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RITUAL AUTHORITY AND THE PROBLEM OF LIKENESS IN CHAN BUDDHISM

The rise of the Chan 禪 (J. Zen) tradition to dominate elite monastic Buddhism in China during the Song dynasty (960–1279) coincided with, and participated in, a turning point in Chinese Buddhist history. From the first arrival of Buddhist texts and objects to China during the Eastern Han (25–220) through the Tang dynasty (618–907), the ultimate wellspring of Buddhist authority was by and large attributed to the figure of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Even Mahayana sutras, which often placed a larger pantheon of cosmic buddhas and bodhisattvas in positions of authority, typically centered around sermons attributed to Śākyamuni as remembered by his disciple Ānanda. The esteem in which the Buddha Śākyamuni was held is reflected not only in the time, effort, and resources poured into the translation into Chinese of Indian Buddhist scriptures claiming to record these sermons,[1] but also in the proliferation of apocryphal Buddhist sutras authored by Chinese Buddhists who viewed putting their

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[1] See Funayama Tōru 船山徹, *Butten wa dō kan'yaku sareta no ka: Sūtora ga kyōten ni naru toki* 仏典はどう漢訳されたのか——スートラが経典になるとき (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2013).

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words into the mouth of the Buddha as the best route to authorizing doctrinal innovation.[2]

But the Song dynasty witnessed a waning of both translation activity and the production of new apocrypha.[3] Instead, there emerged an unprecedented outpouring of openly indigenous Chinese Buddhist literature, much of which was written by elite Buddhist monastics belonging to the Chan tradition. Chan discourse records (*yulu* 語錄) and other novel genres of text circulated widely among Buddhist monastics, government officials, and cultural elites or literati. The collection of these records into massive "lamp collections" (*denglu* 燈錄; sometimes called "flame histories"), which gathered biographies and records of teaching for members of Chan lineages, displaced the older, more ecumenical collections of "eminent monk" and "eminent nun" biographies that had been repeatedly compiled in China from the sixth to tenth centuries.[4]

Over the last several decades, a number of scholars have proposed that by the Song dynasty, Chan masters were treated like Chinese buddhas. Yet the idea is not exactly intuitive. Buddhas were traditionally represented visually and textually as spectacular beings with distinctive bodily forms, whose activities were often accompanied by miraculous portents. Chan masters in the Song, by contrast, were seldom said to possess these features. Moreover, even a cursory glance through Chan literature from the period makes clear that the style in which Chan discourse records and lamp collections are written bears little resemblance to any Buddhist scripture. Indeed, Chan Buddhists are famous for inventing a radically novel rhetorical style, which they deployed in both ritual and literary settings, whose use of quasi-vernacular Chinese in place of the often stilted Chinese of translated Buddhist scriptures helped the tradition appeal to contemporary literati. This new style was doubtless a key ingredient in the Chan tradition's rise to prominence. But in recognizing this fact, we are left to

[2] On Chinese Buddhist apocrypha, see Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮, *Gikyō kenkyū* 疑經研究 (Kyoto: Kyōto Daigaku Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūjo, 1976); and Robert E. Buswell Jr., ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

[3] As Kyoko Tokuno notes, "although the manuscript period witnessed the continuous production of indigenous [apocryphal] scriptures, once printing began, virtually all prospects for circulating new indigenous scriptures were eliminated." Tokuno, "The Evaluation of Indigenous Scriptures in Chinese Buddhist Bibliographical Catalogues," in Buswell, *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, 32.

[4] Ishii Shūdō 石井修道, *Sōdai Zenshū shi no kenkyū: Chūgoku Sōtōshū to Dōgen Zen* 宋代禅宗史の研究: 中国曹洞宗と道元禅 (Tokyo: Daitō shuppansha, 1987), 1–6; John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 136–38; and Koichi Shinohara, "Evolution of Chan Biographies of Eminent Monks," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient* 85 (1998): 305–24. I sketch these trends in broad strokes, not to suggest that Chan and its literature supplanted all other Chinese Buddhist traditions and genres of writing but to underscore Chan's significance in reshaping the landscape of elite Chinese Buddhism.

explain how Chan Buddhists bridged the gap between rhetorical novelty and the age-old idea of buddhahood as a uniquely authoritative status ascribed only to a very select few individuals.

