



# Seeing through Zen

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Encounter, Transformation, and  
Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism

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#### 4. *Romanticism breeds cynicism.*

Storytellers inevitably create heroes and villains, and the depiction of Zen's early patriarchs and icons cripples our understanding of both the Tang "golden age" and the supposedly stagnant formalism of the Song dynasty. If one side is romanticized, the other must be vilified, and both subjects pass incognito. The collusion between Zen romanticists and the apologists for Confucian triumphalism—which has Song Neo-Confucianism climbing to glory on the back of a defeated Buddhism—is an obstacle to the understanding of both Chan and the Chinese civil tradition. The corollary is this: Cold realism eliminates dismissive misapprehension.

## CHAPTER I

# Looking at Lineage

## *A Fresh Perspective on Chan Buddhism*

How should we begin this discussion of Chan Buddhism? One device would be to begin with a story, some striking anecdote to arouse the reader's curiosity. There are certainly many good possibilities within the annals of Chan. One is the account of an earnest Chinese supplicant—the eventual second patriarch, Huike—cutting off his arm in order to hear the teachings from the enigmatic Indian sage, Bodhidharma. How many times this story must have been told in meditation halls in China and throughout the world, in order to inspire trainees to greater effort! Or we could find something a bit less gruesome—perhaps the tale about Layman Pang sinking all his possessions to the bottom of a river because he had learned the futility of chasing after worldly riches. Surely this example of unencumbered freedom is meant to teach us a deep spiritual message? The stock of legendary accounts that might be used, each with slightly different import, is endless. And there are other possible beginnings, as well. Many authors have their own favored ways of characterizing the most essential features of Chan, presenting some short list of features to sum up the entire tradition. Or we could avoid such bland generalization and simply celebrate the incredible creativity of the Chan tradition over the centuries, its vibrancy as a religious phenomenon.

The approach adopted here—already taken by posing these very deliberations—is to begin by asking questions, to arouse in the reader not merely a raw curiosity but the faculties of critical interrogation as well. Specifically, let us begin by directly considering the question of how we should look at Chan Buddhism: What approaches should we adopt, and which should we avoid? What forms of analysis will be fruitful, and which would merely repeat commonly accepted stereotypes?

The question of how we should look at Chan Buddhism is one we should not attempt to avoid; to simply ignore the issue and begin a recitation of facts and concepts would be to make an unspoken decision, to answer the question by adopting a policy of denial. But neither would it be appropriate for me to dictate the answer in flat and simple terms: as I compose these lines on the outskirts of Taipei at the very end of the twentieth century, and edit them in Honolulu at the beginning of the twenty-first, I am conscious of the incredible multivalence of cultural identity implicit in this process of exposition, both in my own person and those of my intended audiences. That is, in various ways and at different times I have been a scholar and practitioner, student and teacher, lover and hermit, and what I am about to present here I have learned through a series of extended educational encounters in America, Japan, and Taiwan. This text is intended for use by listeners and readers not only in China, but in Europe, the United States, and Japan as well—so how could I possibly presume to argue that there should be *one* way to look at Chan Buddhism? A multiplicity of perspectives and a certain fluidity of analytical typologies are givens in this postmodern world.

### Deconstructing the Chan Lineage Diagram

For convenience, let me begin by defining a perspective on Chan that I wish to deconstruct and thereby avoid. I should confess that I mean only to caricature this perspective, so that we can use the observations made now to form a lever with which to push ourselves into a certain type of understanding (to paraphrase the positivist philosopher John Dewey and his student Hu Shih, who spoke of studying the past to create a lever with which to push China into a certain sort of future). The perspective to which I refer is the traditionalist approach depicted graphically in the lineage diagram presented in figure 1. Diagrams such as this are included in virtually every book on Chan that has ever been written, where they are used as a framework for presenting a historical narrative. Instead of plunging directly into that narrative and building upon the content of the diagram *per se*, though, we should first consider its semiotic impact as a medium of interpretation and communication. If the medium is the message (according to the saying popularized by Marshall McLuhan), what message is conveyed by the structure of the diagram itself? It is often noted that Chan claims to “not posit words” (*bu li wenzi, fuyi wenji*) and that it represents a “separate transmission outside the teachings” (*jianpani bie-*

