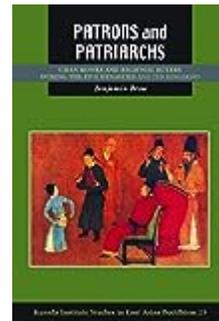




Benjamin Brose. *Patrons and Patriarchs: Regional Rulers and Chan Monks During the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-5381-5.



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Benjamin Brose's *Patrons and Patriarchs: Regional Rulers and Chan Monks during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms* is a very good book. Published last year in the Kuroda series at the University of Hawai'i Press, *Patrons and Patriarchs* takes its place in a long list of impressive books that, since 1983, have done much to shape the study of East Asian Buddhism. What is particularly compelling about this book is that it digs into the details of a long-standing mystery: What happened to Chan Buddhism during China's turbulent tenth century, that era that came to be known the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms due to the rise and fall of so many mini-kingdoms after the fall of the Tang dynasty in 907 CE and before the reunification of the empire under the Song dynasty? Brose breaks this question into two parts, asking first why, after these chaotic decades, did Chan turn out to be, at least at the elite level, the preferred form of Buddhism in the Song dynasty, once it was conclusively established in 979? And, second, in what ways were the form and content of Song-era Chan a continuation of developments first seen during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, developments that have been largely overlooked in modern accounts?

To begin getting at these important questions, Brose works from T. Griffith Foulk's definition of Chan, which

understands Chan Buddhists to be a group of people who take seriously the claim that some select portion of the clergy belongs to an enlightened family of sorts, having directly inherited the perfect wisdom of the Buddha Ākyamuni that was brought to China by the figure of Bodhidharma (p. 2). With this definition of Chan, in which the *form* of the claim to authority dominates any specific *content* in terms of teachings or practices, Brose reads through the surviving Buddhist historical sources from this era, and from slightly later, to understand how members of the Chan family fared under the rapidly changing mini-dynasties. His main sources include the *Song History of Eminent Monks*, the *Patriarchs Hall Collection*, the *Jingde-era Record of the Transmission of the Flame*, and the *Tiansheng-era Extensive Flame Record*, along with epigraphs and some local gazetteers. Based on these materials, Brose finds that a particular branch of the Chan family that descended from Xuefeng Yicun (822-908) and Xuansha Shibe (835-908)—both of whom studied on Furong mountain—did surprisingly well for itself in the southeastern regions of China and should be credited with inventing new ways to organize state-Buddhist relations.

Though Buddhist monks in China had been constructing Chan-style lineages for themselves since at

least the late seventh century, Brose finds that this particular lineage deriving from Yicun and Shibeï was unusually durable and, more important for the arguments at hand, unusually well-connected politically. More precisely, Brose shows that membership in this lineage served as a reliable gateway to being chosen by the kings of the newly established mini-kingdoms in the South—such as Wu, Wuyue, Min, and the Southern Tang—to serve as the abbots of the larger and more prominent monasteries. Thus, Brose sees here evidence of an institutionalized Chan family taking form, one held together by state recognition and patronage, and able to maintain control of the more important monasteries in the land. This finding is interesting on its own, but is doubly so since it was exactly this form of Buddhism that would come to dominate in the Song era. Additionally, and again presaging developments in the Song, Brose finds that the *quid pro quo* relationship between monks and monarchs melded Buddhist and Confucian concerns since the kings of the South came to expect that these state-controlled monasteries, and their abbots, would dedicate themselves to providing care for the kings' ancestors (pp. 59-60). With this evidence in view, Brose suggests that we have something close to a 'Confucian Chan' taking form in the mid-tenth century and that this style of Chan would continue on into the Song, albeit with changes (p. 87).