The stylistic unlikeness of Chan literature to Buddhist scriptures might have been connected to the Chan tradition's self-proclaimed identity as a "separate transmission outside the [scriptural] teachings" (*jiaowai biechuan* 教外別傳).[5] The notion of Chan as a "separate transmission" implied that Chan lineage members all inherited a special mind-to-mind transmission of the Dharma's wordless essence, passed down—independently of the sermons that comprise the Buddhist scriptural canon—from the Buddha himself to each successive generation of patriarchs and finally to the multibranched Chan lineages of the Tang and Song periods. Given this proverbial separation of Chan from the scriptural tradition, it stands to reason that when they did speak, Chan masters spoke in a language all their own rather than in the same words as the Buddha Śākyamuni—even if, in doing so, they often had recourse to established Mahayana doctrinal concepts. But by itself, the trope of spiritual genealogy does not imply that each Chan lineage member was authorized to speak as a full-fledged buddha. On the contrary, the trope of separately transmitting a wordless mental essence of the Dharma implies that (unlike the Buddha himself) Chan masters ought properly to remain silent. The Chan tradition's massive literary output, consisting in large part of spoken words attributed to Chan masters, hints that the trope of a "separate transmission" only partly explains Chan identity and its connection to buddhahood.[6]

On what grounds, then, could Chan masters in the Song have been treated as full-fledged buddhas? How did Chan Buddhists succeed in endowing their new rhetorical style with buddha-like authority? An important context in which to seek out answers to these questions is the Chan ritual of "ascending the hall" (*shangtang* 上堂). As Song period Chan lineage members were appointed to the abbacies of some of China's largest and most esteemed public monasteries, this ceremony became an essential feature of Chan monastic life and an integral component of Chan literature. During the ceremony, abbots of public Chan monasteries ascended a raised platform at the front of the Dharma hall before the entire monastic assembly (and, depending on the occasion, sometimes government officials and lay patrons) in order to deliver a sermon and answer questions from members of the audience. Ascending the hall ceremonies seem to have taken place roughly every five days during the

[5] See T. Griffith Foulk, "Sung Controversies Concerning the 'Separate Transmission' of Ch'an," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 220–94.

[6] See Kevin Buckelew, "Becoming Chinese Buddhas: Claims to Authority and the Making of Chan Buddhist Identity," *T'oung Pao* 105, nos. 3–4 (2019): 357–400.

Song, and literary representations of this ceremony fill Chan discourse records and lamp collections.[7]

On the page and on the stage, it was during the ascending the hall ceremony that Chan masters publicly "play[ed] the role of a living Buddha," as T. Griffith Foulk remarks.[8] The idea that Chan masters ascending the hall ought to be ritually worshiped like living buddhas helped sanction the treatment of Chan discourse records, which always included many sermons and dialogues said to have been recorded during performances of this ceremony, as conveying Buddhist teachings of the highest authority—indeed, as authoritatively equivalent to inherited Buddhist scriptures.[9]

But how, exactly, did Chan Buddhists convince anyone that they deserved such exalted treatment? After all, before the rise of Chan there was little precedent in China for attributing the lofty status of buddhahood to legendary figures, let alone living people.[10] In their influential coauthored article on the ritual culture of Chan portraiture, Foulk and Robert H. Sharf suggest that clues to answering this question can be found in the ritual dynamics of the ascending the hall ceremony itself:

> The exalted religious status associated with the rank of "abbot" or "venerable" is vividly manifest in the ritual known as "ascending the hall" (*shang-t'ang*)—perhaps the single most important rite performed by abbots of public monasteries in the Sung period. During this rite the abbot, accompanied by much pomp and ceremony, would ascend an ornate throne (the "high seat" or "*dhyāna* seat") installed on an altar in the center of the dharma hall. After receiving obeisance and offerings from the community, the abbot delivered a short and highly mannered sermon which was meant to signify the spontaneous discourse of an awakened Buddha. The significance of this

[7] On the frequency of the ascending the hall ceremony's performance in Song period Chan monasteries, see Yifa, *The Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes in China: An Annotated Translation and Study of the "Chanyuan qinggui"* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 266–67 n. 1.

[8] T. Griffith Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice in Sung Ch'an Buddhism," in *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 147–208, quote on 177. Robert H. Sharf writes in similar terms: "The abbot's primary religious duty consists in ritually enacting the role of Buddha." Sharf, "The Idolization of Enlightenment: On the Mummification of Ch'an Masters in Medieval China," *History of Religions* 32, no. 1 (1992): 6.

[9] Like other Chinese Buddhists, Chan lineage members serving as abbots of public monasteries performed many other kinds of rituals apart from the ascending the hall ceremony. But it was this ceremony, I argue, that most centrally defined Chan identity. For this reason, I sometimes use the term "Chan ritual" to refer to the ritual culture of the ascending the hall ceremony in particular. On the larger ritual culture of Song period Chinese Buddhism, see Daniel B. Stevenson, "Buddhist Ritual in the Song," in *Modern Chinese Religion I: Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan (960–1368 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 328–448.

