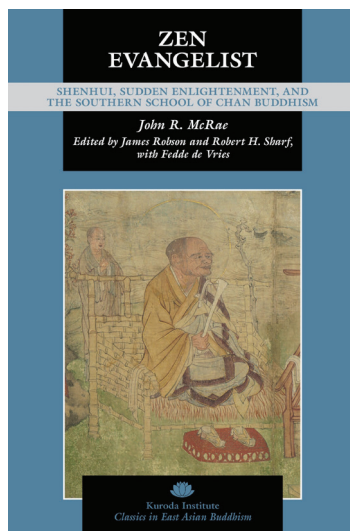


Book Review

John R. McRae. *Zen Evangelist: Shenhui, Sudden Enlightenment, and the Southern School of Chan Buddhism*. Edited by James Robson and Robert H. Sharf, with Fedde de Vries. Kuroda Classics in East Asian Buddhism Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023. 360 pp.



John McRae's (1947–2011) book on Shenhui 神會 (684–758) became a legend even before its publication. Now, we finally have this posthumous book with John's meticulous annotated translation and several of his reprinted articles on the subject, thanks to the editorial guidance of two capable Zen experts and the help of the graduate assistant Fedde de Vries who adopted a conservative approach to consolidate John's manuscript. What is not included are John's analytical chapters, though some of the relevant materials have been incorporated in the notes.

Peter Gregory's foreword summarizes nicely John's involvement and connection with the Kuroda Institute, which sponsored the publication of the present book. John was a major player and supporter of the institute, and played an essential role in a series of important meetings that the institute organized. James Robson and Robert Sharf also introduced the history of this manuscript and summarized the contents of the book. John had been working on the translation for several decades and delayed the publication multiple times.

Early Chan master Shenhui is perhaps one of the most important Chan teachers in shaping the teaching and practice of the entire

Chan tradition in East Asia. Claiming to be the seventh patriarch after the founding patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638–713), Shenhui authored several important works, only extant in manuscript form, which were buried in the Dunhuang caves until their discovery in the 1920s and 1930s by Chinese scholar, intellectual, and politician Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962), a group of Japanese scholars, and French scholars (mostly Jacques Gernet). Because of this loss, the received Chan historiography simply bypassed him and even condemned his teaching based on a distorted understanding of some of his remaining texts. Since the recovery of his works, including sermons, collected dialogues, polemical essays, and even popular rhymed songs and hymns, which often have several versions of the manuscript as textual witnesses, Chinese and Japanese scholars have dedicated themselves to annotating, collating, and publishing these lost texts. The significance of Shenhui's work lies in the fact that Shenhui led a major debate with the proponents of the so-called Northern School 北宗 and claimed to have established the Southern School 南宗 represented by Huineng as the orthodox successor of Bodhidharma's Chan tradition. Many of his thoughts resonate with the content in Huineng's *Platform Sūtra* (Ch. *Tanjing* 壇經), which was not even mentioned in Shenhui's various works, indicating the possibility that Shenhui or his associates might have been involved in the reinvention of Huineng and the finalization of Huineng's *Platform Sūtra*. Hu Shi, in particular, made the study and collation of Shenhui's works his lifetime endeavour, a rare choice for a liberal pioneer in modern Chinese intellectual history who obviously had a deeply rooted rationalist agenda, as John points out in the articles included in this book.

John's contribution is to bring Shenhui's texts and his significance to the English-speaking world, which lacks a thorough and reliable rendition of these works as the basis for further research. The Introduction, reprinted from John's previously published article 'Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment in Early Ch'an Buddhism', offers the most comprehensive introduction to Shenhui's life, his rediscovered works from Dunhuang, and their textual editions, thought, and religious and historical contexts. Part I of this book includes John's English translations of all discovered texts attributed to Shenhui from Dunhuang. These texts are *Platform*

Sermon (Tanyu 壇語), *Definition of the Truth (Nanzong ding shifei lun 南宗定是非論)*, *Miscellaneous Dialogues (Wenda zazheng yi 問答雜徵義)*, *Verses on the Five Watches (Wugengzhuan 五更轉)*, and *Verses on Sudden Enlightenment, the Birthless, and Prajna (Dunwu wusheng bore song 頓悟無生般若頌)*. The provenance and information on the edition of these texts are explained in an appendix on Textual Sources (301–07). Part II includes two of John’s previously published papers on this subject: ‘Religion as Revolution: Hu Shih on Shenhui’s Role in Chan’ critically examines Hu Shi’s scholarship on Shenhui and situates Hu Shi’s endeavour in his thought and modern Chinese intellectual history; ‘Shenhui as Evangelist: Re-envisioning the Identity of a Chinese Buddhist Monk’ introduces Shenhui with a fresh look and a new definition of his identity as an ‘evangelist’.

John was a meticulous scholar, and his translation is based on a solid reading of Dunhuang manuscripts with the help of previous scholars such as Hu Shi, D. T. Suzuki 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966), Yang Zengwen 楊曾文, and Kinugawa Kenji 依川賢次. John has assimilated many of their insights and accepted corrections and rearrangement of the manuscripts. The editors of this book have explained well in the preface and introduction the conception and evolution of the many versions of this book until John’s passing in 2011.