To get a better idea of how these relations between patrons and patriarchs developed, chapter 3, 'Founding Fathers: The Kingdom of Min,' explores how, in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, Yicun and Shibeï came to hold important monastic positions in the newly established mini-state of Min and then managed to transmit those prerogatives forward to their heirs. These genealogical narratives might at first give one the impression that it was the Buddhist masters who were completely in charge of this forward transfer of their authority, and yet Brose shows that it is more accurate to say that it was the kings who ultimately decided who would and would not be recognized as a lineage member and, consequently, be permitted to assume abbot-level responsibilities. This means that the monks who found a place for themselves in this Chan family had, in fact, two paternal sources for their identities, since while they supposedly inherited their august identities from that long line of patriarchs originating with the Buddha, it was, in the end, the emperors who sanctified these claims. Buddhist enlightenment became, in the final analysis, a kind of imperial product.

In the next chapter, 'Filial Sons: The Southern Tang,'

Brose shows how the disciples of Yicun and Shibeï spread out beyond the borders of Min to control the important monastic positions in the Southern Tang—the mini-kingdom that lay just to the west of Min. Moreover, they were able to institute a version of the patron-priest relations that had first emerged in the Min, making clear that such arrangements were exportable and potent enough to take root in altogether new settings.

In chapter 5, 'Heirs and Ancestors: The Kingdom of Wuyue,' Brose considers what happened in Wuyue, the mini-kingdom to the north of Min, where we see clearly that the Chan family that began with Yicun and Shibeï again managed, amidst the reigning chaos, to install itself in this mini-kingdom and secure the benefits of structured patronage that they had first gotten a taste for under the Min rulers. In short, Brose demonstrates that this Chan family and its style of managing state-Buddhism relations was not a passing fad and that it could effectively migrate into new regions.

Brose's argument regarding the enhanced powers and attractiveness of this particular branch of the Chan family from southern China reaches its climax in chapter 6, 'Reintegration: The North Prevails.' In this chapter he shows that when the Song forces began to consolidate their hold over the vast expanses of the old Tang empire, they invited to court several important monks from the South who identified themselves as members of that Chan family begun by Yicun and Shibeï and, more importantly, who seem to have brought with them the know-how required to establish these more involved forms of patron-priest relations. Yet shortly after being established at the new capital in Kaifeng, another group of monks, hailing from the nearby region of Ruzhou (汝州) and identifying themselves as a Chan lineage descending from a Tang-era Chan master named Linji (d. 866), pushed the southern transplants aside and were soon winning the lion's share of imperial patronage. So, what happened? Why did the well-traveled lineage of the South that had already weathered many tough decades in the South, find itself outmaneuvered by the, then, much less storied clan of Linji monks?

Unlike many other scholars, Brose argues that the struggle between these two Chan families was not really about doctrine or different styles of practice (p. 125). In fact, he is not even sure that there was much of a struggle. Instead, Brose argues that the Linji clan became the leading Chan network under the early Song because during the Five Dynasties era it had been located closer to Kaifeng and had already proven its loyalty to the Song

imperial family, having served under a pro-Song warlord in the decades leading up to the establishment of the Song dynasty (p. 131). In this view, the monks from the South, with their networks of power that they had built up there, were simply too distant from the new center of imperial power to be of much use in accomplishing that age-old task of shoring up the legitimacy of the new rulers. Moreover, they had just spent decades supporting the mini-kingdoms that had just been at war with the Song forces and thus were, by default, seen as less trustworthy. Brose frames this interpretation more incisively when, having shown that the Linji monks had had significant contact with the monks from the South, he wonders if it might not have been the case that the successful monks who rallied under the banner of Linji adopted the southern strategies for organizing court patronage to, in effect, beat the Southerners at their own game (pp. 126-27).

