Hu's study on Chan history was a section of his study on the history of Chinese philosophy. He considered Buddhism—predominantly Chan Buddhism—was an integral chapter in the history of Chinese philosophy. For instance, he wrote, in the introduction of the *Zhongguo zhexueshi dagang* 中國哲學史大綱:

In the second period of the middle ages, Indian philosophy was the most prosperous philosophy in China—a period of hundreds of years, from the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the Northern Song Dynasty. Indian scriptures were introduced into China in succession. Indian cosmology, philosophy, epistemology, logics, and religious philosophy were spectacularly distinct from the philosophy of ancient China—at that time, eminent Chinese thinkers, such as Zhiyi 智顗, Xuanzang 玄奘, Zongmi 宗密, and Quiji 窺基, explored and unraveled Indian philosophy with undivided attention (other Chinese thinkers such as Wang Tong 王通, Han Yu 韓愈, and Li Ao 李翱 were characters below those in the former category, because their theories were superficial and shallow, and lacked incisive and original perspectives on the new Indian material). Due to the freshness of the perspectives offered by, Indian philosophy, it became the main intellectual body during this period.

He also wrote:

Indian philosophy has become part of Chinese thought, ever since the Tang Dynasty. . . . Indian philosophy has arrived in China, and the two are merging, in fact, it could be said, digesting together—the new materials integrate with inherent Chinese thought (i.e., contemporary Chinese philosophy). . . . Truth be told, the philosophy in the Song and Ming Dynasties, whether those influenced by the tradition of Cheng Yi 程頤, Cheng Hao 程颢, or Zhu Xi 朱熹, or another tradition of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 or Wang Yangming 王陽明, were actually affected by Indian philosophy, in spite of their denial of relationships with Chan in appearance.
At the same time, Hu paid attention to the reasons as to why Buddhism spread and flourished in China, and, consequently, Buddhist influences on social practices, rituals, and ethics. For example, he wrote on this subject in his reflections on Mu Xiu’s 穆修 Essay Collections from the Song Dynasty, 6 July 1921. He particularly admired a piece named Caizhou Ka iw usi fotaji 蔡州開無寺佛塔記, valuing its contents, which discussed the spread of Buddhism, and its social influence. He referred to many specific sections of this article, and scribed the following comment:

The main theme of this article is that “Buddhism provides people with guidance based on their dislikes and desires. Buddhism spread across China because it could inspire mundane people to persistently follow the order.” This point is quite fair.

He said, “had Yu, Tang, King Wen of Zhou, King Wu of Zhou, Duke of Zhou, and Confucius attempted to deal with the theories concerning life and death, good and bad fortune, their followers would have had had no problems following the theories of the six sages. However, since they did not deal with these themes, and Buddhism was the only one that did, how could people not follow Buddhism to pursue the meanings of these ideas?” These concepts are what Han Yu neglected to mention.

He also wrote, “with the introduction of Buddhism, many people behaved well, without needing to treat each other with manners or justice—instead, Buddhism was ideal for guiding people into goodness. Alas, with powerless manners and justice, our people all believed in Buddhism, and therefore led to the prosperity of Buddhism at that time.” This is a fair evaluation.

He goes on to say, “in fact, building pagodas or temples was the last thing necessary to worship Buddhism. However, nothing else could equal these gorgeous and eminent pagodas or temples, which are so admirable. As a result, there must be Buddhist pagodas or temples located in remote places, and at the origins of rivers, for people to look up to.” Such a statement is also incisive.¹

Here we do not judge whether Mu’s or Hu’s comments on Buddhism are correct or otherwise, but Hu’s interests in Buddhist history is beyond doubt. As a result, Hu commenced studying the history of Buddhist Chan after he completed the Zhong guo zhexueshi dagang (the first volume, 1918).

¹ Hu Shih, Hu Shih de riji 胡適的日記, (The Diary of Hu Shih), the first volume (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), p. 128.