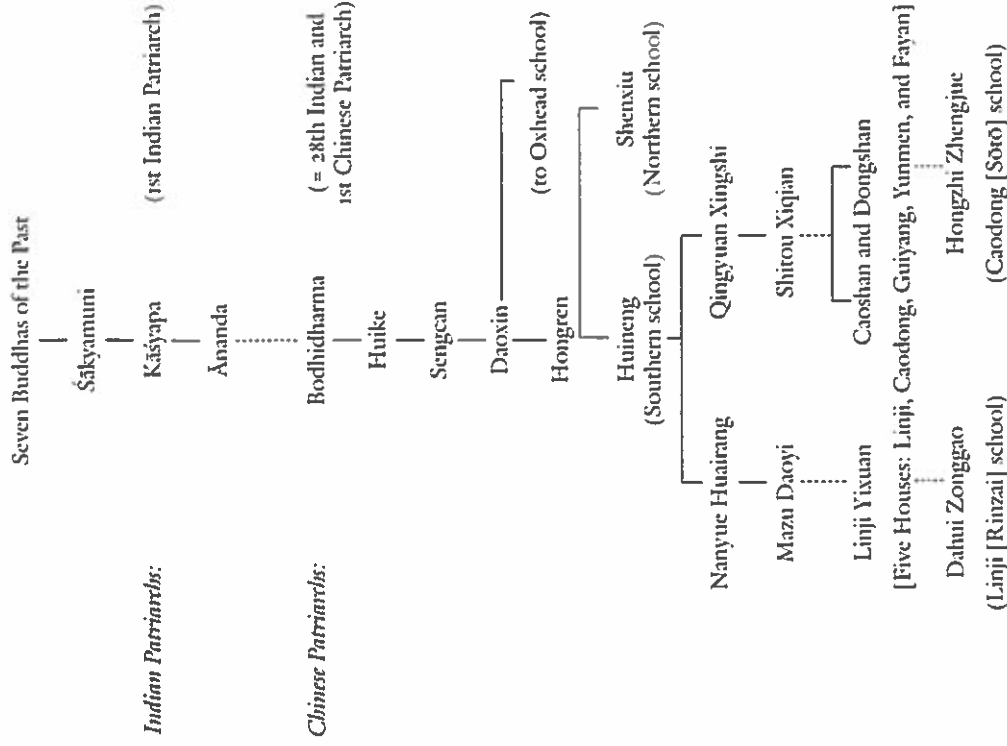


FIGURE 1. Lineage diagram of Chinese Chan Buddhism.

*zhuan, kyoge betsuiden*). Almost always—as I am about to do right now—these phrases are introduced with the ironic observation that Chan certainly does use a lot of words in describing its own teachings. We will come back to the Chan use of language and its not “positing” of words later, but here we can observe that the lineage diagram provides the basic model for how Chan appreciates its own historical background. That

is, Chan does not define itself as being one among a number of Buddhist schools based on a particular scripture (such as the Tiantai [Tendai] school with its emphasis on the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example). Instead, Chan texts present the school as Buddhism itself, or as *the* central teaching of Buddhism, which has been transmitted from the seven Buddhas of the past to the twenty-eight Indian patriarchs, the six Chinese patriarchs, and all the generations of Chinese and Japanese Chan and Zen masters that follow. (Bodhidharma occupies a pivotal position as both the twenty-eighth Indian and first Chinese patriarch.) It took several centuries for this entire schema to be developed; the earliest building blocks appeared at the very end of the seventh century, and the complete system was published perhaps as early as 801 but certainly by the year 952.

One of the advantages of beginning by considering this lineage diagram, to be sure, is that it introduces the most important players in our story. The seven Buddhas of the past are legendary figures to whom we need pay only scant attention; although Chan texts amplify and modify their religious identities somewhat, for our purposes we can admit them into evidence solely as part of the cultural repertoire Chan inherited from the larger tradition of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism. Chan has its own mythic take on Śakyamuni, of course, quite different from our own conception of him as the “historical” Buddha—but this too is a subject for another time. Nor must we pay much attention to the twenty-eight Indian patriarchs. The manner in which their hagiographies were explicated is a fascinating and exceedingly complex subject of study, but we do not have the space to consider it here.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the six Chinese patriarchs from Bodhidharma onward, along with Huineng and Shenxiu in the sixth generation and their several generations of disciples, will appear more often than any of the other players in this drama. (The reader will note at once that no disciples of Shenxiu’s are listed in our lineage diagram, which is a telling omission in itself. I consider this briefly on p. 14 below.) The figures remembered as icons of the Linji (Rinzai) and Caodong (Sōtō) schools, whose names adorn the balance of the diagram, are among the most important in the history of the tradition.

We can draw some important basic inferences from this transmission diagram. First, a note on historical origins: the Chan lineage scheme is a combined product of Indian and Chinese culture. Often authors describe Chan as the “most Chinese” of all the Chinese Buddhist schools, and part of what they are referring to is the Chan genealogical model. (I am particularly allergic to this rhetoric, since such expressions are generally little more than unexplicated tautologies generated through a sense of cul-

tural chauvinism rather than real analytical insight. And the fact that D. T. Suzuki and others say virtually the same thing with regard to Japanese Zen, that it represents somehow the essence of *Japanese* culture, should alert us to both the essential vacuity and the strategic intentions of such sentiments.)<sup>2</sup> Actually, the origins of this lineage-based transmission scheme are to be found in Indian Buddhism and the fourth- and fifth-century Buddhist meditation tradition of Kashmir. There are a number of parallels between the Chan transmission scheme and Chinese family genealogies of the eighth century and later, but we should remember that Indian Buddhists had parents and teachers, family genealogies and initiation lineages, just as the Chinese did.<sup>3</sup> As an amalgamation of Indian and Chinese elements, though, the Chinese Chan transmission schema developed within the Chinese Buddhist context and was particularly well adapted to that milieu. Just as DENG Xiaoping talked about “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” we could refer to the Chinese Chan transmission model as a “Buddhist genealogical theory with Chinese characteristics.”

Second, by using the lineage diagram to define Chan as a “separate transmission outside the teachings,” the advocates of Chan were declaring their school to be profoundly different from, and fundamentally better than, all other Buddhist schools; where the other schools represented only interpretations of Buddhism, Chan constitutes the real thing, Buddhism itself. This is a polemical move, meant to establish the superiority of Chan over all other schools. Other East Asian Buddhist schools reacted in part by devising their own lineage transmission schemes, and in part by saying that Chan emphasized only one of the “three learnings” of morality, meditation, and wisdom. Whether we view medieval Chinese Buddhists as concerned solely with the highest forms of wisdom or as working to obtain imperial patronage and other this-worldly benefits, or engaged in both endeavors simultaneously, at the very least they were competing with their contemporaries for intellectual and cultural hegemony. We should thus not overlook the polemical quality of the lineage theory. Incidentally, to describe Chan Buddhism in terms of polemics and contestation is not to exercise any value judgment, let alone to denigrate the tradition, but merely to recognize historical fact.

