

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING:  
THE CH'AN BUDDHIST TRANSMISSION NARRATIVES  
AND MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

DALE S. WRIGHT

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the kind of historical understanding presupposed in the writing of classical Chinese Ch'an Buddhist "transmission" narratives and places this historical understanding into comparative juxtaposition with modern Western historiographic practice. It finds that fundamental to Chinese Ch'an historical awareness are genealogical metaphors structuring historical time and meaning in terms of generations of family relations and the practices of inheritance. These metaphors link the Ch'an historian to the texts of historical study in ways that contrast with the posture of modern historians. The essay outlines four basic differences between the self-understanding presupposed in Ch'an Buddhist historical writing and that assumed in modern historical research and concludes by suggesting how contemporary historical thinking might benefit from reflection on these differences.

In his *Studies in the History of the Early Ch'an School*,<sup>1</sup> the Zen historian, Yanagida Seizan, claims that the classic Ch'an "Lamp Histories" presuppose an orientation to history that differs significantly from that of the modern historians who now study them. Focusing on one such text, the classic *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp*,<sup>2</sup> compiled in 1004, this paper seeks to articulate an understanding of the character of historical awareness in Sung dynasty Ch'an Buddhism and to define the difference, suggested by Yanagida, between it and modern historiography.<sup>3</sup> Having done this, the paper will conclude with some reflections on what each historiographic tradition can learn from the other, and how historiographic understanding can be advanced in light of this learning.

The initial difficulty of this task is that, although this voluminous text is thoroughly historical in character, no "theory" of history is explicit in the text,

1. Yanagida Seizan, *Shoki zenshu shisho no kenkyu* (Kyoto, 1967), 18.

2. *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu*, Taisho vol. 51 (no. 2076), compiled by Tao-yuan and published in 1004. A partial English translation can be found in Chang Chung-yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York, 1969).

3. John C. Maraldo's essay "Is There Historical Consciousness Within Ch'an?" (*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12 [June-September, 1985], 141-172) is the first to raise questions of this kind about the Ch'an tradition. The present essay follows the course staked out by Maraldo's essay and is indebted to it in many ways.

nor, for that matter, anywhere else in Ch'an literature. Therefore, this paper begins with reflections on the language and formal structure of the text insofar as they enable us to define what understanding of history is presupposed in Ch'an transmission practices.

## I

The historical intention of records of the transmission of the lamp can be gleaned from its title: it consists of "records" (*lu*) of "transmission" (*ch'uan*) as seen from the perspective of a particular historical era—the Ching-te imperial era within the Northern Sung dynasty. What was being transmitted—a lamp and its light (*teng*)—was the fundamental aim of the tradition, enlightenment or "awakening." The overall narrative structure of the text, therefore, is a story of the origins and dissemination of "enlightened mind" beginning with the ancient Buddhas and continuing through Indian and Chinese patriarchs up to current recipients of transmission.<sup>4</sup> Temporal, chronological structure—earliest to most recent—is maintained throughout the text. Within this overarching historical framework, the actual content of the text employed to tell the story of mind transmission is religious biography.

The historical, narrative structure of the text is therefore twofold: biographical histories, themselves individually temporalized in a narrative order moving from birth through death, are placed within the overarching history of human enlightenment. The text's editors venture no reflections on sacred history as a whole—on its meaning, *telos*, or significance. Aside from genealogical charts that serve as periodic tables of content, all interesting detail enters the narrative on the level of individual history. This detail takes basically two forms. First, we are provided with essential biographical information at the beginning and then again at the end of each account. Typically we get an account of names, origins, early signs of brilliance, circumstances of ordination, and some account of the content of early monastic studies. At the end of biographies we often find a transmission *gatha* or poem, an account of the Ch'an master's death, its date, along with subsequent Imperial decrees concerning posthumous names, titles, and pagoda inscriptions.