[10] For analysis of the several precedents we do find, see Buckelew, "Becoming Chinese Buddhas," 369–83.

rite, in which the abbot ascended an altar functionally homologous to the altar occupied by a Buddha icon, was unambiguous: the abbot was rendered the spiritual equal of a Tathāgata ["thus-come one," an honorific title of the Buddha].[11]

In response to the question of how Chan masters might have come to be treated as buddhas, Foulk and Sharf here propose the mechanism of ritual substitution. "According to the ritual logic of Sung Buddhist monasteries," they go on to write, "the icon of the Buddha, the living person of the abbot, and the abbot's portrait were largely interchangeable."[12] To this list we might add the assumption widespread in recent scholarship that, in premodern times, Buddhists treated buddha images as equivalent to living buddhas.[13] Leaving aside for our purposes the role of Chan portraiture in this extended chain of equivalences, suffice it to say that Foulk and Sharf here present a tantalizing—if not fully

[11] T. Griffith Foulk and Robert H. Sharf, "On the Ritual Use of Ch'an Portraiture in Medieval China," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 7 (1993–94): 195. Foulk and Sharf have also separately discussed the Chan master's ritual status as a buddha in Sharf, "Idolization of Enlightenment," "Ritual," in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 261–67, and "How to Think with Chan *Gong'an*," in *Thinking with Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, ed. Charlotte Furth, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Ping-chen Hsiung (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 233–35; and Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice," 177–78. Other scholars have also suggested that Chan masters were viewed as Chinese buddhas. See, e.g., Judith A. Berling, "Bringing the Buddha Down to Earth: Notes on the Emergence of *Yü-lu* as a Buddhist Genre," *History of Religions* 27, no. 1 (1987): 56–88; Shinohara, "Evolution of Chan Biographies," 320–21; John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7; Morten Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 2, 14, and 32; Alan Cole, *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), and *Patriarchs on Paper: A Critical History of Medieval Chan Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Eric Greene, "Another Look at Early Chan: Daoxuan, Bodhidharma, and the Three Levels Movement," *T'oung Pao* 94 (2008): 50–51 and 105–8; and Jason Protass, *The Poetry Demon: Song-Dynasty Monks on Poetry and the Way* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), 49–51, 55–56, and 112.

[12] Foulk and Sharf, "On the Ritual Use of Ch'an Portraiture," 195. Along similar lines, Bernard Faure suggests that the mummies of eminent Chinese Buddhist monastics "*were* Buddhas." Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 149. In a subsequent article, however, Faure nuances this position, writing: "There is a constant danger of hermeneutic overkill: an icon is not a mummy, which is not a living being. Yet something circulates from one to the other, a circulation permitted by a certain isomorphism, isotopy, mimesis, and functional equivalence between these figures of the double." Faure, "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (1998): 791.

[13] To avoid confusion with the technical semiotic concept of iconicity, I use "buddha image" rather than "buddha icon" to refer to the painted or sculpted image of a buddha. See the extended discussion of the topic of image equivalence in Robert H. Sharf, "Introduction: Prolegomenon to the Study of Japanese Buddhist Icons," in *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 1–18.

developed—theory of how the ritual performance of Chan mastery entailed acting out a kind of Chinese buddhahood.

In an essay on the subject of Buddhist ritual for the edited volume *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, Sharf outlines a more detailed theory of ascending the hall as the occasion for a Chan master's ritual performance of buddhahood. Beyond attending to the way Dharma halls in Chan monasteries were built to elevate the master atop an altar-like stage, Sharf closely reads the 1103 CE *Pure Rules for Chan Monasteries* (*Chanyuan qinggui* 禪苑清規)—the earliest extant monastic code expressly written for the administration of public Chan monasteries—to argue that "the rite is clearly modeled on the public invocation rites performed in the Buddha hall, except that veneration is now directed toward a flesh-and-blood abbot."[14] As a result, "Ascending the Hall was an elaborately choreographed event in which the monastic community and visiting patrons came face-to-face with a living buddha."[15]

Following Catherine Bell's lead, Sharf observes that ritual theory was long guided by problematic dichotomies like form versus content, or thought versus action.[16] He proposes a solution by theorizing ritual generally, and Chan ritual in particular, as similar to play. According to the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, metalinguistic cues—"signs or signals that comment on the status of other signs or signals," as Sharf puts it—alert participants in play that particular behavior is playful rather than serious.[17] Likewise, Sharf suggests, ritual is set apart from ordinary activity by virtue of metalinguistic frames cuing perception of particular behavior as specifically ritual behavior. As a feature of communication generally, "frames tell us which signals are to count and which are to be ignored," Sharf writes, "and they define the context and establish the premises that are used to evaluate them."[18] When applied to ascending the hall, this theory implies that the ceremony's similarity to the ritual worship of buddha images framed the abbot as ritually playing the role of a living buddha and bracketed as ritually irrelevant ("to be ignored") any unlikeness of an abbot's appearance, words, and actions to those traditionally ascribed to the Buddha.

