition and the politics of mimicry and reappropriation. The problem here isn’t just that Chan is a thoroughly syncretic cultural invention, but also that Chan’s gestures for claiming to be the unique source of truth were themselves borrowed and developed from non-Chan sources. That is, in trying to set up the image of a conduit running from the perfect past of India to the present of Tang and Song China, Chan writers made use of all sorts of local “building material” taken from their Daoist, Confucian, and poetic contemporaries. Of course, once one has become taken with the idea that perfect enlightenment was delivered into the present via a lineage of perfect masters stretching back to the Buddha, it becomes a whole lot harder to think about where the elements of this story really came from.
There is one last problem to address before we consider the details of Chan’s development, and it has to do with unthinkability. Though it is a modern conceit that everything can be known, and known fast—people tend to forget that *wiki* means “fast” in Hawaiian—the fact of the matter is that, as mentioned in the Preface, we know next to nothing about anything. How does one’s nose work, for instance? In our daily experiences, we don’t have a clue about how this thing—in league with the brain—detects, registers, and identifies odors. A similar unthinkability confronts us when we consider our stomachs, ears, and so on. Clearly, these zones where reality impinges on our bodily consciousness are simply unavailable for us to reflect on.

Now consider where thoughts come from: How in the world is it that we think? No one knows. Why does a thought or dream or melody or memory suddenly appear? And where was it in the preceding moment? The interface between zones of consciousness seems as mysterious as that between our noses and the mini-particles in the air, with the difference being that with thought it all happens “inside,” on our home turf, so to speak. Of course, too, no one really knows what a thought is made of, or if it might not be that we think only one thin side of a thought, while much more of its heft drifts by, mostly concealed from us like an iceberg, but still present and active in determining what is thought next. And then there’s the real nightmare question: how is it that *I* think a thought? Put that way it seems that there are three things: a thought, thinking, and the *I* that thinks. Now while it often does feel like that, what if it isn’t like that at all? The commonsense notion that static thoughts are called forth by an equally static subject is surely wrongheaded, and yet that dualistic way of thinking about thinking gives us a useful sense of self and control, even when under investigation the realities of thinking seem fluid and altogether ungraspable.

Mentioning the mysterious nature of thought and self-recognition is important here at the beginning because these are topics that have been
well considered in the Buddhist tradition, and in Chan in particular. Thus, trying to make sense of Buddhist thought in China naturally involves trying to come up to their level of sensitivity vis-à-vis these rather intractable problems regarding reality, self, and truth. Surely one can hardly make sense of a tradition that claims that selves don’t exist if one hasn’t come to realize that defining self, experiencing self, reckoning self, and so on, are real problems for any human who has ever stopped to think about it. Thus, while I am interested in being as clear and reasonable about Chan’s literary history as I can, I also need to warn the reader here at the outset that we are dealing with traditions—in India and China—that are quite used to dealing with unthinkability and, perhaps, even got quite good at benefiting from the many open-ended problems that swirl around language, thought, and identity. In fact, as the chapters to follow suggest, it would seem that Chan literature is largely devoted to chronicling the special “selves” of those who had supposedly mastered no-self. I mention all this here simply to prepare the reader for the paradoxes and contradictions to come.

With a sense for these complex forces shaping Chan’s development, let’s turn to start piecing together the important prototypes of Chan writing that first appeared in the late sixth century.