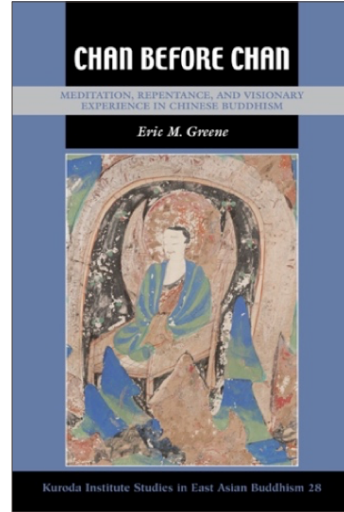


Book Review

Eric M. Greene. *Chan Before Chan: Meditation, Repentance, and Visionary Experience in Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021.



Eric M. Greene's *Chan Before Chan: Meditation, Repentance, and Visionary Experience in Chinese Buddhism* is among the most intellectually stimulating books on Chinese Buddhism published in the last decades. While many scholars moved forward in time during this period, from the Tang Dynasty to studies of Song and—since recently—also Ming Buddhism, Greene *moved backward*, investigating the roots of the Chan School which emerged roughly in the beginning of the eighth century. This study has been long overdue, since the early Chan School was excessively studied based on Dunhuang (and other) materials during the second part of the twentieth century, first by Japanese scholars, and eventually also by Western and Chinese scholars. However, the period before ca. 700 and the religious and sociocultural factors which eventually made Chan possible have largely remained a dark corner in scholarship, despite various studies on the corpus of so-called 'meditation sūtras'. Fortunately, Greene has ventured to shed light on many of the issues involved in the complex processes which finally led to formation of entities which we can refer to as 'Chan schools' and which over the course of time matured into powerful religious and cultural institutions, eventually impacting all

regions of East Asia.

Greene's approach is multi-faceted, including meticulous philological studies of key texts from various genres and types, in addition to applying up-to-date theoretical frameworks to contextualize the insights gained from the close study of primary sources.

In the Introduction, Greene elaborates on the theoretical aspects and the structure of the book, and informs the reader that he will approach the topic as a social event, with a focus on the term semiotic ideology (14),¹ and he states the '[t]his book therefore approaches the practice of Buddhist meditation in medieval Chinese as a matter of sign reading' (16). What this concretely means is demonstrated in the following chapters.

In Chapter One, based on a close reading of historical sources, Greene argues that the 'social and cultural' life of meditation (see especially the section on 'The Formation of a Social Field Meditation', 54f.) in China did not develop before the beginning of the fifth century, although Chinese Buddhists were introduced to the term *chan* 禪 at an earlier date. However, only from ca. 400 onward did meditation enter identifiable social structures, with designated roles of teachers and *authoritative* and verifiable practices. Parallel to these developments, the term *chan* also started to be encountered in various new contexts, referring, for example, to defined spaces where the practice of meditation was carried out (42f.). In addition to the information extracted from historical/hagiographical texts, Greene also supports his arguments with the study of material objects, such as an inscription on the walls of a fifth-century Bingling cave 炳灵寺石窟, being—probably—the earliest witness of a reference to a 'Chan master' (*chanshi* 禪師). The increasingly frequent use of the term also signaled the emergence of the meditation master as a social category (28).

The second chapter turns our attention to the emergence of 'Chan scriptures' (*chanjing* 禪經), with a focus on the 'confirmative visions' which were interpreted as verifiable signs of spiritual attainment, as well as the teacher who had the authority to interpret them. Here, Greene also convincingly argues for the use of the term 'vision' rather than

¹ Adapted from Keane, 'On Semiotic Ideology'.

‘visualization’ (more commonly used in scholarship). Visualization implies a ‘causative’ process, concretely referring to the notion of generating visions; however, although the practitioner might focus on or contemplate (*guan* 觀) a particular object, the resulting visions often are of an ‘unanticipated nature’ (80). The chapter also includes a very interesting section reflecting on theoretical implications, ‘The Semiotics of Meditative Experience’ and ‘The Affordances of the Semiotic Form’. While the former section elaborates on the symbolic features of meditative vision, in the latter section, Greene broadens his approach and supplements his textual sources with references to ‘Paintings of Meditative Attainment’ (exemplified by murals from Toyok, Turfan).

Chapter Three follows up on these notions in the socioreligious context of the fifth century, embedding meditation practice in an ethical context. As is shown, meditation is not necessarily an individual practice performed in solitude, but ‘meditative experiences’ can reveal—when mediated by the teacher—important information on the practitioner and their relative purity or impurity. Seen from this perspective, meditation is closely related to purification practices aimed to relieve the practitioner from karmic bondages. The fourth chapter elaborates on these related practices, with a focus on repentance rituals (*chanhui* 懺悔). The chapter is also very helpful for gaining a better understanding of the texts of the early Chan School (eighth century) in which the notion of *chanhui* is frequently mentioned but not elaborated on.

In the last chapter, ‘From *chan* to Chan’, Greene relates his findings to the emergence of the early Chan School 禪宗 around 700 when important paradigm shifts took place. Here, he sees a dramatic re-interpretation of meditative experiences, which are ‘...never signs of consequential attainment and hence never valid evidence that someone is a true “master of meditation”...’ (205–06). There are many factors which defined the rise of the Chan School; one of them significant in the context of the book is the rejection of the corpus of earlier *chan* scriptures. In this last part of the book, the author provides several examples from early scriptures of the Chan School, aptly illustrating the new developments taking place from ca. 700 onward, completing his account of the development from ‘*chan* to Chan’.

Greene's publication clearly *stands out* among the many publications on various aspects of Chan Buddhism published during the last decades by Western scholars. In my opinion, his approach can serve as an inspiring model for graduate students and established scholars alike. What especially caught my attention is the *thoroughness* of his approach. *Philological depth* must always be the foundation and precondition of all text-centered studies. However, Greene manages to bring this philology to life by combining it with a simple but intriguing theoretical model, as well as by drawing on additional evidence in the form of visual sources.

Bibliography

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