Sharf's theory of metalinguistic framing helps him connect the ascending the hall ceremony to other rituals, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. Like in the Catholic

[14] Sharf, "Ritual," 265. Compare *Chanyuan qinggui*, in *Xuzangjing* 續藏經, 150 vols. (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1975), no. 1245, 63: 527a18–b20; trans. in Yifa, *Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes*, 135–36.

[15] Sharf, "Ritual," 265.

[16] Sharf, "Ritual," 250–52.

[17] Sharf, "Ritual," 253. Compare Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 177–93. Sharf also discusses Bateson's theory of metalinguistic framing in the context of the Buddhist cult of relics in Robert H. Sharf, "On the Allure of Buddhist Relics," *Representations* 66 (1999): 89–90.

[18] Sharf, "Ritual," 253.

Eucharist, Sharf suggests, the process of metalinguistic framing by which Chan masters were treated as buddhas unfolded in a subjunctive or "as-if" register. Writing again of the Buddhist culture of image worship, which (as we have just seen) he views as closely related to the ritual worship of Chan masters as buddhas, Sharf proposes: "One does not believe that the wafer is flesh, nor that the icon is buddha; belief has little to do with it. One simply proceeds as if it were the case."[19] Doing so involves "an elaborate set of ritual cues, one of which is that the wafer continue to look and taste like a wafer. (Surreptitiously substituting a bit of meat for the wafer would likely disrupt rather than enhance the ritual effect.)"[20] We need not only imagine such a scenario hypothetically. Discussing Eucharistic visions in medieval Europe, in which the consecrated bread and wine were perceived to take on other forms, Caroline Walker Bynum writes: "When Colette of Corbie [1381–1447] saw the Christ Child carved like a piece of meat, she brooded over the vision in horror and interpreted it as Christ's reparation for our sins, beating her own body in response. Indeed, Eucharistic visions were sometimes seen as evidence of God's wrath, and priests who themselves experienced them or met with such claims from the faithful were often enjoined to pray that the elements return to the form of bread and wine."[21] Such exceptional cases help Bynum emphasize the basic "dissimilitude between the incarnate God and the material stuff in which that God is understood to be most completely present or instantiated," namely, bread and wine, in the Eucharist.[22] Too much likeness, in short, might be inimical to the process of ritual framing.

Along similar lines, in the context of ascending the hall ceremonies, as we will see, no audience expected Chan masters to literally act the way buddhas are described as acting in Mahayana scriptures: emitting beams of light from their bodies, shaking the earth with the power of their words, eliciting a rain of flowers from the heavens, and so on. If Song period Chan masters had ascended the hall and attempted to mimic the spectacular performative displays narrated in such scriptures—say, by means of some kind of synthetic show of pyrotechnics—the resemblance might have seemed both overly close and unconvincing or artificial, subjecting the audience to a simulacrum of buddhahood rather than convincingly conjuring a living buddha into the ritual arena.

[19] Sharf, "Ritual," 257.

[20] Sharf, "Ritual," 257. Sharf's analysis in this article builds on a briefer argument for the "as-if" nature of Buddhist ritual in Robert H. Sharf, "Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism," in Sharf and Sharf, *Living Images*, 196. Michael Puett articulates a theory of ritual that dovetails with many of Sharf's ideas in "Ritual and the Subjunctive," in *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, ed. Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 17–42.

[21] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone, 2020), 141–42.

[22] Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 138.

To leave it at that, however, would be to miss something important about the role of likeness—or "iconicity," in the language of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory—in rituals like the Eucharist or ascending the hall.[23] Even as we attend to the ways flesh and blood are unlike bread and wine, we should not jump to the opposite conclusion that the Eucharist dispenses with likeness or iconicity entirely. Consider, for example, that specifically red wine was the historically favored variety used in the Eucharist owing to its visible likeness to blood.[24] In fifteenth-century Japan, use of red wine in the Eucharist gave rise to the fear of European foreigners as blood-drinkers, and to suspicion of red wine generally, which persisted for centuries.[25] Bread and wine also stand in for flesh and blood as, respectively, solid and liquid. If participants in the Eucharist were asked to imagine themselves drinking Christ's flesh and eating his blood, the ritual's coherence would unravel. Just as too much likeness might inhibit ritual framing, so too little likeness might do the same. Moreover, the Eucharist depends for its ritual significance on likeness to the biblical Last Supper. Jesus himself, we are told, compared blood with wine and flesh with bread, endowing these particular comparisons with special significance and performing the inaugural Eucharistic communion on the basis of which the comparisons were ritualized. The priest officiating the ceremony, in turn, reinforces this connection by reciting words Jesus is said to have spoken to the apostles—"This is my body," and so on—ritually playing the role of Jesus, as it were.[26] As the linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein puts it: "The participation frame of the Eucharistic ritual, as mediated by the deixis of the narrative and the ostensions of the officiant with its quotations, thus becomes an *icon* of that of the Last Supper."[27]