Between these two extremes, however, is content even more pertinent to the transmission of mind—that is, narratives recounting particular events in the Ch'an master's life in which the power and efficacy of his "awakening" are clearly manifest.<sup>5</sup> These occasions are most often rhetorical occasions, discursive events that in one way or another display the character of enlightened mind. These stories, more than anything else in classical Ch'an, were understood to demon-

4. For an elaboration on this historical structure see John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu, 1986), 75.

5. Because all Ch'an Buddhist masters represented in the *Transmission of the Lamp* were men, this essay uses masculine gender pronouns when referring to the Buddhist saints of this time period. The essay employs inclusive gender references in all other cases.

strate what it means to be awakened. What this paper highlights, however, is the way in which these enlightened events receive their full meaning and significance only when placed within the overarching context of Ch'an history. Enlightenment is not figured as an isolated and unrelated event, nor just as an experience of eternity in the present moment. In each case enlightenment is an historical event located in a particular temporal, spatial context. My point here is simple: that the classical Ch'an interest in history is more central to their concerns than we have taken it to be and that beyond the Ch'an rhetoric of timelessness, we find historical contextualization to be central to their, self-understanding.

In order to specify further the role that history plays in classical Ch'an, we turn to the key metaphors and symbols that place people and events into temporal relation. How are historical connections construed in this text? Primarily, it seems, through a complex set of metaphors drawn from the domain of family genealogy. Most basic to this symbolic order is that Ch'an itself came to be understood as a "*tsung*," a word evolving out of the ancient Chinese sense of ancestry. Interesting work has been done on the concept of *tsung* by Yanagida, John McRae, and Griffith Foulk, especially on when and how Ch'an became a *tsung* and what that meant over time.<sup>6</sup> Pertinent to this paper is that in the most general and archaic sense *tsung* meant "ancestor" and came by extension to connote anything related to clan or family ancestry. It is clear that throughout the Sung and subsequent epochs, the term continued to carry deep pre-Buddhist religious connotations—ancestral spirits oversee and guide the clan. They are to be revered, followed, and honored; it was they who established the clan and made it what it is. In effect, the clan's identity is a gift of the ancestors; only through them can one understand what it is. Similarly, understanding Ch'an as a clanlike institution meant conceiving it in genealogical terms. Knowing what it meant to belong to the institution entailed knowing from whom it had been inherited, an historical knowledge transmitted and inculcated by means of narratives like the *Transmission of the Lamp*.

In effect, then, we can think of this text as analogous to a document of family history; it communicates a distinct Ch'an identity by means of significant family stories. Moreover, we see that family lineage and genealogy provide virtually all significant terms of relation within the Ch'an clan. Bodhidharma, the founding figure of the lineage, is called the "first ancestor" (*ch'u-tsu*), the patriarch of patriarchs.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent patriarchs are his "*dharma* heirs" (*fa-ssu*), each of whom can be located on distinct branches of the family tree. Relations among later Ch'an masters are also figured in genealogical terms, basic kinship titles such as uncle, nephew, and cousin, providing the overall framework. Words

6. See Yanagida, *Shoki zenshu shisho no kenkyu*; T. Griffith Foulk, *The "Ch'an School" and its Place in the Buddhist Monastic Tradition* (Ph.D dissertation, University of Michigan, 1987); and McRae, *The Northern School*.

7. Yanagida traces the Ch'an history of the term "patriarch" in *Shoki zenshu shisho no kenkyu*, 214. See also Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York, 1967), 1-23.

related to “inheritance” provide the primary symbols for patriarchal succession—the transmission of Ch’an mind from one generation to the next.<sup>8</sup>

The *Transmission of the Lamp* pictures the Ch’an master in constant search for an appropriate heir, someone who is seen as capable of being a “vessel” or “receptacle” of the *dharma*. The Chinese term here is “*ch’i*,” a sacred, ceremonial vessel used in ancient times to make ritual offerings to the ancestors. A *ch’i* is also a tool or instrument, something that exists for the sake of something else. In this case, the patriarchs exist for the sake of the *dharma* and of posterity. Like the ceremonial vessel, they receive, preserve, and transmit the substance of the sacred. *Dharma* transmission from one generation to the next is also figured as the impression made by a “seal” or “stamp” (*yin*) upon the mind and character of the inheritor. The so-called “mind seal” is imprinted upon the next generation’s practice and experience by virtue of long-standing co-practice under the guidance of the master. The Ch’an practice of issuing certificates of “inheritance” or “authorization” doubles this metaphor of the stamp through the use of an actual seal stamping a document certifying that the holder has in fact received the master’s seal upon his mind.