Third, what counts in the Chan transmission scheme are not the “facts” of what happened in the lives of Śakyamuni, Bodhidharma, Huineng, and others, but rather how these figures were perceived in terms of Chan mythology. This point will come up repeatedly here, and I will argue a rather complex position: In case after case, what the texts say happened almost certainly did *not* occur, in terms of a straightforward but simple-

minded criterion of journalistic accuracy. But rather than being fixated on notions of fact and fabrication, we should notice the very dynamism of the mythopoetic processes involved. Whether or not any anecdote actually represents the words spoken and events that occurred “accurately” is only a historical accident, and in any case the supposedly “original” events would have involved only a very small number of people, at most the members of a single local community. What is of far greater consequence is the process by which that anecdote was generated and circulated, edited and improved, and thus transmitted throughout an entire population of Chan practitioners and devotees, until it became part of the fluid body of legendary lore by which Chan masters came to be identified throughout Chinese culture. This is McKrae’s first law of Zen studies: “It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important.” This is to say that fiction—actually, a different sort of truth—is more important than the simplistic criterion of the question “Did it really happen?”<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, based on the rhetoric of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness,<sup>5</sup> nothing is actually transmitted in this transmission scheme. What occurs between each teacher and his successor is merely an approval or authorization (*inika*; *inika*) of the successor’s attainment of complete enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> This is first of all a doctrinal principle of Chan Buddhism itself, but we should recognize that the most important parts of the diagram are not the separate names of individual patriarchs, but the spaces between them, the lines that join them. That is, what is being represented is not only a series of human figures but the encounters between each figure and his immediate predecessor and successor. As is frequently stressed in the texts of Chan, there is no “thing”—such as enlightenment, the Buddha-mind, or whatever—that is actually passed from one patriarch to the next. The existence of such an entity would violate a fundamental Buddhist doctrinal theme, the denial of unchanging, substantive, and individual identity to the things and beings of this world. With regard to persons, this doctrinal theme is called “no-self” (*anātman*); with regard to all the various component elements of existence, including persons, this is called “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*). This is not a merely philosophical consideration, but rather an existential posture with profound genealogical impact: the focus is not on “what” is being transmitted, but on the relationship of encounter between the Buddhas and Patriarchs. The act of transmission thus involves not the bestowing of some “thing” from one master to the next, but the recognition of shared spiritual maturity. It is a cosmic dance involving a special set of partners, a relationship of encounter, a meeting at the deepest spiritual level.

Fifth, since the enlightenment of each Buddha and Patriarch is complete, there is no differentiation between the religious status of the Indian Buddhas and Patriarchs and their Chinese counterparts. This was perhaps the most important reason why this lineage-based exposition was attractive to medieval Chinese Buddhists, since it raised the authority of native Chinese figures to equal those of their Indian predecessors. This is very important in terms of the sinification of Buddhism, that is, the adaptation of Buddhism within Chinese culture, a subject that is vitally relevant to a wide range of subjects in Chinese religions and Chinese studies in general. At the moment, though, what I want to emphasize is the most striking and most frequently overlooked characteristic of this diagram: the homologizing impact of its very simple lines of succession.

By representing Chan Buddhism in terms of a straight-line succession from the seven Buddhas of the past through the six Chinese Patriarchs, diagrams such as this are used to simplify fantastically complicated sets of cultural and religious phenomena. Every time a straight-line relationship between two masters is posited in a lineage diagram, an entire world of complexity, an intricate universe of human relationships and experiences, is effectively eliminated from view. Could any religious figure’s identity possibly be adequately summarized by selecting only one out of a whole lifetime of relationships? Even a quick look at the biographies of Chinese Chan masters shows the extent of the distortion involved: where the sources are adequate, we sometimes see multiple awakening experiences<sup>7</sup> catalyzed by different teachers and events, yet in the lineage diagrams these are all reduced to single lines of transmission. The use of lineage diagrams to represent the Chan tradition, then—and their use is as old as the tradition itself, since it was by explicating genealogical specifics that Chan generated its own identity as a specific religious movement—is a hegemonic trope, the willful extension of one way of perceiving the world to the exclusion of all other viewpoints. (I briefly discuss the various branches and divisions of the diagram beginning on p. 9 below.)

Sixth, the “genealogical model” is important not only for the historical self-understanding of the Chan school in its transmission from Śākyamuni Buddha through Bodhidharma and onward, but also for the manner in which it defines how Chan spiritual practice itself is carried out. That is, in contrast to a basically Indian conception of meditation practice as an individual yogic endeavor of self-purification and progressive advancement toward buddhalood, the Chan genealogical model implies that the most important aspect of spiritual cultivation takes place in the encounter between teacher and student. Chan trainees still spent long hours

in the meditation hall—we can be sure of that, even though the texts often do not bother confirming the fact—but the focus of Chan rhetoric and literature is on the dialogues and exchanges between each master and his students, or between each student destined to be a master and his various teachers. It is thus not only the Chan school's self-understanding of its own religious history, but the religious practice of Chan itself that is fundamentally genealogical. By saying that Chan practice is fundamentally *genealogical*, I mean that it is derived from a genealogically understood encounter experience that is *relational* (involving interaction between individuals rather than being based solely on individual effort), *generational* (in that it is organized according to parent-child, or rather teacher-student, generations), and *reiterative* (i.e., intended for emulation and repetition in the lives of present and future teachers and students). No matter what the comparison or relationship between Chinese Chan and earlier forms of Indian Buddhist meditation practice, this particular complex of qualities is not found in other schools or forms of Buddhist training.<sup>8</sup>

In the most basic historical terms, though, we should recognize that the homologizing impact of the Chan lineage diagram represents a profound distortion of the subject matter. This is McAra's second rule of Zen studies: "Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong." In more formal language, this means that lineage assertions are problematic in direct proportion to their significance. That is, every time we read that the masters of such-and-such a group are related to each other in a lineal succession, the statement is probably inaccurate in some sense, and the more important it is to the religious identity of the individuals involved, the less accurate it will be. If nothing much is made of the relationship, the lineage assertion is more likely to be correct than if a great deal rides on it. Almost always, of course, the figure at the end of the list, or even that individual's students, has the most at stake in making such assertions. And if his religious identity must be defined on the basis of a lineal succession, if his historical status depends on being the recipient of the cumulative charisma of one particular set of predecessors, then it always seems that some significant distortion of the facts has taken place. Of course, my use of the word *facts* should remind you of the first rule, which remains relevant here: The presentation of reality in lineage schema represents a certain type of myth-making, and what is not "true" *per se* is inevitably more important!

