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Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy
in Chinese Chan Buddhism (review)

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Although these essays seek to move the death penalty debate away from the models of retribution and deterrence which endlessly and unproductively dominate secular discourse on the death penalty, the religious viewpoints expressed in the volume will have limited effect on the public policy debate, in part because they are expressions of private experiences, not fully understood by the authors, and in part because they are sectarian theological views. Far more significant is something that Gilbert Meilaender hints at: that execution itself unconsciously and perversely reflects “something religious” that captures and excites the imagination of the American public (55). In this respect, exposing the dynamics that underlie support of capital punishment has only just begun.

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Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism. By John R. McRae. University of California Press, 2003. 204 pages. \$19.95.

The title of this book suggests an intriguing question posed by one of the leading American scholars of Chan/Zen Buddhism to students, scholars, and practitioners: how should one go about researching and understanding Zen? McRae’s answer is straightforward: follow “McRae’s Rules of Zen Studies” (xix–xx), of course.

1. It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important.
2. Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong.
3. Precision implies inaccuracy.
4. Romanticism breeds cynicism.

McRae’s rules appear to emulate the famous four-part slogan, attributed to Bodhidharma by Muan Shanqing in the *Zuting shiyuan* (Chrestomathy from the Patriarchs’ Hall, 1108), which characterized the mature Chan school for its Song dynasty (960–1279) participants:

A separate transmission outside the Teachings (*jiaowai biechuan*); That is not established by means of language (*buli wenzi*); It points directly to the human mind (*zhizhi renxin*); And causes one to see their nature and become a Buddha (*jianxing chengfo*).

This correlation is more appropriate than one might expect; *Seeing through Zen* seeks to reexamine—and correct preconceived notions about—how the Chan lineage (*chanzong*, *J. zenshū*) should be understood not in terms of “palpable circularity at work, with historians of China building comprehensive theories based in part on a romanticized image of Chan, and apologists for Chan buying into those theories because they served the missionary agenda” (103), but by

what McRae calls the “Song-dynasty climax paradigm” (103 and throughout book). This paradigm seeks to place the rise of the Chan lineage directly within the contexts of Chinese history, literature, religion, and culture: “The emergence of Chan as the single most dominant Buddhist tradition in China came about, in effect, because it fit so well in the post-Tang world” (72).

Although McRae’s thesis firmly establishes Song Chan as the most relevant topic for scholarly inquiry, the bulk of the primary research presented in *Seeing through Zen* renegotiates his earlier work on pre-Song topics, including the rise of the East Mountain School and genealogical portraits of Bodhidharma (chapter 2); the place of Heze Shenhui (684–758) in launching the *Platform Sūtra* as the conduit for the cult of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638–713) (chapter 3); and the ever-present problem of interpreting encounter dialogue as prototypical Chan practice (chapter 4). Over twenty years of critical investigation of these subjects is apparent throughout the volume. In chapter 2, “Beginnings: Differentiating/Connecting Bodhidharma and the East Mountain Teaching,” for example, there is an especially concise and effective discussion—and handy chart—that illustrates the historical evolution of hagiographical accounts about Bodhidharma (25–27). McRae’s treatment of new research regarding the significant role of so-called “Northern School” polemics and perspectives in the reception of the *Platform Sūtra* is also to be welcomed by expert and novice students of early Chan alike (60–69). Perhaps the most considerable addition to McRae’s apparent rethinking of his earlier work lies in a particularly lucid presentation of the context within which Chan developed during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Although the effects of the introduction of Tantric Buddhism (*mijiao*), anti-Buddhist suppressions (e.g. Huichang [845] and Huang Chao [875–884]), and the ostensible end to the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese have been introduced elsewhere as factors affecting the rise to prominence of the Chan lineage, McRae’s conclusions are characteristically succinct and straightforward (69–73).

To navigate the reader toward his thesis of a “Song-dynasty climax paradigm” (103), McRae introduces the reader to a much more straightforward understanding of the antecedents of the mature Chan narrative than can be found in any single volume in English. In chapter 1, “Looking at Lineage: A Fresh Perspective on Chan Buddhism” (1–21), for example, McRae posits how the foundation for the rise to dominance of the Chan lineage in the Song can be traced back to the end of the seventh century, and the complete Chan genealogy certainly to 952, with the completion of the *Zutang ji* (Anthology of the Patriarchs’ Hall)—and perhaps as early as 801, to the *Baolin zhuan* (Transmissions of Treasure-Grove Temple). McRae then proposes seven distinct rules to construct a more nuanced portrait of the Chan lineage and its patriarchs and deftly summarizes his “String of Pearls” fallacy to deflect many of the truly egregious sins of some earlier Zen scholarship (9–11). In an attempt to elucidate a more accurate chronology for the development of the Chan school, McRae provides the only serious taxonomical flaw in *Seeing through Zen*. McRae presents the “Phases of Chan”—Proto-Chan (ca. 500–600); Early Chan (ca. 600–900); Middle Chan (ca. 750–1000); and Song-dynasty Chan (ca. 950–1300)—as a “provisional device,” which illustrates precisely the sort of teleological fallacy about the chronological

development of Chan that his own “String of Pearls” metaphor seeks to correct (11–21). In a volume that constructively argues against erecting false paradigms that circumvent a picture of the Chan tradition in its native contexts, simplistic stages only serve to entice the reader to backslide toward the very representation of Chan history McRae wishes to transform.