Occasional passages in the text allude to a sense of “debt” that inheritance accrues. Being selected and trained as an heir imposes enormous obligation and responsibility—a debt to be repaid. This responsibility is figured as a form of filial reverence that a descendant owes to the family lineage. “Confession” of this debt is common in the text, where a newly selected successor announces his gratitude and subsequent obligation to others in the lineage. The master warns the recipient not to “neglect posterity,” and that “inheriting the *dharma*” imposes an obligation to carry out the transmission as the ancestors had done. Being placed in a genealogy establishes relation not just to the past but to the future as well.<sup>9</sup> In order to feel this obligation to past and future generations, the inheritor must have a working understanding of the history of the lineage, not just knowing it but striving to embody it in act and discourse.

All of the genealogical terms that we see applied to patriarchal succession are applicable to the majority of practitioners who have not succeeded to the abbotship. They too stand in a concrete lineage location, they too inherit the *dharma* and pass it along to the next generation, primarily through the everyday teaching that socializes a new generation of monks. They are all “*Ch’an-tzu*,” “children of Ch’an,” raised by the family elders and socialized into the lineage. As the offspring of a particular master, raised in this monastic household rather than some other, they all manifest a distinct “family spirit” (*chia-feng*), the particular style of Ch’an behavior and rhetoric characteristic of the lineage.<sup>10</sup> Given the way in which sense of identity in Ch’an was structured upon models

8. Yanagida does a more extensive analysis of the vocabulary of Ch’an genealogy in “Shinzoku choshi no keifu,” *Zengaku kenkyu* 95 (1978). Heinrich Dumoulin draws upon this work in chapter 10 of *Zen Buddhism: A History* (New York, 1988).

9. For interesting reflections on themes related to past, present, and future generations, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago, 1988), III, especially 109–116.

10. Ricoeur elaborates on the relation between language and tradition in *ibid.*, 221.

and terms supplied by family life and lineage, it is not surprising to find that role models, socialization, and mimetic repetition were essential to the way in which Ch'an practice came to be understood. To practice Ch'an was to repeat the ancient, ancestral Buddha pattern, and in turn to have its stamp placed upon one's character and comportment.

A sub-thesis of this paper is that one of the most important forms of this repetition was the repeated retelling, rereading, and rethinking of Ch'an narratives like those in the *Transmission of the Lamp*. By means of mental repetition, narrative shapes the participant's self-identity. "Narrative selfhood" here means that who the monk becomes, how he fits himself into the world, is to a great extent shaped by the stories into which he has been socialized. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"<sup>11</sup> In the case of classical Ch'an this would be to say that personal identity or self-understanding was communicated only partly by doctrines concerning the self and much more by narratives, models, and precedents. Moreover, the doctrines themselves are integrally tied to the narratives and can be understood only in terms of particular exemplars described in narrative texts. As in other clans, the "Ch'an-tzu," the "children of Ch'an," come to understand who they are and what they are doing through the process of hearing and acting out the stories of Ch'an. Prior to the "practice of presence" are stories weaving the concept of presence into conscious understanding; prior to the practice of "zazen" are the narratives of *zazen* telling who did it, how, when, and to what effect. If this is so then narrative, historical identity would have been an essential component of enlightened identity. What I mean by this is that, although the Ch'an tradition did come to conceptualize and to represent the experience of "awakening" in vocabulary that expresses timelessness and an ahistorical ground, even more prominent in its representation are the genealogical, historical metaphors of relatedness that I have begun to describe here. Furthermore, the ahistorical concept of enlightenment comes to be situated under the overarching structure of genealogy such that belonging to the Ch'an clan becomes a background, stage-setting factor for the experience of enlightenment — a condition of its possibility. Since "awakening" was figured first and foremost as an "inheritance," the tradition naturally assumed that only well-socialized family members came into its possession. Thus enlightenment and historical understanding were integrally related.<sup>12</sup>

What is intriguing about the *Transmission of the Lamp* as an historical document is the extent to which it has been structured as a montage of earlier traditions, a characteristic which reveals something of the historical consciousness presupposed in it. Editors of the text have essentially gathered together all

11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1981), 216.

