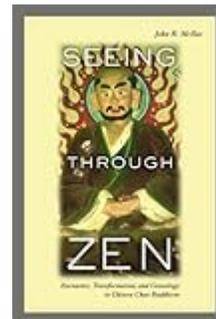




John R. McRae. *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. xx + 204 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-23797-1; ISBN 978-0-520-23798-8.



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Defining Chinese Chan Buddhism

Seeing through Zen is a critical evaluation of widely received representations of Chinese Chan Buddhism as a tradition focused on and forwarded by demonstrating liberating spontaneity. It is a careful, and one feels, fundamentally caring, consideration of several centuries of documentary evidence, interpretative frameworks, and patterns of conceptual contrast and continuity, in the course of which Professor John McRae offers us his “best and most cherished insights” into Chinese Chan with the expressed intention to “change how we all think about the subject” (p. xi). *Seeing through Zen* concisely summarizes McRae’s considerable contributions to contemporary scholarship on Chinese Chan Buddhism in a style that is straightforward, accessible, and yet also pointedly iconoclastic. It is a book that raises complex questions about the meaning of Chan in ways that will make many readers pause, this reviewer included.

McRae states at the outset of his preface that he is committed to actively and critically examining how Chan emerged as a distinctive “school” of medieval Chinese Buddhism, where “action” implies continuous engagement and “critical” implies consideration of all evidence

from all angles, testing hypotheses, and evaluating objections. Following the preface is a statement of “McRae’s Rules of Zen Studies” which I will list here without their paragraph-long glosses or further commentary: 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; and, 4) romanticism breeds cynicism. The final rule has as its corollary: cold realism eliminates dismissive misapprehension (pp. xix-xx).

The first chapter opens by reflexively puzzling how best to begin, picking up the methodological thread laid out in the prefatory material and pointedly urging a deconstruction of the traditionalist depiction of the evolution of Chan as an unbroken line of transmission or luminous “string of pearls.” McRae’s “deconstruction” of this account leads him to see the traditional account of Chan origins and evolution as a fiction, but a fiction that he avers is more significant, more telling with respect to the emergence of Chan self-identity and its distinctive vitality, than if it had turned out to be true.

For heuristic purposes, McRae identifies four distinct and yet overlapping phases in the emergence of Chan:

proto-Chan, early Chan, middle Chan and Song-dynasty Chan. These four phases of Chan development and their interrelationship are examined over the course of the succeeding five chapters, in roughly chronological order, beginning with the purported genesis of Chan teaching and practice with the arrival of Bodhidharma in China and the subsequent emergence of a distinctive set of so-called East Mountain teachings. McRae then visits the birth of what he calls “metropolitan Chan,” examining evidence regarding a critical turning point in the evolution of Chan: the traditionally recounted splitting apart of a gradualist Northern school of Chan and a Southern school of sudden realization. Following this is a consideration of the origins of Chan encounter dialogue, the religious vitality and institutional dominance of Chan during the Song, and the cultural precedents for and patterns of what McRae characterizes as a stable and self-sustaining “climax paradigm” of Chan teaching and practice (pp. 119-120).

On the basis of evidence detailed throughout these several chapters, McRae concludes that there gradually consolidated over a period of several generations a set of “biographical” narratives, recorded sayings, teachings, and discourses on practice that would become fully authoritative within Chan and that revolve around the (richly imagined and vibrantly represented) advent of a creative “golden age” of Chan teaching and practice in the eighth and ninth centuries. Contrary to this traditionally authoritative set of tales and teachings, McRae claims that the actual (rather than imagined) golden age of Chan creativity occurred during the Song dynasty, with the emergence of the “golden age” narrative itself. The genius of Chan and its particular construction of enlightened (and enlightening) virtuosity, did not manifest in the events of day-to-day life within practicing Chan communities, but rather as a meta-discourse on that life, romantically reconstructed. The most consistent and coldly realistic interpretations of documentary evidence encourage admitting that, “Chan encounter dialogue derived not (or, perhaps, not solely) out of spontaneous oral exchanges but (perhaps only in part) out of ritualized exchanges” and that in seeking out the origins of Chan encounter dialogue we should not look to purportedly historical events but rather to texts (pp. 92-93).