Similarly, the process of metalinguistic framing that Sharf identifies as establishing the Chan master's ritual buddha status was iconic in the Peircean sense—it relied on bonds of likeness in order to work its magic. The spatial positioning of the abbot atop an altar-like stage and of the audience down below the stage, combined with the choreography of worship, created a

[23] Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *The Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 104–15.

[24] Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 66.

[25] Gerald A. Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 34–35. I thank Andrew Macomber for this reference.

[26] This dimension of the priest's role may be more or less emphasized, depending on context. Bynum writes that "as the theological emphasis on the Eucharist as sacrifice became more literal in the later Middle Ages, the priest came to be understood as in some sense Christ himself; hence the divine was present in sacrificer as well as sacrificed." Yet she adds that such an idea was never settled, and "controversy raged in Western Europe over how exactly to interpret the Eucharist." Bynum, *Dissimilar Similitudes*, 141–42.

[27] Michael Silverstein, "The Eucharistic Chiastic Trope in American 'Civil Religion': Ritual Interdiscursivity and the Production of Cultural Intertexts," *Lexia, Revista di Semiotica* 11–12 (2012): 302 (emphasis added).

spatiotemporal homology between revering a buddha image and worshipping a Chan master. This framing homology contrasted with the ceremony's discursive content, which, as I already suggested, was stylistically quite unlike that of Buddhist scriptures, even if it often drew on Buddhist tropes and doctrinal ideas. The ritual's framing homology to worship of a buddha image also contrasted with the visible presentation of the Chan abbot, who might have been dressed in special ceremonial robes but did not actually quite resemble the spectacular buddha images situated atop monastery altars. The Chan master's ritual performance of buddhahood while ascending the hall thus involved a complex combination of likeness and unlikeness to the Buddha's example. At the same time, different from the Eucharist, no direct scriptural reference point can be found for the comparison of Chan masters to buddhas, and Chan masters did not play the role of living buddhas by reciting words attributed to the Buddha Śākyamuni. We therefore have reason to suspect that there might be more to the story.

My contention in this article is that scholars have been correct to argue that Chan masters came to be seen by many as holding the authority of buddhas during the Song dynasty but that the question of how exactly this happened has yet to be fully accounted for. Building on Foulk's and Sharf's pioneering studies, and engaging closely with Sharf's work on Buddhist ritual in particular as the gold-standard treatment of ascending the hall, I propose that the problem of likeness offers a useful thematic lens through which to begin formulating such an account. By analyzing how Chan Buddhists managed the problem of likeness both in the ritual of ascending the hall and in literary representations of this ceremony, we can come to see in much greater detail how the ceremony was transformed into the narrative backdrop against which the "text" or "script" of Chan mastery as a kind of buddhahood could be shared as a cultural reference point by a larger elite public.

Why does it matter? First, for the historiography of Chinese Buddhism, examining how Chan Buddhists managed the problem of likeness helps us come to grips with the historical fact of the Chan tradition's precipitous rise to power and influence during this period. Chan Buddhists might have had a difficult time claiming the mantle of elite standard-bearers for monastic Buddhism if they possessed only rhetorical ingenuity but no claim for that rhetoric's specifically Buddhist authority. Yet the successful fusion of novelty and tradition, unlikeness and likeness, could not have been automatic or even straightforward; it was a significant rhetorical feat that required of Chan Buddhists ritual and literary work. This work participated in shaping the Chan tradition's public identity, which in turn facilitated the tradition's worldly success. To account for that success, therefore, we must take stock of the work that went into achieving it.

More broadly, my interpretive focus on likeness rather than equivalence or interchangeability allows us to consider how ritual might provide occasion for

negotiations over the sensory and rhetorical contours of religious authority. Whereas the concept of equivalence (e.g., between a Chan master and the Buddha) is categorical, a matter of logic, likeness is often ambiguous, a matter of discernment. "Between a banality of sameness and a delirium of difference," Paul North writes, "likeness likes to hide."[28] Hiding between these extremes, likeness invites a variety of competing interpretations. By showing how the question of a ritual officiant's likeness to an authoritative exemplar might sometimes constitute a live problem needing to be dynamically managed within the ritual itself, I hope to shed new light on the larger topic of religious authority.