12. Modern interpreters, under the influence of the language of "universality," have ignored this genealogical dimension of "Zen," preferring instead to read it as an excellent example of the transcendence of tradition and history.

of the legends, stories, and other texts related to the key figures in the lineage. Then through substantial editing, rewriting, and repositioning, they have organized a new text and through it a revised understanding of the tradition. Furthermore, while drawing heavily on forebearing texts, the editors have made no effort at attribution. Innumerable bits and pieces of other texts are woven together into a new one without citation, quotation, or other devices that might credit the appropriate sources. In addition, editors seem very little concerned over the accuracy or legitimacy of their sources. Epistemological concerns—how do we know that this story about Ma-tsu really did occur—seem to be subordinate interests at best. From our modern perspective, what we notice is that objective authentication of sources is not the reigning criterion of inclusion. What seems to matter is not where the story came from but how good it is and how well it might serve the purposes of transmission. This realization pushes us toward the question: Were these editors really historians, and if so, what kind?<sup>13</sup>

## II

When Yanagida wrote that the sense of history among Sung “lamp historians” was different from that of modern historiography—of which he himself is a practitioner—what concerned him was the extent to which classical Ch’an historians seemed to ignore pertinent data in order to construct their own history. How, he wonders, is the Zen tradition to reconcile these constructions with the discoveries of modern historians?<sup>14</sup> Yanagida’s dilemma parallels in many ways the situation of modern Christian historians who have had to live in the tension between traditional doctrine and a series of historical realizations about the texts which have served to establish that doctrine. But, as Yanagida suggests, we would miss the productive point of this tension altogether if we were to construe it as an epistemological issue about the accuracy of the traditional narratives. The difference between modern and classical Ch’an historical consciousness goes much deeper. It concerns fundamental differences, in self-conception, in relation to tradition, and in what history is taken to be. In order to articulate these differences, we will need to ask: From what understanding of history could texts such as the *Transmission of the Lamp* and our own modern histories about those texts, have derived? How does the Ch’an historian’s relation to history differ from that of the modern historian?

Although the differences between these distinct traditions could be shaped in any number of forms and in varying degrees of specificity, I will here characterize the contrast in terms of four basic points.

First, the Ch’an historian sees himself and his own text as standing in continuity to the tradition. Because he “recapitulates” and “hands down” what has

13. See McRae, *The Northern School*, 10–11 on “the distinction between legend and history.”

14. For an interesting characterization of modern Japanese Zen historiography see Foulk, *The “Ch’an School”*, chapter one.

already been handed down to him, his text stands in full continuity with its sources. Modern historians, by contrast, draw a line of separation between the object of study and their own texts about that object. The modern history of Buddhism is not to be considered a reenactment of that tradition.

Second, feeling this sense of continuity, the Ch'an historian acts as a participant, fully engaged by the stories he transmits. He assumes that the literature of the tradition addresses him directly. Stories about past actualities are taken to be current possibilities, fully applicable to the historian in his own context. Modern historians shift the context of understanding. The text is to be understood, not in relation to the historian in his or her context, but in relation to its original context in another time and place. Bracketing out the present context of meaning, the modern historian describes what the text once meant to others.