Despite the minor issues and my quibbles regarding the translation of technical terms, which I do not need to include here, the whole translation is very reliable. My only major disagreement is John’s rendering of *zong* 宗 as ‘doctrine’, which can be further discussed, as it is a crucial term for Chan teaching. With this positive evaluation in mind, I do want to caution readers about the nature of such translations from highly variegated and fragmented manuscripts, rather than from often well-collated and stable printed texts. John has inherited this convention from his Japanese teachers, especially from Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, who are looking for a final, fixed, standard version of the text (Ch. *dingben*, Jp. *teihon* 定本). In this process, the editors performed reasonable manipulation of the texts, such as substituting corrupted, illegible, or even incomprehensible characters and phrases, realigning paragraphs and text blocks, reconciling differences from different manuscript editions,

sometimes minor but sometimes quite significant, according to what they thought to be logical and reasonable. However, Shenhui's extant manuscript editions are extremely fluid and unstable, and make researchers doubt if such a final and fixed edition ever existed or can be reproduced in translation. John has done his best to keep these introduced changes from various scholars in the ample footnotes, which are highly valuable for future research. It should be noted that John has his own arrangement for the texts and paragraph division, especially in *Miscellaneous Dialogues*, for which he most closely followed the Paris edition (Pelliot 3047), differing significantly from what Chinese scholar Yang Zengwen has done by following Ishii Mitsuo's 石井光雄 edition. (For the explanation and chart of these text alignments, see 304–07.)

No matter how carefully John and other translators approached these texts in their original manuscript form, something significant will be lost in translation. First is the language itself, especially the colloquial aspect which Shenhui's text often displays, although it has been duly recognized in John's notes. Second is related to the style of these early Chan texts, as they themselves created a unique type of Chan literature marked by sermon, verses, and dialogues. John was quite sensitive to this and often distinguished between the medieval Chan and early Chan with the emergence of the style of encounter dialogue (*jiyuan wenda* 機緣問答), which also had traces in Shenhui's texts. Third, the entire paleographical aspect, one of the essential physical presentations of these manuscripts, cannot be fully reflected in the translation. This is an area often neglected by traditional Chinese and Japanese scholars, who emphasize the religious and intellectual meaning of the content of the manuscripts rather than the social dimension of the texts, because these different versions were obviously manufactured, consumed, and circulated. Paleographical information such as their formats in scrolls or small hand-held stitched booklet format, and various marginalia, among other features, can divulge interesting information about the producers and users of these texts, who were likely Shenhui's followers who quickly disappeared in later times. My point here is not to highlight the shortcomings of John's translation or traditional translation practice in general. It is rather a call for the scholars of Chan studies

to reconsider the conventional practice of annotated translation and to consider what should be included when dealing with more fluid texts like Dunhuang manuscripts. Maybe the whole idea of *dingben* or *teihon* should be abandoned and replaced with the juxtaposition of translations with different directions and scenarios.

John's two articles are great examples of critical analysis of complex texts and their historical situations concerning religion. As always in his style, they are provocative and insightful. They have been previously published but it appears that some ideas presented may not have been final. His critique of Hu Shi is eye-opening. But it may be too harsh to call someone like Hu Shi 'fundamentally flawed', 'superficial', or 'intellectually unhealthy'. Rereading Hu Shi's work on Shenhui today, one can still feel Hu Shi's character between the lines and admire him as a sincere, serious, careful, and sometimes mischievous scholar, with his concern for the fate of China. John's second article explained the reason why he would like to identify Shenhui as an 'evangelist'.

The use of these Christian terms (among others like 'apostle' and 'crusade' in John's articles) shows the lack of an academic category in the field of Chan studies to describe the phenomena with which we are dealing. Although the analogy is obvious, the direct use of these terms to describe a Chan teacher still begs questions. However, John has pioneered a new comparative methodology borrowed from early Christian studies, which most Chan scholars have neglected. The similarity and analogy between the rise of Chan and the Christian movements, especially the Jesus movement in early Christianity, are striking and may generate fruitful results in further research. Readers should also be aware that John has the tendency to reduce Shenhui's Chan teaching to a mere rhetorical device to assert his orthodoxy. His assumption that Chan records should be 'journalistically accurate accounts of actual words and events' (241) may also be a skewed starting point for approaching these early Chan texts.

Overall, I recommend this book in the highest regard. It is the best way to commemorate the loss of an eminent Chan scholar. For those who do not read classical Chinese, John's translation offers a reliable and readable edition to be added to the 'Zen Canon' for contemporary users. For those who can read classical Chinese, John's extensive

notes provide valuable guides and examples for reading early Chan texts. They should be read together with other critical editions in Chinese and Japanese, as well as with other early Chan texts, such as the Dunhuang editions of the *Platform Sutra* and Northern Chan texts.

P. S. I have personal memories of John and received his helpful and critical comments in my research. I remember that during a session at the 2000 American Academy of Religion meeting, he called me out and inquired about my research. I walked out with trepidation and didn't remember what I said to him. He seemed to be very interested in my research and generously read my manuscript. After reading the manuscript, he sent me a long comment, suggesting it was not ready to be published. After thorough revision, John was quite pleased with the final product entitled *Enlightenment in Dispute*. His expectation of his own book was even greater with his high standard of scholarship. Rest in peace, John. Your torch will be carried on by the next generation of Chan scholars.

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