In section I, I introduce the sources available to us concerning the ascending the hall ceremony as it was performed at Song period Chan monasteries. I argue that, although Song period Chan Buddhists were engaged in writing and revising discourse records attributed to their legendary Tang period forebears whose contents were embellished or even fictional, discourse records and lamp record entries for Song period Chan masters themselves were less embellished, and their depictions of ceremonies of ascending the hall likely more closely reflected the dynamics of real-life ritual. I propose that the ritual performance of ascending the hall and the composition of discourse records depicting ceremonies of ascending the hall were closely intertwined activities that affected each other in a feedback loop.

In section II, I turn to one particular ritual convention—as yet overlooked by scholars—found in the records of many Chan masters' inaugural performances of the ascending the hall ceremony upon being appointed abbots of public monasteries, a ritual known as "opening the hall" (*kaitang* 開堂). According to this convention, audience members at opening the hall ceremonies explicitly contrasted the spectacular miracles said in Buddhist scriptures to have accompanied the Buddha Śākyamuni's birth, attainment of enlightenment, or other major life events—miracles such as flowers raining from the heavens, the earth shaking, and so on—with the mundane circumstances of a Chan master's inauguration as abbot, and they asked the Chan master who had just been appointed abbot to explain the difference. If the Chan master was really a buddha, then where were all the miracles traditionally understood to authenticate that status? Analysis of this ritual convention and the answers provided by various Chan masters both supports the idea that Chan masters were ritually treated like buddhas and, at the same time, demonstrates that the ritual equivalence of Chan master and buddha was never entirely taken for granted. Instead, I argue, the manifest unlikeness of Chan masters to buddhas had to be actively integrated into a new, Chan-specific understanding of buddhahood in and through the ritual of ascending the hall.

[28] Paul North, *Bizarre-Privileged Items in the Universe: The Logic of Likeness* (New York: Zone, 2021).

In section III, I examine passages mainly from the writings of Chinese literati that provide clues about how the Chan master's authoritative buddha status during the ascending the hall ceremony might have been vulnerable to disruption or subversion from various sources. Although accounts of ascending the hall ceremonies going wrong often hinge on the most mundane of contingencies—an abbot's resentful natal family looking to embarrass him, or an unfriendly audience member hoping to be paid a bribe not to sabotage the proceedings, for example—I argue that precisely the mundanity of these interruptions illustrates the limits of Chan masters' capacities to actively incorporate their own mundane unlikeness to buddhas into a new, specifically Chinese, form of buddhahood. Analyzing cases of the ascending the hall ceremony going wrong offers vivid proof of the ceremony's simultaneously religious and social complexity, in which doctrinal questions of what it means to be a Chinese buddha were inextricably bound up with social questions of hierarchy, authority, and reputation.

I. ASCENDING THE HALL BETWEEN RITUAL AND LITERATURE

Because the first extant monastic code dictating prescribed behavior at public Chan monasteries dates only to 1103, it is difficult to tell exactly when the formal features of ascending the hall analyzed by Foulk and Sharf first took shape. But the appearance of a seemingly mature form of the ascending the hall ceremony in the *Patriarchs' Hall Collection* (*Zutang ji* 祖堂集) of 952, a precursor to the imperially sponsored Chan lamp collections produced in the Song, suggests that this ritual already existed by the mid-tenth century. Of course, Chan discourse records and lamp collections can only be treated as evidence of actual monastic practice with great care. As scholars have now conclusively demonstrated, famous discourse records once thought to preserve historically reliable accounts of the marvelous words and deeds of eighth- and ninth-century Chan masters like Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–88) and Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄 (d. 866) were actually sophisticated literary fabrications written in part or whole and repeatedly revised between the late eighth and eleventh centuries. Only in the Song were these texts stabilized into the standard editions by which they were subsequently known.[29]

Ceremonies of ascending the hall depicted in the records of legendary Chan masters like Mazu and Linji are often lively affairs. To give just one example, here is a scene from the *Record of Linji* (*Linji lu* 臨濟錄):

[29] Albert Welter, *The "Linji lu" and the Creation of Chan Orthodoxy: The Development of Chan's Records of Sayings Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Mario Poceski, *The Records of Mazu and the Making of Classical Chan Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

> One day the master [Linji] went to He Prefecture. The governor, Councilor Wang, requested the master to take the high seat. At that time Mayu came forward and asked, "The Great Compassionate One [the bodhisattva Guanyin] has a thousand hands and a thousand eyes. Which is the true eye?" The master said, "The Great Compassionate One has a thousand hands and a thousand eyes. Which is the true eye? Speak quickly, speak quickly!" Mayu pulled the master down off the high seat and sat on it himself. Coming up to him, the master said, "How do you do?" Mayu hesitated. The master, in turn, pulled Mayu down off the high seat and sat upon it himself. Mayu went out. The master stepped down.[30]

This passage, first found in versions of Linji's record dating to the eleventh century, stages a scene that would never have occurred in live Song period ceremonies of ascending the hall. As we will see, evidence suggests that ascending the hall during the Song was a highly rule-bound ritual affair. Yet the author or authors of this passage likely expected readers to appreciate Linji's and Mayu's antics precisely because they broke all the ceremony's rules of decorum. In other words, the record was likely written during the Song period with the real-life ceremony of ascending the hall as its narrative setting, against the backdrop of which readers could imagine the dramatic freedom of ritual action enjoyed by Chan masters and their audiences in centuries past.