Seventh, I referred above to "each teacher and *his* successor" (see p. 6), and the gender-specific terminology is appropriate. The Chan tradi-

tion is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and the strong implications of the term *patriarchal* in English (referring both to Chan figureheads and a male-centered ideology) is entirely suitable here. Nancy Jay has analyzed how genealogical systems tend to create justifications for removing women from the nexus of power and fecundity,<sup>9</sup> and in a later chapter, we will consider the manner in which Chan represented a way of organizing power within the Chinese Buddhist monastic establishment. There is also, of course, a broader, gender-related issue concerning Chan as a patriarchal ideology: to put it bluntly, Was Chan a weapon used to oppress women within Chinese society? Alas, I cannot deliberate on this issue in these pages, but when the subject comes up, scholars should certainly not shrink from it. This awareness, however, is helpful here in a different and perhaps even larger sense. I do find it germane to deal with the following variant of the question: Was Chan a weapon in the oppression of Chinese religious practitioners in general, or did it serve to suppress certain groups of them? This is a shocking question, to be sure, but it seems to me that any means by which knowledge is structured—and the lineage format is certainly that—both *allows* and *suppresses* different types of perspectives. I am by no means unsympathetic to the Chan tradition, nor to the realm of Buddhist meditation and spiritual cultivation in general, but a consideration of how the Chan school's dominance in Chinese Buddhism may have militated against alternative viewpoints seems an obvious aspect of our intellectual responsibility.

At this point, you may be surprised that we have derived so many inferences from one simple diagram, but we could certainly coax numerous additional insights from it if space were not an issue. Let us leave further comment on the Chan lineage diagram and the genealogical identity of the Chan tradition until later, though, and turn instead to the reason we began this discussion in the first place.

### Avoiding the "String of Pearls" Fallacy

The preceding observations regarding the lineage diagram are to some extent preventive medicine, prophylaxis against a type of interpretation to be avoided. Simply put, the message is this: To represent Chan Buddhism in terms that are congruent with the lineage paradigm is to run the risk of mere repetition, without saying anything fundamentally insightful. Rather than performing legitimate analytical investigations, to do so would be merely to recapitulate an inherited symbolic system, and

in this context one's most cherished intellectual nuances would be nothing more than trivial variations on the genealogical model. Here it is useful to make a clear insider/outsider distinction: What is both expected and natural for a religious practitioner operating *within* the Chan episteme, what is necessary in order to achieve membership within the patriarchal lineage, becomes intellectually debilitating for those standing, even if only temporarily, *outside* the realm of Chan as its observers and analysts. What from the standpoint of Chan religious practice may be absolutely essential becomes, from the standpoint of intellectual analysis, the passive submission to a hegemony, the unwitting contraction of an intellectual pathology.

So what is it that we should not be doing? Or, to put it another way, how can we recognize when we are falling, or in danger of falling, into patterns that inhibit our ability to see the history of Chan in all its rich complexity?

Seen from this perspective, the issue is really quite simple: Whenever we pretend to explain Chan in terms of lineal successions from one great master to another, we run the risk of committing the "string of pearls" fallacy, in which the evolution of Chan Buddhism is described in terms of a sequence of individual masters like pearls on a string. This is a variant of the "great man" fallacy of historical writing, in which one explains the inevitably messy details of past realities in terms of the willful endeavors of a limited number of heroic men. (Once again, the gender-specific terminology is warranted.) To be more logically precise, it is also an example of the fallacy of archetypes, which "consists in conceptualizing change in terms of the re-enactment of primordial archetypes which exist outside of time."<sup>10</sup>

In terms of Zen studies, this tendency is starkly apparent in the way Dunhuang manuscripts have been used to supplement rather than radically transform the appreciation of Chan in many writings. A trove of cultural treasures similar to the Dead Sea scrolls, the Dunhuang manuscripts were discovered in a walled-up cave in Chinese Central Asia at the turn of the twentieth century and then dispersed to various libraries throughout the world. They provided a cross-section of Chan documents from the eighth to the tenth centuries, just before the great editorial homogenization of the Song dynasty took place.<sup>11</sup> Access to these manuscripts has allowed scholars to explore the early phases of Chinese Chan Buddhism in ways that would simply not have been possible in their absence, and the analysis of this magnificent trove has occupied the attentions of scholars (not only in Chan, but in other fields of Buddhist and Daoist

studies, and various realms of historical and sociological research as well) for the entire twentieth century. However, in Chan studies, evidence from the Dunhuang manuscripts has most often been used merely to paint better features onto the same old traditional picture, merely to add attractive detail to the genealogical model described above. Thus, scholars have used Dunhuang manuscripts in conjunction with other evidence to describe more vivid portraits of Bodhidharma, Huineng, and others as *individual* figures, without changing the framework in which these individuals are presented in any substantial manner, and certainly without trying to work out the cultural and religious dynamics that led to their inclusion in the genealogical paradigm in the first place. There are exceptions, of course, but they are comparatively few and far between.

