Chapter 19

Halves and Holes: Collections, Networks, and Epistolary Practices of Chan Monks

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Of the many different kinds of writing collected in the Buddhist canon, letters stand out as a category of writing that is not marked as specifically Buddhist. Students of Buddhism are taught the three “baskets” of the Buddhist canon: sūtras, abhidharma (treatises), and vinaya (monastic regulations). In Chinese canons, added to these basic categories are monastic biographies, ritual texts, and “records of speech” (yulu 語錄), to name just a few important types of text. Some of these genres, such as biographies, had secular origins, and were reshaped in various ways to suit Buddhist subject matter. Likewise, letters were an example of social writing that could be put to Buddhist ends. As “Buddhist” literature letters often reflected the priority doctrine held for the monastic elite. For example, an early, famous exchange of letters between Buddhist monks is that of Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) and Kumārajīva (344–413), in which the Chinese monk asks for clarification on a number of issues from the Indian scholarly authority. This exchange, as it appears in the modern Buddhist canon, points to some of the problems in studying letters: the set of letters was edited so that Kumārajīva’s responses follow the questions of the original letter, making Huiyuan look somewhat obtuse.1 What began as an epistolary exchange became an artificially constructed doctrinal dialogue.

In this case, the work done by later Buddhists, in their capacity as compilers and editors, complicates what we can know about how letters were used by monks, even as letters came to be more commonly included in the literary collections of monks. That is, collections of individual monks likely give us a skewed view of epistolary practices. To take another famous example, some five dozen letters of Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163) make up the last five fascicles of his “records of speech.” The first examples of the “records of

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1 Zürcher, e.g., writes, “it is interesting to note how the two partners continually misunderstand each other.” Zürcher, Buddhist Conquest, 229. Against this view, Wagner argued persuasively that the Dacheng dayi zhang 大乘大義章, in which the letters appear, is a “collation from two series of questions and answers” that “were matched by editors,” and “not pairs of letters following each other in sequential order.” Wagner, “The Original Structure,” 30–31.
speech” were compilations created retrospectively decades or centuries after their subject had died, culling their anecdotes from biographies and other sources. The materials included were fairly limited, but as Chan developed a more distinct institutional identity in the Song dynasty, “records of speech” were often compiled shortly after the death of an eminent monk, usually by one of his disciples. The material they admitted also changed, as “records of speech” came to resemble the literary collections (wenji 文集) of the monks’ secular peers. Such collections included inscriptions, commemorations, poetry, and letters; these types of writings were often those that reflected a social connection or occasion.

In the case of Dahui, the large number of letters assembled, making up approximately a sixth of his collection, suggests that his disciples saw them as an important part of their teacher’s identity. Dahui wrote more than one letter to many of the recipients, and through these letters he had sustained conversations about Buddhist teachings and practice. All but two of these letters, however, are to lay followers. This raises some questions: are we to believe that Dahui’s letter-writing was heavily skewed towards the laity? Or were letters to lay followers privileged during the collecting process?

Setting aside the way in which the letters between Huiyuan and Kumārajīva are presented, we might identify a good deal of overlap between how they used letters and how Dahui did, even though they were separated by several centuries, and had entirely different doctrinal agendas. For these monks, letters were a way of carrying out instruction and inquiry between two people with shared interests but separated by distance. Looking at the letters in the collection (guanglu 廣錄) of Zhongfeng Mingben 中峰明本 (1263–1323), presents a different picture. If we were working solely from Mingben’s collected works we would conclude that letters were an insignificant part of his relationship with students. Most of the letters are short, and based on the collection there is only one example of a person who received two letters. There are no sustained conversations reflected in the epistolary network expressed through the letters in Mingben’s collection. Again this raises questions about the role of letters for Chan monks: did they serve a different purpose in Mingben’s life than they did for Dahui? Did those disciples in charge of collecting Mingben’s writings and compiling his Expansive Record take a different view of which letters merited inclusion? I would argue that the latter is more likely to be the case: judging

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2 See the discussion of the definition of yulu in Welter, The Linji lu, 47–49.
3 David Pattinson’s essay in this volume raises the same issue with reference to the collection of letters sent to Yan Guangmin 颜光敏 (1640–1686). Pattinson notes that it is impossible to determine how collected letters might relate to all letters received by Yan.