Third, the Ch'an historian hopes to be freely and thoroughly influenced by the tradition he writes about. Because the text at hand, no matter how ancient in origin, is assumed to be fully applicable to his own context, his posture towards it is responsive, not just open but eager to undergo whatever influence it bears. His ideal is that the language and character of the text have been imprinted upon and joined to his own language and character. Modern historians, by contrast, make a commitment to avoid that influence on the thought that it might invalidate the history that they have written. The principle of objectivity requires that the historian's voice remain distinct from and not overlap with that of the text. The line between what the Buddhist text asserts and what the modern historian asserts about it must in every instance remain clear. While the Buddhist historian strives to learn *from* the text, the modern historian is content to learn *about* it.

Fourth, the Ch'an historian assumes the overriding truth of the Buddhist tradition and takes himself to be fully accountable for the recapitulation of that truth. His text is not just a report on what other Buddhists once said, but also what he, the historian, now says. Thus accountable, the stories he transmits must in some way accord with the current "sense of the *dharma*." Whenever they don't, the stories are either omitted from the new text or appropriately altered.

Modern historians understand truth primarily as representational accuracy. They seek to know what the text really did say in its own context and to describe how people in that epoch really did use it. This task requires that they bracket, at least for the time being, all opinions about whether what was accurately reported is, in fact, true. Modern historians assume that their own views on its truth are irrelevant and that it simply isn't the historian's job to consider that question.

From the perspective of the modern historian, the procedures of the Ch'an historian are flawed to the point of producing "bad history." Lacking sufficient distance from the tradition, the Ch'an historian fails to describe the tradition accurately because the position from which his text is written conjoins and confuses how it was with how it is.

The weakness, however, of Ch'an historical consciousness is not just that it alters the data available to historical narrative. It is rather that its underlying assumptions and desires concerning the continuity and coherence of the tradition structure for the historian a perspective from which the "otherness" and the "disjunctions" of the tradition cannot be seen. If current practitioners model themselves on the ancients *and* the ancients are updated to fit the current image of "awakening," then no fundamental difference remains between the past and the present. The figure of the ancestors evolves along with the understanding of what "enlightenment" could mean to the extent that each new generation projects its highest aspirations onto the ancestors. Thus the ancestors always represent what the current practitioner could conceivably become even though that conception changes over time. Lacking a way to represent the "otherness" of the tradition to itself, the Ch'an historian has no perspective from which the present understanding can be criticized.<sup>15</sup> Practitioners, therefore, live out of a partially mistaken and typically precritical understanding of their own tradition. As a modern Zen historian, Yanagida Seizan stands within the first generation of practitioners to correct this defect by adopting the methods and procedures of modern, critical historiography.

### III

However, critique can run in the opposite direction as well—a critique of modern historical consciousness from the perspective of classical Ch'an. What can an understanding of the classical Ch'an sense of history show us about our own practice of historiography and the understanding of history upon which it is based? Two brief suggestions along these lines are salient.

First, compared to the Ch'an tradition, our historical practices demonstrate very little sense of belonging to a tradition. We imagine ourselves tradition-free observers, representing no particular point of view and responsible to no one. On this point, however, we are mistaken. Like Ch'an Buddhists, we do, in fact, stand within a tradition and write out of a contextualized point of view. Although lack of self-understanding on this issue does not mean that we stand nowhere, it does mean that the quality and depth of our stance in study is significantly diminished. Knowing where you stand is important, as is understanding the relation between where you stand and what you study. In conse-

15. This account is overstated in order to highlight one side of a more complex interaction. The texts did in fact serve as an ancient perspective from which the present historical moment could be criticized. This would have been so in several important respects. But at least two factors diminished the extent to which this "difference" between past and present could be recognized. The first, suggested above, is that the texts were altered to bring them into accord with the language and thought of the present era. Thus their "otherness" was erased whenever it seemed to protrude. The second is that, even when the text was not altered, the overriding assumption that past and present are in full correspondence sets up the likelihood that whatever the text says will be given a new and current sense rather than being seen as a "difference" demanding critical judgment between former and current points of view.



quence of our view, we weaken the relation to tradition that we do inevitably have.<sup>16</sup>