On this front, and others, Brose seems hesitant to explore the theoretical problems that his evidence brings into view. For instance, he often relies on the passive voice to describe how monks ended up in positions of power, and in that way lends more innocence to the whole situation than is perhaps warranted. For instance, we are twice told that monks were "propelled" into their new positions at court, a phraseology that of course minimizes their agency in the process (pp. 7, 133). Yet is this in fact the most realistic model, especially when Brose can show that as soon as a new kingdom was created in the South, eminent monks would flock to the capital apparently hoping to ingratiate themselves with the new imperial power and to benefit thereby, even as they must have understood the dangers involved in associating themselves with these short-lived dynasties? In a particularly salient case, a monk was made the king of Min in 945, only to be assassinated two months later (p. 48). Surely this would have made an impression on those monks eager to work closely with these new political powers, and yet still the pattern held as monks continued their dangerous and, at times, deadly dance with the state. Thus, I expect that I will not be the only reader to find myself wondering if part of what was transmitted within the Chan lineage was the practical knowledge needed to successfully set up lineage claims at court and survive in that dangerous and shifting environment. That is, Brose's evidence strongly suggests that within the Chan family in the South, mastery of the Buddhist tradition was profitably blended with some rather astute insights regarding how newly established Chinese states function and how they could be best led into develop-

ing forms of state Buddhism that benefited those monks closest to court. While this suggestion might upset some people's notion of what it meant to be a Chan master, it is doubly interesting to think that this kind of knowledge could jump from one Chan family to another, implying that monks could read each other's strategies with a certain precision—and irony—in order to learn the tricks of the trade and better their own chances at court. In *Fathering Your Father*, I argued that just this kind of aggressive "reading" of one's adversaries was essential to explain the ongoing re-creation of lineage claims in the mid-Tang, so it is likely worth wondering if a similar kind of ironic appreciation of the opposition is not at work here, too.

To get at another shortcoming in an otherwise excellent book, let's look closely at a sentence that sums up one of its basic arguments: "monks from one particular Chan lineage family were repeatedly posted to these [imperial shrine] temples, a phenomenon that seems to suggest that lineage affiliations had become indicative of *efficacy* and that clerics belonging to certain lineages were perceived, in part by virtue of their "ancestry," as more capable of serving "their imperial patrons" (pp. 76-77, italics added). At the heart of this assessment is the idea of a kind of Buddhist "efficacy," an efficacy that was imagined to flow from one lineage member to next, and which was understood to be essential for providing the emperors with the best kind of ancestral care. And, yet, Brose never explores how this efficacy was understood. Was it thought of as a kind of inherited magic, or a powerful purity, or a technical *savoir faire*, or what? Brose regularly claims that the Chan lineage promises efficacy and yet leaves the reader wondering what this efficacy was made of.

Thinking about this question of Chan efficacy might naturally lead readers to ask: Why, after all, was it Buddhist monks who were brought in to take care of the newly invented imperial cults? Where were the Confucians and the Daoists? What was it about these Buddhist monks, with their perfect "family ties" back to the Buddha, that made them the ideal choice to take care of the imperial families and their public image? Was this simply a case of a productive cultural mimesis in which the newly established kings wanted to surround themselves with the glow of a supposedly very old (and very bold) patriarchy, or was there more at play here? One answer might be that the new kings believed, as so many Chinese did, that their ancestors were being held in underworld prisons run by Buddhist figures whom could only be influenced through the offices of Buddhist au-

thority figures on earth. This perspective gains relevance when we remember that the immensely popular Buddhist mythology surrounding the Ghost Festival claimed that all mothers—even the mothers of kings—would go to hell for their supposedly wanton ways, and thus kings would be doubly interested to gain the assistance of a patriarchy that reproduced itself without women. Such considerations might, perhaps, appear far from Brose's stated goals in writing this book, but if Brose insists on the structured nature of the social engagements holding monks and monarchs together, it might be wise to consider, too, that those structured engagements belonged to a symbolic economy that had a structure of its own as well.

