PART TWO

THE LIFE OF QISONG
CHAPTER THREE
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INTRODUCTION

Qisong was born in the far south, on the periphery of Chinese civilization at the time. By the time of his death in Lin’an, now Hangzhou, in his mid-sixties, he had been named an heir to an influential branch of Chan lineage and made a name for himself as a writer and scholar. In this chapter, we will follow the dramatic arc of Qisong’s life, to his journey from obscurity at the edges of the empire to fame and triumph at its center.

Historical material generally reaches us through a few highly predictable patterns of preservation. The elite are usually represented, especially those who live long enough to make a mark in the world, those who are intent on being remembered, and those who are respected by or useful to later generations. Sheer chance also plays a role, wiping out some legacies and preserving others against all odds. In the case of Qisong, many of these forces were at work. Over his long life, he wrote prolifically and well, winning the approbation and friendship of many highly-placed officials and fellow monks. In his mid-fifties, he also devoted himself to securing the acceptance of several of his most important works in the imperial canon. In addition, roughly half of his other writings survive, thanks to the efforts of the monk Huaiwu 懷悟 (fl. 1107–1134), whose respect for Qisong prompted him to persevere—over a period of over two decades that included the disruption caused by the fall of the Northern Song—in gathering Qisong’s printed writings and taking rubbings of those preserved as stone inscriptions.¹

¹ Huaiwu details his efforts to collect Qisong’s writings in a postscript to the Tanjin wenji 鍾津文集 [T.52.2115, hereafter, Collected Works]. He began the arduous task before 1107–1110 and continued until 1134. He calculates that he amassed roughly 300,000 of the 600,000 words Qisong is said to have written (Collected Works, 746b–747a). Huaiwu seems to have had a taste for this sort of work because, according to the thirteenth-century historian Zhipan 志磐, he was also involved in collating a more complete version of the Mt. Lu shiba xian zhuan 廬山十八仙傳 (Fozu tongji