Second, studying the various kinds of relationship between reader and text in the classical Ch'an tradition may bring to our attention a weakness in the extent of reflexivity or self-awareness that we bring to our study. This weakness is a consequence of the modern inclination to take natural science as the model toward which humanistic study should aspire. Valorizing objective disengagement, modern historical studies of Buddhism tend not to relate the Buddhist text at issue and its context to the context of the interpreter. Thus isolated, Buddhist texts tend not to serve as the impetus to seek a deeper understanding of the positions and assumptions out of which our work proceeds nor as encouragement to discover what of significance could be learned "from" these texts. We proceed, in effect, as if we aren't really involved. In this respect the narratives we tell about ourselves are underdeveloped.<sup>17</sup> They fail to locate us in a productive relation to the text, one through which we might be provoked by the text, either to understand more deeply our own position, or to rethink, revise, or expand it. A reflexive relation to the text takes advantage of whatever light the text can shed on its reader. When this reflexive relation is lacking or weak, the very rationale for historical study has become obscured. As the Ma-tsu section of the *Transmission of the Lamp* asserts, the most important answers to our questions about Buddhism can be discovered only in self-conscious relation to "the one who is doing the questioning."

#### IV

Although the deficiencies highlighted in this paper in both traditions of historiography are at this level of description polar opposites of one another, they can also be understood to share a fundamental similarity: both the Ch'an Buddhist and the modern Western historical traditions deny implicitly some dimension of the impermanence of history, the radical mutability of temporal movement. Although the Buddhist tradition highlights the deficiency of the present—its unsatisfactory character due to which the ancestral Buddhas need be consulted and imitated—it is unable to consider critically the deficiencies of the past or the possible inapplicability of past truths to present contingencies. And although modern historians understand very clearly the deficiency of the past—the relativity of "outmoded" ideas and practices to their own historical context—they tend to assume the universality and noncontextual truth of their own modern ideas and practices of historiography. One tradition—the Buddhist—experi-

16. "Modern historical research itself is not only research, but the transmission of tradition." H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), 253. Gadamer's work is the primary source for the concepts of "tradition" and "historicity" operative in this paper. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry—Encyclopedia, Genealogy, Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1990).

17. For a critique of modern historiography on this point see Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1983).

ences the lack or absence of the present in relation to the fullness of the enlightened past, while the other — the modern — maintains that, whereas the full presence of true historical knowledge is now possible, it appears not to have been so in the past.

In both traditions, therefore, one dimension of time stands exempt from the negativity of historical finitude. Locating a kind of historical understanding that overcomes these particular deficiencies is thus a matter of learning to avoid these exemptions. Working toward this kind of self-awareness in our study would, in effect, constitute work toward the development of a new and more encompassing criterion of truth for historical reflection.

Because each tradition of historiography evolves within its own cultural tradition and upon the conceptual and practical bases supplied for it by other dimensions of culture, it should not be surprising that each places its focus differently and orients itself to past, present, and future in a distinct way. The possibility of a significant transformation of historical consciousness in each of these cultures is greatly enhanced in the current setting by the availability of different traditions of historical reflection in relation to which each tradition can understand, evaluate, and critique itself.

Already the social, cultural ramifications of the rethinking of both Chinese history and the practice of historiography in China in light of their encounter with Marxist and other forms of Western historical reflection have been immense. Signs now exist that some form of alteration has begun to occur in Western historical thinking as a result in part of the twentieth-century encounter with the rest of the world. These signs are promising, indeed, exciting. They push historical imagination to consider possibilities hitherto closed to thinking. However, it would be a mistake (in fact a mistake symptomatic of the modern tendency to exempt its own standpoint from contextualization) to regard this present activity of placing two traditions of historiography in critical relation to one another as itself occupying a position outside of and “beyond” those traditions. In a finite, diverse, and historical world, “nontraditional” and all-encompassing theories of history are not possible. What is possible, however, is that through the encounter with other cultures and epochs, particular traditions of historical reflection will become in some way richer, more comprehensive, more self-critical, and more applicable towards cultural ends which are themselves open to similar transformation.

*Occidental College*