CHAPTER THREE
LI GONGLIN, AN EARLY CHINESE CHAN PAINTER

Perceptions of Chan Painting

Murals on the walls of monasteries in the two Tang capitals, Chang’an and Luoyang, and at major Buddhist pilgrimage sites such as Dunhuang, represented a pinnacle in Chinese Buddhist painting. Beginning in the Tang and continuing into the Song, with Chan widely popular and penetratingly influential in Chinese society, and with Buddhism becoming ever more sinicized, Buddhist art began to diversify. Chan history and literature engendered a major departure from traditional Buddhist art, while Chan-doctrinal syncretism opened a wide spectrum of new possibilities. Chan subjects coexisted with traditional sūtra illustrations, doctrinal pantheons, and numerous freshly sinicized Buddhist deities, marking a new chapter in Chinese Buddhist art history.

The rich Chan environment that nourished Li Gonglin’s spirit also influenced his artistic direction and stimulated him to investigate Chan subjects and become a pioneer in Chan art. Yet many problems beset the study of Li’s Chan art. First, Chan subjects were not considered an independent category of Buddhist art during the Northern Song, and Chan art was scorned by the influential connoisseurs and critics of the Southern Song and Yuan dynasties. Consequently, Li Gonglin’s Chan oeuvre has hitherto not been properly acknowledged. Later collectors, influenced by Southern Song and Yuan contempt, avoided Chan paintings. Chan art lay moribund until Japanese Zen art became popular in the West in the early twentieth century and stimulated inquiry into its Chinese origins. Second, due to the predominance of literati art in both past and present art-historical research, religious art in general was seldom judged on its own aesthetic merits and historical significance.

1 The Yuan-dynasty art critic Xia Wenyan’s Tuhui baojian, for example, criticized Muxi’s (often but incorrectly: Muqi) works as “coarse, ugly and lacking of ancient methods. They are not for elegant enjoyment. (粗恶無古法，誠非雅玩。)” and noted that Liang Kai’s surviving works were “all done with coarse strokes called abbreviated brush (皆草草，謂之減筆).” See Xia Wenyan 夏文彥, Tuhui baojian 圖繪寶鑑 in Huashi congshu, ed. Yu Anlan (Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1962), juan 4, pp. 99, 104.
The negative comments cited in the Introduction about Li Gonglin’s Buddhism are but a few out of many. Third, the syncretism between Chan and other schools of Buddhism (as in the Longmian Chan environment), and the intermingling of their philosophies and scriptures, blur the boundaries and scope of Chan art. We are further hindered by the paucity of material evidence; as Jan Fontein has lamented: “Our vision of the early Ch’an art, however, is bound to remain unclear, for we can only base our judgment on the few isolated works of art which chance has preserved for us.” Those few reliable works referred to by Fontein are Southern Song in date and origin. No original Chinese painting depicting Chan subject matter and predating the Southern Song is known to have survived. The absence of extant original Chan paintings of Northern Song date deprives us of the chance to discern Chan aesthetic proclivities. We then compound these irremediable deficiencies by thinking about Chan painting in Japanese Zen terms, thereby overemphasizing the relationships between Chan painting and yipin (untrammeled) style painting (which evolved into wangle wang hua, “apparitional painting”). All these hindrances have given rise to a host of perceptions that somehow bound the definition, function, purpose, philosophical meaning, and subject matter of Chan painting to the yipin style. Li Gonglin’s role in early Chan visual culture would be difficult to study without first dispelling these misperceptions.

Scholars are nominally aware that several painting styles of equal importance were employed by painters focusing on Chan subjects, but for most scholars this awareness has been submerged by the popularity of the post-1600 Zen painting phenomenon. Furthermore, while cautioning students not to overemphasize the yipin style in Chan art, they often contradict their own admonitions by imputing to the yipin style the function, spirituality, meaning, and distinctive modes of expression of Chan painting, thus relegating Chan paintings in other styles

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3 I disagree with some scholars’ assessment that one painting by Guanxiu and another by Shike are early examples of Chan art. See discussion later in this chapter. *Danxia fang Pang Jushi* (*Danxia Visits the Layman Pang*), formerly in the Kaikodo collection (now in a Japanese collection), is attributed to Li Gonglin. See discussion later in this chapter.