The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-Century China.

Although the significance of the Hongzhou faction of Chan Buddhism has been acknowledged for some time by modern scholars, it has received little systematic treatment. Assumptions about the influence of the Hongzhou faction over Chan doctrine and practice that have long prevailed in Chan and Zen studies, particularly its iconoclastic and antinomian tendencies, largely resulting from the repetition of traditional accounts, uncritically accepted at face value—assumptions promoted by modern Japanese Rinzai Zen orthodoxy. Enthralled by the discovery of Chan related Dunhuang manuscripts, scholarly concern for much of the twentieth century was with revealing hitherto unknown aspects in the development of early Chan. These revelations have had a prodigious impact over our knowledge of Chan, its origins and early development, and attuned the scholarly community to the way various orthodoxies shaped the tradition in their own image and likeness. One unfortunate outcome of the focus on early Chan was the relative neglect of later developments and their sources, a neglect reflected not only in Western scholarship but also noticeable in Japanese and Chinese. It is indeed odd that the Hongzhou school received so little attention given its alleged impact over later Chan tradition.

Jinhua Jia’s book, The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-Century China, is thus a welcome addition to the field of Chan and Zen studies. It joins a relative onslaught, given the dearth that preceded it, of works on the subject. In English, there is Mario Poceski’s Ordinary Mind is the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). I am also aware of two recent works in Chinese on the Hongzhou school and its reputed founder, Mazu Daoyi: Su Shuhua 蘇樹華, Hongzhou Chan 洪州禪 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2005), and an edited volume by Zheng Xiaojiang 鄭曉江, Jixin Jifo, Feixin Feifo: Chanzong Dashi Mazu Daoyi 即心即佛，非心非佛：禪宗大師馬祖道一 (Mind is Buddha; Not Mind, Not Buddha: Great Master of the Chan School Mazu Daoyi) (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2006), which includes wide-ranging studies on Chan, the majority of which focus or touch on Mazu Daoyi and the Hongzhou school. Future scholarship on Chan and Zen will do well to take these findings into account.

The book on review here is an ambitious and densely packaged work informed by a richly documented range of primary sources and secondary scholarship in Chinese, Japanese, and English. Jia’s use of sources leaves the impression that she is well-informed and well-read regarding both sources and scholarship. The aim of the work is “to present a comprehensive study of this (i.e., the Hongzhou) school, including its literature, formation, doctrine and practice, transmission and spread, road to orthodoxy, and final schism and
division” (1). Jia’s analysis is based on a novel approach to sources, aimed at overcoming interpretive problems encountered in modern scholarship: a tendency to read Chan’s “transmission of the lamp histories” (chuandeng 傳燈) literally and incorporate the transmission framework into Chan’s narrative structure; the differences between Chan historians’ sense of history and that of modern historians; and the influence of Song-dynasty Chan monks over materials (e.g. encounter dialogues) recorded in relation to Tang Chan masters. In addition, there is the associated dilemma posed by modern scholars who assert that the Chan “golden age” was no more than a retrospective creation imagined by these Song devotees (3-4). Taken together, there is little, it seems, that one can attribute in an unqualified way to the Tang Chan masters themselves.

On the point of the Song recreation of Chan’s “golden age,” Jia makes a useful, if minor point. It is not that the retrospective creation of the “golden age” did not occur, but it was actually begun in the late Tang by Mazu’s third and fourth generation disciples (4). Other scholars (myself included) will hold to the contention that the consolidation of Chan tradition, and the recognition of a “golden age,” only occurred with the publication of Song lamp histories. These, of course, did not appear out of thin air, but were anticipated by the kinds of developments that Jia observes and helps clarify.

The thrust of Jia’s interpretation rests with her claim to overcome the philological and methodological barriers that have made the interpretation of sources relating to the Hongzhou school problematic. According to her, it is possible to recover the authentic teachings of Mazu and his disciples due to the existence of three bodies of reliably datable texts: (1) contemporary stele inscriptions, including many biographies in the Song gaoseng zhuan (Song Biographies of Eminent Monks) based on original Tang stele inscriptions; (2) datable Buddhist texts like the works of Zongmi 宗密, Huangbo Xiyun’s 黃檗希運 Chuanxin fayao 傳心法要, and the works and catalogs of visiting Japanese monks; and (3) the works of such Tang-dynasty literati as Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) and Duan Chengshi 段成式 (d. 863) (4-5). This ability to identify authentic sources has profound hermeneutical implications: “With the identified original and relatively datable texts of the Hongzhou literature,” Jia asserts, “we are able to observe the Hongzhou doctrine and practice through our own lens (emphasis mine) instead of the lens of the late-Tang, Five-Dynasties, or Song-dynasty Chan monks” (4). “Our own lens” here refers to the alleged ability to reconstruct a mid-Tang perspective based on “authentic” sources.

Jia’s depiction of sources in this way belies her underlying motive to clarify the historical record with an aim toward reconstructing and clarifying the actual events, teachings and practices of the Hongzhou school. Thus, in Chapter One— The Biography of Mazu Daoyi (11-19)—she purports to “provide a new, complete biography of Mazu,” as “(m)any important events in his life have not been clearly or accurately described” by modern scholars (11). And in Chapter Two—Mazu Daoyi’s Disciples (21-45)—after examining the lives of three leading disciples, Jia not only determines their apprenticeship with Mazu, but