As a self-described specialist of pre-Song Chan, McRae’s remarks about Song Chan are nevertheless some of the most astute to be found anywhere in English. Chapter 5, “Zen and the Art of Fund-Raising: Religious Vitality and Institutional Dominance in the Song Dynasty” (101–18), for example, subjects to criticism how western scholarship—especially the well-known protagonists D.T. Suzuki and Heinrich Dumoulin—presents Chan as a jewel in the crown of the now antiquated theory of a Tang-dynasty “Chinese renaissance” (103–107). McRae then suggests that Chan hagiographical literature (e.g., *Zutang ji* and *Baolin zhuan*) may have received considerable attention by local elites as a means to domesticate and establish a new, officially sanctioned, Chinese Buddhist religious hierarchy (108–111). Therefore, McRae argues that the Chan lineage, rather than producing a separate institutional framework apart from the Chinese sangha, sought to dominate it at the top—in the position of the abbot, with Chan-abbacy monasteries established by the Song period (115–118). McRae is certainly echoing the pioneering work of T. Griffith Foulk here; however, in chapter 6 “Climax Paradigm: Cultural Polarities and Patterns of Self-Cultivation in Song Dynasty Chan” (119–154), one can clearly see how McRae’s scope of inquiry is nevertheless expansive. He asserts in perhaps as clear language as possible that “*there was never any such thing as an institutionally separate Chan “school” at any time in Chinese Buddhist history*” (122), a point scholars of Song Chan and religion will surely read with excitement.

McRae’s discussion of Song Chan follows the paradigm he applies to earlier developments: polarities between sudden/gradual, northern/southern, static/dynamic, and essence/function serve to establish domination over the rhetorical field by a singular approach. Just as there could be no doctrinal ground to gain for the *Platform Sūtra* without the “gradualist” Northern School, nor a Chan lineage of patriarchs without the various Eminent Monks of the *Gaoseng zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks) collections, the mature establishment of the Chan lineage needed to produce an “other” to maintain its orthodoxy during the Song. The “Transmission of the Lamp” (*dengshi*, J. *tōshi*) histories compiled during the Song—in 1004, 1036, 1101, 1183, 1204, and 1252—show the need to contend for continued rhetorical supremacy within Chan. McRae carries the notion of a centralizing theme within Song dynasty lineage propagation, as well as notions of practice, to demonstrate how apparent polarities between the Linji school (J. Rinzaishū) Dahui Zonggao’s (1089–1163) *kanhua* Chan (investigating the critical phrase of the *gong’an*, J. *kōan*), and the Caodong school (J. Sōtōshū) Hongzhi Zhengjue’s (1091–1157) *mozhaō* Chan (silent-illumination meditation), as well as between Song Buddhists and Neo-Confucians, effectively maintain an orthodoxy by emasculating other approaches to religion, philosophy, and transmission (138–142).

The most exciting points raised in *Seeing through Zen* come when McRae generalizes about how Chan was received within Chinese society at large. He suggests that traditional Chinese cultural views regarding death and the gods oppose traditional Indian notions because “the aim is to maintain an ongoing series of relationships between deceased ancestors and the living” (146). Therefore, the Chan patriarchal lineage developed in large part as a “mortuary religion,” which “provided a format for Buddhist practice that matched the pattern implied by Chinese funerary customs” (147–148). Overall, *Seeing through Zen* is a book that will likely provoke students to rethink the way they understand Chan Buddhism, and McRae should be thanked for writing an excellent primer for classes on Zen. In terms of the field of Chan/Sōn/Zen Studies, however, much of *Seeing through Zen* is discussed by others, and in much greater depth. The book is splendidly produced, with a full bibliography, and a helpful character glossary. There are few typos (e.g., *jiaowai biezhuān* on p. 3 should read *biechuan* [chuan2]); however, the conventions for rendering Chinese with tones should either be followed consistently throughout or not at all.

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The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography. By Virginia Burrus. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 216 pages. \$42.50.

Lying on a bed of soft feathers, bound so that he cannot escape, a young, virile man finds himself in a paradisiacal setting of radiant flowers, murmuring streams, and a gently whispering wind. Along comes a beautiful prostitute, caressing the young man, exciting him with visible success, and throwing herself on top of him to consume the fruits of her seduction. If this sounds like a scene from the soft-porn industry, we have not reckoned with the young man's resilience, for he is no other than a martyr, a soldier for Christ. Helplessly bound and at the brink of losing that which is most valuable, his virtue, “the resourceful youth bites off his own tongue and spits it into the face of the woman who kisses him” (25). Jerome, the author of this patristic text, paints a scene of seductive titillation meant to eradicate erotic desire, yet producing both a desire for what is to be combated and a desire for something even more pleasurable than normative sexuality, even at the price of self-immolation: God.

How are we supposed to interpret this ancient tale? The writing of the history of Christian sexuality has often been subject either to reductionist theories of repression and sublimation or to the dualistic flesh-spirit polarization of devotional piety that is awestruck by the ascetic discipline of substituting earthly pleasures for divine love. But can we also write a Christian history in which sexuality—far from being anathema—is seen anew as a peculiarly slippery passion, at once denied and called upon in Christian narratives and testimonies that paint a landscape filled with countererotic (rather than non-erotic) pleasures?