I am not suggesting that we never include descriptions of lineage successions in our writing on Chan—far from it—but only that, when we do so, we should be conscious of the reasons for their use and remain aware of the risks involved. Not only would it be impossible to talk about Chan without ever using concepts related to lineage—to the extent it can be described as a continuous set of processes, Chan is at its most profound level a *genealogical* set of phenomena—but we will gain the greatest benefit from shifting our focus and perspective repeatedly as we move through the evidence. To commit the "string of pearls" fallacy is to remain fixed and unaware in a single posture. Rather than simply move to a different static position, however, we should work to illuminate our subject from a number of angles, to encounter it with different aspects of our interpretive capacities.

### A Provisional Device: The Phases of Chan

Figure 2 (p. 13) is a simple chart describing Chan in a manner quite different from that of the lineage diagram (fig. 1) discussed above. Where the traditional Chan diagram lists names of individual human beings, this chart lists named phases or trends in the evolution of Chan.<sup>12</sup> The names of these phases or trends are not universally accepted in writings about Chan, and the boundaries between them are subject to debate. I preserve these ambiguities by not adopting this terminology and periodization without question throughout these chapters; on the contrary, we should pay close attention to the intrinsic fuzziness of the borders between the phases named so uniquely and unambiguously here. It is in large part through considering the failure of any margins to tightly cap-

ture these arbitrary entities that we will be able to see the utility of this periodization.

Each of the named phases refers not to a specific set of individuals per se (although some of the most representative figures are listed), but to a style or configuration of religious activity that is known through a variety of sources. One of the primary models by which each phase is characterized is, of course, a list of teachers, known as patriarchs in the traditional lineage scheme, who function as figureheads for a certain type of religious identity. These men (and very occasionally women) serve as exemplars of enlightened behavior, whose stories are told and retold in order to pattern the behavior of subsequent generations of students.<sup>13</sup> (Even as Chan involves the transcendence of patterned behavior in enlightened spontaneity, this abandoning of patterning must itself be patterned in order to be understood, modeled before it can be imitated, deconstructed, and refigured.) Information about these figureheads, as well as doctrinal explanations and other types of information, was circulated both orally and through written texts. Hence each phase of Chan can be described in terms of multiple dimensions: its exemplary human representatives, the geography and timing of their activities, the texts that describe their activities and convey their teachings, and so forth. Figure 2 provides information of this sort briefly in the summary for each phase.

Hence, the basic difference between the lineage diagram and the chart in figure 2 is that, where the diagram tends to homologize all the individuals represented as identically enlightened representatives of a single confraternity—to enable (and simultaneously limit) the understanding of them according to a meaningful yet unitary religious mode—the chart seeks to distinguish qualitative differences along a chronological axis, to facilitate multiple perspectives and modes of understanding. The goal of the chart is the generation of meaningful distinctions, not the assertion of an unbroken continuity of patriarchal authority.

You will note that the lineage diagram is not monolithically unilinear, that there are divisions into double lines at a number of points, and that five different “houses” of Chan are specified. How can we account for these differentiations, while at the same time acknowledging the “homologizing” impact of the lineage diagram and its underlying religious assumptions? We will consider most of these examples in detail later, but they are to a certain extent exceptions that prove the rule. It has long been recognized that Huineng and Shenxiu, the figureheads of the so-called Southern and Northern schools, function within traditional Chan ideology not as two isolated individuals, but as an inextricably related

FIGURE 2. Simplified chart of the phases of Chinese Chan.

PROTO-CHAN ca. 500–600	Bodhidharma (d. ca. 530) Huike (ca. 485 to ca. 555 or after 574) <i>Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices</i>  SUMMARY: Multiple locations in north China; practice based on Buddha-nature; no known lineage theory. Known through traditional texts and a few Dunhuang documents.
EARLY CHAN ca. 600–900	Hongren (601–74) Shenxiu (606?–706), Huineng (638–713) Shenhui (684–758) Northern, Southern, Oxhead factions <i>Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch</i>  SUMMARY: Various loosely defined factions/groups, with different approaches to “contemplation of the mind”; relationship between this and proto-Chan unclear; lineage theories appear from 689 on as a unifying ideology; known through numerous Dunhuang documents and traditional sources.
MIDDLE CHAN ca. 750–1000	Mazu (709–88), Shitou (710–90) Linji (d. 867), Xuefeng Yicun (822–908) Hongzhou and Hubei factions, antecedents of the Five Houses <i>Autobiography of the Patriarchal Hall</i>  SUMMARY: Emergence of “encounter dialogue” as primary mode of practice and discourse, recorded in colloquial form and massive quantity in 952, and implying a genealogical model of religious cultivation; not present in Dunhuang documents but known through Song dynasty texts and idealized as a golden age during Song.
SONG-DYNASTY CHAN ca. 950–1300	Dahui (1089–1163), Hongzhi (1091–1157) Five Houses, Linji and Caodong schools <i>Blue Cliff Record</i>  SUMMARY: Greatest flourishing of Chan, which as an administrative ideology dominated the Chinese monastic establishment; the image of Tang-dynasty masters operating in enlightened spontaneity was inscribed in highly ritualized Song-dynasty settings; snippets of encounter dialogue were collected, edited to serve as precedents of enlightened activity, and used as topics of meditative inquiry.

