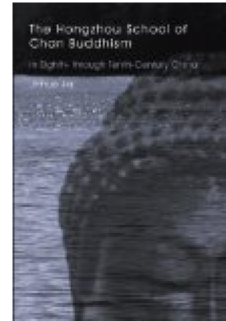
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jinhua Jia. *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-century China.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. xv + 220 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-6823-4; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-6824-1.



Reviewed by John R. McRae (Department of Buddhist Studies, Komazawa University)
Published on H-Buddhism (March, 2008)

This is a gem of sinological scholarship. Although some facets are a bit roughly cut–primarily a questionable standard for deciding the authenticity of texts and the simplistic quality of some inferences–the author's research diligence is impressive indeed. Any specialist in Chinese religions allowed to take only a single secondary work on this crucial middle period of Chinese Chan history to some imaginary desert island (one providentially stocked with all the primary texts) would certainly select this volume for its encyclopedic citation of primary and secondary sources, its integrated strategy of critically defining a corpus of authentic documents followed by their systematic analysis, and its closely reasoned analysis of historical and doctrinal issues.

The specialist's choice is not necessarily appropriate for everyone, though. Here I am thinking of another recent publication dealing with much the same subject matter: Mario Poceski's *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism* (2007). It is fortunate for readers that two such excellent books on this topic have appeared nearly simultaneously, and that they take distinctively different but complementary approaches. As a specialist I have found that every time the two authors address the same question Jia's approach is more compelling, but others might find her analysis methodologically naive and her reportage overly dense.[1]

The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth-through Tenth-century China consists of an introduction and six chapters, appendix, notes, Chinese and Korean character glossary, bibliography, and index. The chapters are devoted to (1) the biography of Mazu Daoyi ? ? ? "? (709-88), (2) the lives of his disciples, (3) the school's literature, (4) its doctrine and religious practice, (5) the manner in which it became adopted as the Chan "orthodoxy," and (6) the later history of the school and its representation in traditional genealogies.

Jia's writing is straightforward and concise, and she wastes no time in presenting her data and its interpretation. Her narrative includes only very occasional non-native speaker glitches, such as having an author "attribute" someone to a lineage (p. 24), or using "body language" to refer to the gestures and physical actions (such as throwing a pillow) that occur in encounter dialogue (pp. 24 and 25), or writing "doubts" when she mean "suspects" (p. 29). Sometimes the complexities of her textual citations lead to some uncertain antecedents, but none of these problems are significant and her meaning always comes through clearly.

Jia devotes her introduction to reviewing the intellectual and field-related background of her research, and her no-nonsense style allows coverage of a remarkable number of issues. She does tend to state the positions of previous scholars in overly stark terms. For example, in the introduction she points out that a number of scholars have posited that various Chan stories "were the retrospective creations of Song-dynasty Chan monks" (p. 3), but here she misses an important nuance of contemporary research writing, in which texts, worldviews, and the like are "created" in an ongoing process by the participants in any social community. In her annotation to this statement (p. 133 n. 17), Jia seems to lump together statements of qualitatively different import by Mario Poceski and myself, misrepresenting what I attempted to do in a recent book.[2] In the last chapter, she too quickly adopts the view that "almost all monasteries were destroyed or

removed" (p. 108, where for "removed" read abolished, or perhaps dismantled; cf. p. 116), citing Stanley Weinstein's masterful account of Chinese Buddhism during the Tang period. Although the Huichang persecution was a deeply harrowing event, it did not necessarily penetrate the entire realm.[3]

Jia's treatment of Mazu's biography is masterful, in that it concatenates an incredible number of closely reasoned judgments concerning an impressive array of primary sources and their interpretation in all the secondary literature available in English, Chinese, and Japanese (and some in Korean). She is very judicious in her use of these sources and frequently disagrees with earlier interpretations, or notes when they are not supported by evidence. Included here is an interesting discussion of the confusion between Tianhuang Daowu ? ? ? "? and Tianwang Daowu ? ? ? "? (pp. 22-26), in which she argues that a text crucial to the discussion is actually not authentic. This is a subject covered in greater detail in Jiang Wu's forthcoming *Enlightenment in Dispute: The Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-Century China* (2008).

Initially it seems curious that Jia's chapter on Mazu's disciples treats only a few problematic cases, presents a table of 145 known figures (pp. 33-45), and then abruptly stops. (Incidentally, she seems to have omitted Baizhang Weizheng ? ? ? ? "? [also known as Baizhang Fazheng ? ? ? ? "? ; d.u.] and Guiyang Wuliao ? ? ? ? [d.u.]; thanks are due Miriam Levering for noticing this.) Where is the overall analysis, where is the description of how Mazu's school fared over time? Indeed, the lack of attention to transitions between sections and chapters is disconcerting, but this specific case is a good indication of Jia's overall *modus operandi.* That is, she is not merely rehearsing a chronologically arranged set of topics, but rather following a well-constructed analytical agenda. The "lost" discussion of Mazu's disciples has been postponed to chapter 5 (pp. 103-105). Although even here the discussion of the disciples per se seems severely truncated (see Poceski's superior coverage, pp. 45-83), but Jia carries the discussion forward in chapter 6 (pp. 107-118) with coverage of the lineage dynamics of the later Hongzhou and other schools during the Five Dynasties and Song periods.

Jia is primarily focused on the analysis of Chan literature, and her chapter 3, "Examination of the Hongzhou School Literature," is wonderfully rigorous in its overall conception even if its specific conclusions seem overly optimistic. Here Jia undertakes to determine which texts and passages involving Mazu are "authentic" and which are "reasonably reliable," rather than later fabrications. She begins with lists posited by Yanagida and Iriya Yoshitaka ? .