Not coincidentally, it was also during the tenth and eleventh centuries that patronage by regional rulers during the interregnum between the Tang and Song dynasties, and subsequently by Song period rulers and literati, brought the Chan tradition to a position of virtually unrivalled eminence in the landscape of Chinese Buddhist monasticism.[31] During the Song dynasty, many of the most prestigious monasteries in China came to be proclaimed "ten-directions Chan monasteries" (*shifang chanyuan* 十方禪院) and had their abbacies limited to members of Chan lineages, who were selected via public processes.[32] As a growing number of Song period Chan masters embarked on careers as abbots of these elite monasteries, they became the subjects of new discourse records of their own, which both circulated independently and were

[30] 師因—日 到河府, 府主王常侍請師升座. 時 麻谷出問:「大悲千手眼, 那箇是正眼?」師云:「大悲千手眼, 那箇是正眼? 速道速道.」麻谷拽師下座, 麻谷却坐, 師近前, 云:「不審.」麻谷擬議, 師亦拽麻谷下座, 師却坐, 麻谷便出去, 師便下座. *Zhenzhou Linji Huizhao chanshi yulu* 鎮州臨濟慧照禪師語錄, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大蔵経, 85 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–32), no. 1985, 47: 496c4–9. Translation follows Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Record of Linji*, ed. Thomas Yūhō Kirchner (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 128, with minor changes.

[31] On elite patronage of Chan from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms through the Song, see Benjamin Brose, *Patrons and Patriarchs: Regional Rulers and Chan Monks during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015); Albert Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, chaps. 2 and 3.

[32] Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice," 166. On the Song period distinction between private and public monasteries, see Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, 36–49.

also incorporated into lamp collections that included entries for many different Chan masters.

In combination with the instructions for ritual practice given in the *Pure Rules for Chan Monasteries*, scholars have looked to the discourse records of Song dynasty Chan masters for clues about what ascending the hall ceremonies involved during this period. Such records never include scenes of members of the audience dragging the master off the stage and taking his place, as we find in the *Record of Linji* and similar sources attributed to Tang dynasty Chan masters, probably because ascribing such behavior to Song period masters would have struck readers (who may have attended these ceremonies in person) as implausible. Chan discourse records typically only included a select few ceremonies of ascending the hall compared with the number of such ceremonies each Chan master was expected to perform over the course of a career, and they were subject to editorial revision and embellishment just like the records of mythic Tang dynasty patriarchs. But unlike the records of Linji, Mazu, and other such revered figures from earlier eras, records of Song dynasty Chan masters come down to us in versions dating closer to the lifetimes of the masters in question. With the aid of an emerging print culture, Song period Chan discourse records also circulated broadly among monastic communities and lay enthusiasts, and records of many Chan masters were published and read by an interested literate public within those masters' lifetimes.[33] This does not mean that we can rely on any given discourse record for a Song period Chan master to present us with historically reliable transcriptions of ritual events as they really transpired. But it does mean that discourse records for Song period Chan masters likely adhere more closely to the live dynamics of ascending the hall than do the embellished or fictional records for mythical Chan patriarchs from earlier eras.

We have already considered how, as Foulk and Sharf argue, ascending the hall ceremonies were framed by an overarching likeness to the ritual worship of buddha images. What was the discursive content of such ceremonies like? Several scholars have proposed that Chan masters ascending the hall during the Song ritually reenacted the dynamic words and actions attributed to legendary Tang period Chan masters like Mazu and Linji. Foulk, for example, proposes that apart from a certificate of receipt of Dharma transmission in a Chan lineage, the chief marker of Chan mastery during the Song was "a familiarity with the mythology of Ch'an and an ability to mimic its rhetorical style in certain ritual settings."[34] Foulk argues that Chan masters ascending the hall

[33] Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, 73–74. For a recent evaluation of the impact of print on Song period literate society, see Robert Hymes, "Sung Society and Social Change," in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, pt. 2, *Sung China, 960–1279*, ed. Dennis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 542–68.

[34] Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice," 161.