In spite of the parenthetical equivocations in this statement, McRae’s reasons and rhetoric unswervingly and overwhelmingly direct readers toward the view that the Chan texts that eventually came to constitute an authoritative Chan “canon” did not develop on the basis of first-hand experiences of the sort that they record,

but rather inter-textually. At the very least, the events described in the encounter dialogues so central to the Chan “canon” did not occur as described, with the actors named, in the situations specified. At least as I read McRae’s multi-faceted arguments, he would urge considering that it may well be that, in fact, nothing like these events occurred, for any actors, in any situations, at any time.

This reading of McRae’s reasoning finds considerable support in his rhetorically charged observation that what is both “expected” and “natural” for those operating within Chan is “intellectually debilitating” for those standing outside of it as observers and analysts. “What from the standpoint of Chan religious practice may be absolutely essential becomes, from the standpoint of intellectual analysis, the passive submission to a hegemony, the unwitting contraction of an intellectual pathology” (p. 10). As McRae sees it, “if Buddhist spiritual practice aims at seeing things as they are, then getting past the foolish over-simplifications and confusing obfuscations that surround most interpretations of Zen should be an important part of the process” (p. xii). Failing to do so, as he makes clear at various points in the book, is in his view to be “crippled” and “simplistic” in either explaining or expressing Chan.

Harsh judgments of this sort will draw judgments of their own, perhaps understanding or forgiving and perhaps not. At the very least, they make clear that McRae takes seriously his own stated intention of changing “how we all think about the subject” of Chan (p. xi), including those who identify themselves with and as members of Chan traditions. But setting aside their scathing tone, McRae’s judgments regarding Chan “insiders” and what is “natural” and “expected” of them direct attention to complex questions that McRae is clearly grappling with and that he would convince readers to raise and grapple with as well.

One such question is about the status of Chan teachings. Embedded as they are in the internally authoritative biographies and encounter narratives of Chan, wherein (if McRae is right) they had their actual origins, these teachings cannot be assumed to be accurate conveyances of the lives and works of Chan luminaries. Can they, nevertheless, be considered illuminating in terms of their explicit or implicit formulations of the form and meaning of Chan Buddhist realization? The potential disparity between what is accurate and what is illuminating begs further questions about what is meant by “true” in the context of Chan, or other Buddhist traditions, where theory

functions as a support for practice, but not an explanation of it. Does the “fact” that Chan teachings were originally formulated in fictions entail seeing them as at some level fictitious? What, in other words, is the truth-value of Chan teachings?

To be sure, claiming that the traditional account of Chan origins and the teachings and tales embedded within them are fictions is not to state that they are false. And perhaps McRae is employing considerable scholarly skillful means to force consideration of what might be referred to as the ontological priority of value over fact in Chan narratives. Fictions, after all, are narratives in which the conveyance of facts is subordinated to the expression of particular structures and potentials for meaning. In a Buddhist context, where crucial and critical emphasis has always (at least traditionally) been placed on understanding and skillfully responding to the operation of karma, that is, to the meticulous consonance obtaining among sustained patterns of value-intention-action and experienced outcomes-opportunities, fiction may well be a more suitable vehicle for the expression of liberating insight than factually accurate documentation.

Indeed, although it is quite common to attribute to Buddhism a firm commitment to seeing things “as they are,” the formula as presented in the earliest Buddhist teachings centers critically on the term, “*yathabhutam*,” which is most accurately rendered “as they have come to be.” Buddhist practice aims, quite fundamentally, at generating deepening skill in seeing the process or path by means of which things have come to be, precisely as they have come to be in reflection of compounding patterns of value-intention-action. Insofar as all Buddhist traditions enjoin engaging suffering as a function of errant interdependence, the purpose of developing such deepening skill should not be understood simply as a way of improving perceptive clarity with respect to present situational dynamics, but to true or properly align the patterns of interdependence informing them. Traditional Chan narratives, whatever their factual accuracy or inaccuracy, demonstrate the meaning of truing or properly aligning errant relational dynamics. The encounter narratives of Chan Buddhism, whatever their historical origins, express clarifying originality, skillfully displaying liberating relationships as both means-to and meaning-of non-duality.