NOTE: In order to cover Chan from the end of the Song dynasty up to the present, this chart should include at least a postclassical phase or perhaps multiple later phases. However, since the developments of these later periods are not treated in this book, I will not attempt a periodization here.

pair simultaneously linked in collaborative and competitive relationship. Together they constitute a single literary and religious polarity expressed as a relationship between two human exemplars. A convenient shorthand for this complex bimodality is the French word *duel*, which carries the meanings of both “duel” and “dual” in English.<sup>14</sup> Thus the doctrine of sudden enlightenment associated with the Southern school cannot be explained without reference to a gradualist doctrine attributed to the Northern school. (This simplistic explanation of sudden versus gradual is woefully inadequate in the face of historical reality, but it must have been very effective in disabusing trainees of their simplistic notions of meditative “achievement.”) Note that these two schools, along with Oxhead Chan, are included together in the “early Chan” phase of the eighth century—and this is an intentional grouping, meant to indicate that these three factions were more alike than different, or at least that their religious identities were so intimately intertwined that they must be represented together. The fact that none of Shenxiu’s disciples are included in the Chan lineage diagram (already noticed on p. 4 above) is due to their exclusion from consideration in traditionalistic accounts of Chan; here their meaningful absence serves to highlight the unilinearity of the “orthodox” line traced from the legendary (i.e., fictional, but therefore more important) Huineng. In chapter 6 (see p. 138) we consider whether the distinction between the Linji/Rinzai and Caodong/Sōtō schools implies a similar polarity, that is, two groups paired together in a duel or binary relationship that is both contrastive and competitive.

You might assume that the chart depicts a chain of historical causality, but it actually characterizes the retrospective identity of the various phases of Chan. The periodization of any set of past events represents an act of reconstruction—not the mere reorganization and ordering of information, but the total remaking of the past as the structured image of our imaginations. Now, there is nothing wrong with creating an image of the past—indeed, I believe it is our task as historians, both professional and occasional, to visualize the past in the best ways we know how. But we should work to remain aware that the ordering of developments from the fifth through the thirteenth centuries inevitably involves this kind of re-creation; we cannot get off the hook with the naive belief that we are merely ordering the information for the sake of convenience, but not really altering it in the process.

This retrospective quality pervades the Chan tradition. Time and again we find we are dealing, not with what happened at any given point, but with what people thought happened previously. We deal not so much in

facts and events as in legends and reconstructions, not so much with accomplishments and contributions as with attributions and legacies. The legends and reconstructions, not the supposedly “actual” events, determined later religious and social praxis. This observation may have a broad application beyond Chinese Chan, in describing what it is that makes traditions traditions.<sup>15</sup> But it is certainly applicable to Chan: not true, and therefore more important.

With these considerations in mind, then, and in order to get a better perspective on the subjects to be covered in the remaining chapters, let us look in somewhat greater detail at the phases listed in figure 2. At this point I provide only a few introductory comments to help you become oriented to the material and thus prepared for the more detailed analysis that follows.<sup>16</sup>

#### PROTO-CHAN

The designation *proto-Chan* refers to the ill-defined activities of a set of practitioners surrounding Bodhidharma and Huike who were known for their dedication to ascetic practices and meditation. Beginning roughly around the year 500 and overlapping with the so-called early Chan phase in the seventh and perhaps even into the eighth century, this group operated in a variety of north China locations. The extent to which the individuals involved conceived of themselves as participating in a single group or movement is unclear, and since they had no way of knowing of the continuity of their activities with any later “Chan school,” even the convenient term *proto-Chan* does not bear close scrutiny. (Their activities are “prototypic” only to those who already know what followed.) We know of a small number of figures who studied under Bodhidharma, and a somewhat larger number who were primarily associated with Huike, presumably after his master’s death. There is a certain quantity of biographical information about the participants in proto-Chan, and although it attests to the variety of their backgrounds, it imparts only a shadowy image of any shared group esprit.

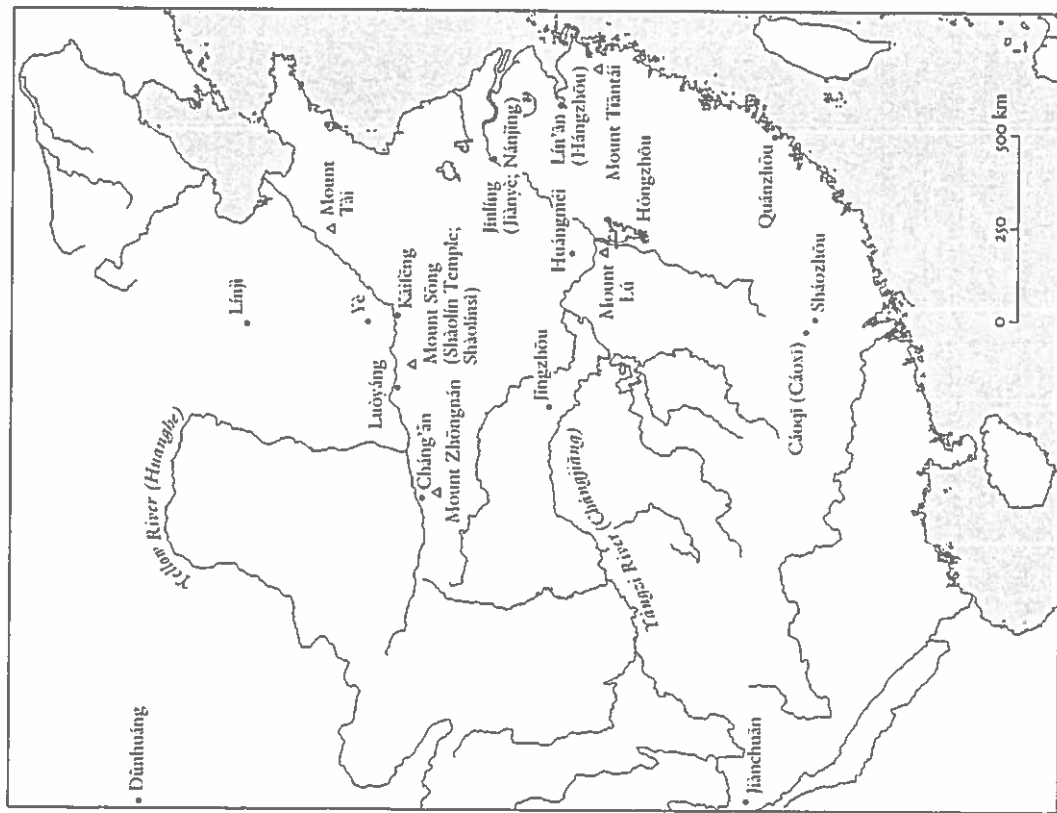
One important feature of proto-Chan—at the very least, a feature important for the subsequent evolution of the school—was its common focus on a text circulated under Bodhidharma’s name, the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* (*Erwu sixing lun*). As this text circulated, practitioners who identified with Bodhidharma’s message appended their own comments to it, making it an expanding anthology of the earliest Chan teachings.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while we cannot describe the scope of proto-Chan