..? ? ? ? (1910-98), but brilliantly considers all relevant Chinese and Korean epitaphs as well. The comprehensive quality of her coverage, as well as the tightly reasoned arguments she uses to either include or exclude the various candidate passages, will make this chapter an invaluable research tool for future scholars.

Jia's judgments are however disturbingly binary in nature–candidate passages are generally either accepted or not, with little middle ground–and methodologically unsound in one important respect. She concludes the chapter claiming to have "identified some authentic or relatively datable texts and discourses": six sermons and four dialogues of Mazu's, as well as a selection of the texts of his disciples, etc. (p. 65). However, this list is by no means certain. In her treatment of the initial set of dialogues involving Mazu, the only occasion in which her logic holds up concerns his famous final statement "Sun-face Buddha, Moon-face Buddha" (p. 58), which is charming but not very informative. Regarding Mazu's successors, in many cases she accepts as authentic or relatively datable passages known only from the *Song gaoseng zhuan* ? ? ? ? (Song-dynasty Biographies of Eminent Monks) and other tenth-century texts, when those texts cite an earlier epitaph as their source. Without a separately transmitted version of the epitaph in question, we have no way of knowing how much has been changed, added, or deleted by the Song-period editors. I would reduce the list of truly reliable passages to just a few, including epitaphs and other early sources (given on pp. 64-65).

It is also curious that Jia, as a well-published specialist in Chinese literature, is tone-deaf to differences of genre. In a recent book that Jia has drawn upon throughout her work, I suggested that the emergence of encounter dialogue involved both a "backroom" process emerging into the limelight and a transformation in literary expectations that allowed the words and actions of humble students to be reported along with those of their masters.[4] Although Jia is uninterested in considering the possibilities of such a sea change–and given her erudition I would love to read her critique–it seems implied by her chronology for the appearance of encounter dialogue in Chinese literature. She writes:

In conclusion, during the mid-Tang period when Mazu, Shitou, Jingshan, and their immediate disciples

were active, encounter dialogue emerged in two forms, the first involving the vogue of indirect, paradoxical phrases, and the second the fictionalized accounts of enlightenment dialogues that already displayed the highly mature style of "classical" encounter dialogue. Then, from the late Tang to Five Dynasties, beginning with Mazu's third-generation successors, encounter dialogue achieved full maturity with multiple forms, including illogical, nonconceptual phrases and physical actions. Chan monks also created encounter dialogue retrospectively for their mid-Tang or earlier masters. During this period, lively oral encounter dialogues or retrospectively created encounter dialogues were transcribed in various kinds of texts, and some of them are preserved in stele inscriptions. (p. 52, with partial repetition on p. 65)

This passage also manifests the author's surprisingly sharp categories. That is, in referring to early encounter dialogue as "involving the vogue of indirect, paradoxical phrases" she inadvertently shows that she has not thought very much about what actually constitutes "encounter dialogue." And her citations of such exchanges make overly quick judgments regarding their meanings. For example, after citing the line "When I was in Shitou's place, I was like a mosquito on an iron cow," she states that it "was obviously meant to disparage Shitou" (p. 28). But the prevalence of irony and sarcasm make such statements extremely hard to judge, and here the speaker (Danxia Tianran ? ? ? ? , 739-824) may be getting depicted as referring to his own inability to penetrate Shitou's teachings. Ambiguity being a creative literary and religious device, a definitive explanation may not be possible.

Regarding chapter 4, on Hongzhou doctrine and practice, in some ways Jia's treatment of the famous Mazu maxim "ordinary mind is the way" is better than Poceski's (see my review of his book noted below). Chapter 5, "Road to Orthodoxy," includes a plausible theory regarding the authorship of the *Baolin zhuan* ? ? – ? (Chronicle of the Baolin Monastery), an important but only partially extant Hongzhou text compiled in 801. The last section of the chapter is on the expansion of the school (as mentioned above).

The real focus of chapter 5, though, is on Chan monastic regulations (pp. 95-103), especially her use of the text of an epitaph to argue that Baizhang's students initiated the process by which he eventually became recognized as the founder of the distinctively Chan style of "pure regulations." Once again she dates texts according to whatever is claimed in the original source, rather than the date of that source itself. In addition, she makes the devastating error of mistaking a prescriptive statement for one with descriptive value. Thus, when a thirteenth-century edition of the monastic regulations supposedly derived from Baizhang–a text with a definite editorial agenda of its own and thus suspect in any matter related to that agenda–introduces the text supposedly inscribed on the back of the master's funerary stele. Are we supposed to accept that as authentically dating from the ninth century? Even more, when the passage in question introduces a short list of rules concerning monks' behavior, are we to take this as evidence that those rules were actually observed by the community? Jia has introduced some interesting evidence on this stele inscription and its contents, but the entire matter needs to be rethought.

Notes

[1]. I have reviewed Poceski's work favorably [forthcoming in *China Review International*, to be available in print and at `http://www.uhpress.hawaii.edu/journals/cri/issues.html` or at Project Muse `http://muse.jhu.edu`], and an evaluation of it by another reviewer is due to appear here on H-Buddhism.

[2]. See Mario Poceski, "*Mazu yulu* and the Creation of the Chan Records of Sayings," in *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 72-75; and John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 19 and 120-121.

[3]. Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 134-135.

[4]. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 96, 99, and 168 n. 40.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism

Citation: John R. McRae. Review of Jia, Jinhua, *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-century China.* H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14304

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.