A second question raised by *Seeing through Zen* is the proper relationship of scholarly work and religious belief or conviction. McRae’s harsh judgment of those operating “simplistically” or “foolishly” within the context of

traditional Chan convictions makes clear that he believes something important is at stake in forcing confrontation with “the facts” of Chan’s historical origins. Chan “histories” are not fictions in the same way as Shakespeare’s recounting of the lives of European royalty. Chan narratives purport to be histories and are not. The dissemblance they evidence may be reasonable, it may even be skillfully carried off, but it is dissemblance nonetheless and (in McRae’s estimation) “should” be acknowledged as such by all.

I am not so sure, an uncertainty that has much to do with discerning whether there are limits to the proper scope of scholarship and whether the contemporary scholarly route to dissolving Chan’s “master narratives” is not liable to enforce dependence on a “master methodology” that ultimately results in derivations of a normative or ethical “ought” from a purely descriptive or ontological “is” or “was.” That is, does the scholarly method, applied beyond its proper scope, run the risk of committing us to the fallacy that determining how Tang dynasty Chan really was in some way properly determines how we should engage Chan as a tradition of religiously significant practice?

The master-student encounters of Chan are sacred events in the sense of being events around which distinctively Chan religious sensibilities have coalesced and been imbued with generation upon generation of layered, spiritual significance. For Chan practitioners, these narratives come to be experienced as opening direct access to the virtuosic spontaneity and genius of Chan relationality in a way no less forceful and no less religiously or spiritually charged than the seminal events in other religious or spiritual traditions centered on more literally miraculous conjunctions of the human and the divine. Whatever gains are made through embracing documentary evidence regarding their historical origins, to abandon faith or confidence (Chin.: *xin*) in the encounter narratives of Chan as religiously real events is to cease activating Chan conviction and readiness for expressing, in an increasingly confident, committed and virtuosic manner, the meaning of relating freely in liberating intimacy with others.

Should Chan scholarship be directed to supporting or enhancing the conviction and readiness of Chan practitioners? I do not think so. The internal “histories” and commentarial traditions (oral and written) are charged with precisely this role. At the same time, however, I do not think that academic scholarship should position beliefs and patterns of readiness, which for those within

a given religious tradition are both “natural” and “expected,” in such a way that they are determined to be “foolish” or “pathological.” Academic scholarship should not aim at supporting religious belief; neither should it aim at inducing religious disbelief. Contemporary scholarship on Chan, from this perspective, should chart a course that avoids embroilment in the dichotomous discourse of belief and disbelief.

The articulation of such a non-dual approach to Chan scholarship is, I think, a work in progress, with Professor McRae as a notable participant. *Seeing through Zen* culminates on a telling note in this regard, with an affirmation that “the avenues of inquiry are virtually endless—such exciting possibilities for future research, so many different ways of seeing through Zen” (p. 154). This might be interpreted as a celebratory, academic positioning of Chan history as an infinitely “good read” in the way that the best literature is. But the passage also echoes the bodhisattva vows to learn all of the Buddhist teachings, though they are infinite in number; to travel the Buddhist Path fully, in spite of it being endless; and to save all sentient beings, in full awareness that they are numberless. The parallelism suggests at the very least that Chan scholarship should be no less devoted to infinite inquiry than Chan practitioners are to the infinite cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

But perhaps it can also serve to suggest something more. Chan master Mazu is said to have had a moment of particularly deep realization when his attention was directed to the difference between “seeing the Buddhist Path” and “seeing from it.” Granted that the Chinese term for the Buddhist Path, “*dao*,” ambiguously means understanding, path, way, method, and practice, the distinction functions religiously: first, to express the phase of considering the Path without having committed oneself fully to it; and, secondly, to evoke the non-duality of Chan awakening and Chan practice. In terms more relevant to scholarship, however, the distinction can be seen as useful for how it invites discernment with respect to the interplay of what can be studied (the Path as conveyance or text) and what can only be activated (the Path as conveying or meaning). Perhaps the deepest challenge of Chan scholarship, so thoughtfully engaged by *Seeing through Zen*, is to embrace and illuminate the ambiguity of the boundary separating these distinct scopes of “understanding” the “way” of Chan, doing so in such a way that we are enabled to follow Huayan scholar-adept Fazang, affirming that they are ultimately “the same,” precisely insofar as they “differ” from one another. Like all other things, perhaps Chan Buddhist scholarship and Chan practice ultimately are only what they mean for one another.

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