activities with any accuracy, the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* provides insight into precisely those ideas that formed the doctrinal nucleus of subsequent Chan practice ideology. This text describes a fundamental attitude of emphasis on the existence of the Buddha-nature or potential for enlightenment within all sentient beings, as well as an attitude toward how this understanding of Buddhism may be carried out in daily life.<sup>18</sup>

EARLY CHAN

*Early Chan* designates the phase when the school, or what was to become a school eventually,<sup>19</sup> first articulated its lineage-based ideology in clear and extensive form. Actually, the Dunhuang manuscripts and traditional Chan records include an amazing variety of different formulations from this phase, and it seems evident that a great deal of experimentation was taking place, involving a number of variations on commonly accepted themes, as the Chan movement matured and crystallized over time. Some of these formulations describe specific methods of contemplation practice, sometimes presented in a progressive series of steps. Others describe the role of the Buddha-nature, or “pure mind,” within, as well as the behavior of the illusions — the false thoughts, or “impure mind” — that obscure the appreciation of our inner purity. Compared to later Chan texts, these formulations often seem odd but are not particularly enigmatic or difficult; the emphasis at this point was on clarity in expressing this new form of the Buddhist teaching, not on generating entirely different modes of expression.

In contrast to proto-Chan, the early Chan phase manifests a great stability of location: Daoxin and Hongren spent exactly a half-century, from 624 to 674, in the same monastic complex in Huangmei (“Yellow Plum,” Hubei Province) and it is not unreasonable to include Shenxiu’s quarter-century, from 675 to 701, at the not-too-distant Jade Spring Temple (Yuquansi, in Jingzhou, which overlaps both Hubei and Hunan Provinces) in this phase as well. Matters become more complex with the explosion of Chan into the two imperial capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang during the eighth century. Therefore, whereas investigation of proto-Chan leaves one with the impression of an indefinable will-o’-the-wisp, analyzing the sources for early Chan imparts a sense of continuous community development and a growth pattern that moves from geometric increase throughout much of the seventh century to explosive expansion in the eighth. Also, where proto-Chan refers to a single, albeit incohesive and



MAP 1. Locations for Proto-Chan, Early Chan, and Middle Chan.

ill-defined, style of religiosity, early Chan may be understood as a collection of different communities, groups, and factions.

In the most straightforward sense, the label *East Mountain teaching* refers to both the community and doctrines of Daoxin and Hongren, but there is an important sense in which these matters are known solely through information transmitted by their successors. Those successors identified themselves not as purveyors of their own doctrinal innovations, but as transmitters of the East Mountain teaching. We need to recognize that the ideas associated with the names Daoxin and Hongren were primarily those of their followers' later reconstruction; this recognition does not sever the connection between those ideas and the East Mountain teaching figureheads themselves, but it does lend an important retrospective quality to the process. That those successors, who were active in Chang'an and Luoyang in the early decades of the eighth century, came to be known by the label *Northern school* is a curious historical detail. The *Southern school* derives from the mid-eighth-century activities of Shenhui (684–758), although later this label came to be adopted for the Chan school as a whole. The *Oxhead school* is a somewhat later development, a faction or lineage that played an important historical role through its apparent involvement in the composition of the *Platform Sūtra*, the hallmark and culminating text of early Chan.

We will deal with the East Mountain teaching in chapter 2, along with Bodhidharma and proto-Chan. The Northern, Southern, and Oxhead schools, as the most important trends of metropolitan Chan (i.e., those factions that evolved in the two capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang),<sup>20</sup> will be treated together in chapter 3. It is appropriate that the last three schools should be taken together, since they were in dialogue with one another, and the supposed distinctions between them in their original historical identities are not nearly as sharp as the Chan legends would have us believe. It would also be appropriate to mark the East Mountain teaching off as an entirely separate phase, but I hope that adding these comments here — and organizing chart and chapters differently — will be sufficient to show the provisional nature of the boundaries involved. The lack of congruence between the categories “early Chan” and “metropolitan Chan” as used here is intentional.

#### MIDDLE CHAN

An event of overwhelming significance takes place in the “middle Chan” phase: the emergence of “encounter dialogue,” the idiosyncratic manner