In any case, Brose's evidence demonstrates that this increasingly solid Chan family emerged in southeastern China precisely to address an all too real political problem: new empires needed a source of legitimacy and authority that would appear to come to them from a place *beyond politics*. Hence, though the new kings were in fact crowning the local elite monks as kings of Buddhism—with purple robes and impressive titles—the claim that these monks descended from the Buddha made it appear that this imperial recognition was but a mere reflection of a deeper kind of nonpolitical authority. Thinking about this dynamic is particularly useful because we know that the image of the Chan master became increasingly shaped by the fantasy that these very sophisticated and highly literate monks somehow achieved their enlightenments naturally, away from books and without relying on any particular form of practice. For instance, as Brose notes, Shibe, though presented as a keen devotee of the sutras in the earliest biographies, was gradually turned into a country rustic who, fond of fishing as he was, found enlightenment when he stubbed his toe (p. 58). In short, Chan monks were increasingly cast in this role of owning a form of authority that came from beyond culture, even as that pristine authority was put to work for the very cultural project of making the mini-kingdoms appear legitimate. And, of course, drawing on these alluring images of culture-free Chan masters to shore up imperial claims to legitimacy was, in fact, *the cultural work of Chan*.

As I hope the above comments make clear, Brose's work has a richness to it that warrants a good deal of engagement. For now, I would like to leave this discussion with brief mention of two other sets of issues that might warrant more reflection. First, when Yicun dies in 908, his funeral epitaph mentions that he had five main disciples who carried on his legacy, with three of these

going on to have close relations with the royal family in Min (p. 55). The next biography for him, found in the *Patriarchs Hall Collection* of 952, expands that short list of heirs so that Yicun now has twenty-one disciples who supposedly inherited his legacy. Then in 1009, when the *Transmission of the Flame* was published, he had sixty-four direct heirs. It is these monks and their disciples that Brose shows went on to take up important monastic positions in Min and the other mini-kingdoms, and yet it seems most likely that this expanding family had, in fact, only mythic connections back to Yicun.

This suggests that the powerful Chan family that Brose documents is not so much a real-world entity but rather a virtual kind of family in which connections between members were fabricated as time went on. If this is true, then we have to imagine a very complicated process whereby the later monks had to have won enough recognition for themselves in the real world in order to get put into the ever-expanding fantasy family of Yicun, as it was documented in the imperial histories. In short, the Yicun lineage family that at first appears as a closely knit family of monks furthering each other's careers by spreading their members throughout important monastic posts in southeast China, might turn out to be more of an esteemed and well-known brand name that elite monks, regardless of their real origins, adopted as a badge of legitimacy and value, once they had gained some public recognition and wanted to secure that renown for posterity. Deciding what blend of real and imaginary relations most appropriately describes tenth-century Chan in southeastern China will take some more work, but Brose's *Patrons and Patriarchs* has surely set us on the right path, and his comments at the end of chapter 5 are particularly useful for bringing the interplay of Buddhist and state arbitration into view (pp. 112-113).

Second, many readers will want to know what Brose makes of this steady Buddhist enthusiasm for winning imperial recognition and largesse. Was this simply the result of greed and vanity? Or should we imagine complex motivations whereby leading monks understood that the Buddhist tradition in China, with its massive landholdings and heavy commitments to maintaining culturally produced objects—buildings, books, artwork, etc.—desperately needed the support of the state to keep itself viable? In this light, leading monks might have felt that it was their *duty* to go and curry favor with whatever state power emerged, if only to ensure a better future for their disciples and monastic Buddhism at large. A third possibility is that the elite monks very much understood that if they wanted, as individuals, to be seen as

enlightened—in their lifetimes and in history—they had to have the throne's imprimatur, even if the newly established king had only recently been a farmhand or a lucky officer in the army. With the Chan lineages being published under imperial auspices from this period onward, there really wasn't any other way for this kind of recognition to be secured. In this view, it would have been the master's deepest religious aspirations that would have led him into the political fray, hoping thereby to secure the imperial recognition that would encourage his Chan family to thrive. *Patrons and Patriarchs*, coming in at 141

pages, might have found room for this more speculative kind of discussion, but on the other hand, the book remains more compact and streamlined for keeping theoretical ruminations to a minimum. It is thus up to other scholars in the field to build on this excellent foundation.

Patrons and Patriarchs is well written, and well organized, though I am afraid that the density of historical details will limit its accessibility to graduate students and colleagues in the field. Nonetheless, this book represents a new high-water mark in Chan studies.

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