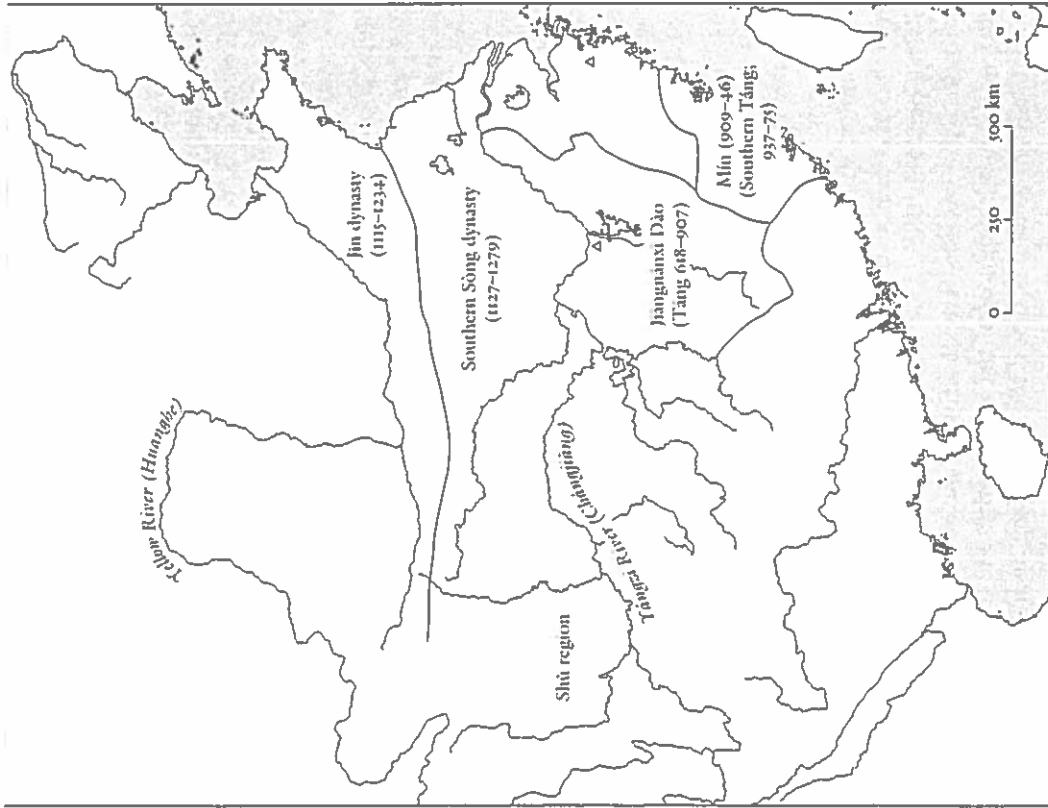
in which Chan masters are depicted in dialogue with their students.<sup>21</sup> Associated initially with such celebrated figures as Mazu Daoyi (709–88) and his successors Baizhang Huaihai (749–814), Nanquan Puyuan (748–834), and Linji Yixuan (d. 867), as well as Shitou Xiqian and his successors Dongshan Liangjī (807–69) and Caoshan Benji (840–901), this is when Chan appears to have become really Chan, when Chan masters seem to have really behaved like Chan masters. The anecdotes of middle Chan encounter dialogue represent the stories repeated most often in popular books on Chan/Zen as examples of paradoxical but enlightened behavior. Here the locus of religious practice was firmly removed from individual effort in the meditation hall and replaced by a demanding genre of interrogation that sought to destabilize all habitual, logical patterns. Spontaneity was the rule, iconoclastic behavior the norm.

Or so it seems. For here we will have to consider, not only the momentous import of encounter dialogue as the dominant model of religious undertaking, but also the difficult questions of *when* all this spontaneous interaction was actually being practiced and *what* precisely was going on. We will see that there is a substantial gap between when the most famous stories of Chan lore are supposed to have happened, and when we first see them in written form. We will also see that these stories have complex origins, bearing features of both oral and written literature. In the past scholars (myself included) have referred to the middle phase as the “golden age” or “classical period” of Chan. The first of these terms may easily be discarded for its romantic coloring.<sup>22</sup> The latter term may still be used, but only with the provision that what is being referred to is not some collection of activities and events that actually happened in the eighth through tenth centuries, but instead the retrospective re-creation of those activities and events, the imagined identities of the magical figures of the Tang, within the minds of Song dynasty Chan devotees. Mazu and the other Tang figures came to represent a classical age only when their time had passed, when their identities were redesigned to fit the needs of Song-dynasty Chan. Although middle Chan may be considered as a historical phase, “classical” Chan is itself a romantic depiction of activities from that phase within the later texts of encounter dialogue.

#### SONG-DYNASTY CHAN

The contours assumed by Chan Buddhism during the Song dynasty represent the mature pattern which defines the tradition up until the

modern period. Using an ecological metaphor, I refer to this pattern as a “climax paradigm,” which describes the dynamic equilibrium achieved by a mature forest or ecological system. Earlier writers (both scholarly and apologist) have tended to ignore this period, partly out of the wish to explore the more “creative” masters of the Tang, or to jump across the waters to emphasize the emerging Zen school of Japan. The Song has also been denigrated in general textbooks as the beginning of the decline of Chinese Buddhism, its ossification into institutional formalism. This attitude is changing, as Song-dynasty religion has become perhaps the primary focus of the study of premodern Chinese religion, by Euro-American scholars at least. And with this change our impression of Song-dynasty Chan has been transformed as well. It is now increasingly recognized that the Song dynasty witnessed the emergence of a basic configuration of Chan that was disseminated throughout East Asia, and now the world. This is apparent most dramatically in the life and teachings of Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), the innovator and greatest exponent of “viewing the critical phrase” or *kōan* practice in the history of Chinese Chan. But the picture of Song-dynasty Chan is not complete without looking closely at the style of meditative introspection advocated by Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091–1157) and other members of the Caodong lineage, evaluating their recommendations on their own terms and not simply in light of the polemical characterization by Dahui as mere “silent illumination.” Ultimately, we will see that the Linji and Caodong approaches present an inseparable pair that mimics the sudden/gradual debate of the eighth century, and which resonates with the “two entrances” of the treatise attributed to Bodhidharma. But this is to get ahead of our story. Let us now turn to the legendary account of Bodhidharma himself, to see how Chan Buddhism emerged in the first place.



MAP 2. Locations for Song-Dynasty Chan.