"recalled and mimicked the sparkling sayings and dramatic actions attributed to renowned T'ang patriarchs in the lineage. One of the important functions of the flame histories and discourse records was precisely to provide such models of sacred utterance and behavior for ritual reenactment."[35] In turn, other scholars analyzing the ascending the hall ceremony's performative dynamics have echoed and amplified this idea. Mario Poceski, for example, writes that ascending the hall ceremonies "were contrived performances that fitted into preexisting templates of behavior deemed apt for Chan teachers, even if in them there was some scope for individual expression and creativity," and he later reiterates the idea that the abbot "ritually reenacted" records of Tang period masters.[36] Alan Cole writes of the "ritual reenactment of scenes drawn from the literary version of Chan," by means of which audience members "reliv[ed] the magic moments they imagined to have been the norm for their Tang predecessors."[37]

But did the ascending the hall ceremony really involve the literal reenactment of an established script of Chan mastery? Even if we construe the concept of "reenactment" loosely, can it fully account for ascending the hall as a public ritual activity routinely performed at monasteries across China during the Song? We have reason to exercise caution before analyzing Chan ritual too strictly in terms of reenactment. Sharf notes that "even the most conservative of ritual traditions undergo constant change."[38] And Catherine Bell has warned against potential pitfalls involved in an interpretive framework grounded on the concept of reenactment: "Tradition . . . is not created once and then left to its own momentum. Tradition exists because it is constantly produced and reproduced, pruned for a clear profile, and softened to absorb revitalizing elements. . . . Theories that have defined ritual activity as first and foremost the reenactment of historical or mythical precedents . . . risk a certain blindness to a group's constant reinterpretation of what constitutes these precedents and the community's relationship to them."[39] In our case, too great an emphasis on the reenactment of an already-established script of Chan mastery implies that Song dynasty Chan Buddhists lived in a period of the tradition's routinization. Without necessarily intending to do so, scholars adopting this approach risk recapitulating now-rejected ideas about Chinese Buddhism's creative stagnation and institutional decline in the Song.[40]

[35] Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice," 177.

[36] Mario Poceski, "Chan Rituals of the Abbots' Ascending the Dharma Hall to Preach," in *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*, ed. Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 98, 104.

[37] Cole, *Patriarchs on Paper*, 224.

[38] Sharf, "Ritual," 248.

[39] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 123–24.

[40] See, e.g., Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959), 82–85; and Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*

For his part, Sharf proposes that "the abbot's 'script,' wherein he lectures the audience and responds to their queries, was . . . modeled on the patriarchal transmissions depicted in Chan lineage texts, which in turn evoke Indian scriptural prototypes."[41] It is true that certain Tang dynasty Chan texts like the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經) resemble traditional Buddhist scriptures in certain respects—although, as Judith Berling points out, "the celestial dimensions and wonders attested in many Mahāyāna sutras are conspicuous by their absence" in the *Platform Sutra*.[42] But as I suggested in this article's introduction and as Berling also notes, the language of Song period Chan discourse records was much more radically unlike the language of Buddhist scriptures than was that of the *Platform Sutra*, marking "a significant break with the previous tradition."[43] The principal continuities between Buddhist sutra literature and Chan discourse record literature, Berling suggests, are the shared "form of a dialogue between master and disciple, a venerable dramatic structure dating from the earliest Buddhist writings," as well as the importance attached to "the skills of the master or a disciple in debating with or answering the doubts of an adversary."[44]

For this reason, I disagree with Sharf that Chan sermons resembled scriptural precedents. Instead, I think we should take note precisely of the stylistic unlikeness that distinguished the two genres. Despite this disagreement, I find Sharf's identification of four major conventions governing a Chan abbot's sermon while ascending the hall to provide an important starting point for moving beyond the framework of reenactment. Attending to these conventions helps us understand that even as the ceremony's dynamics were rule bound, they were also variable and contingent. The conventions identified by Sharf are "(1) the frequent and stylized use of dialectical negation drawing on models in Mādhyamika and *prajñāpāramitā* (perfection of wisdom) texts; (2) a marked predilection to interpret any assertion, scriptural or otherwise, as pointing to 'true mind' or 'buddha-nature'; (3) repetitions of standard Chan injunctions; (4) the use of dramatic elocutionary and physical gestures, including shouts, claps, cuffs, and so on."[45] It was according to this repertoire of

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), chap. 14. Foulk himself has been instrumental in overturning such ideas about Buddhism's and Chan's supposed Song period decline; see, e.g., Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice," 147–49.

[41] Sharf, "Ritual," 265.

[42] Berling, "Bringing the Buddha Down to Earth," 70.

[43] Berling, "Bringing the Buddha Down to Earth," 71. More recent scholarship suggests that this seemingly radical break in Chan Buddhists' rhetorical style actually unfolded as a gradual transition. See, e.g., Jia Jinhua 賈晉華, *Gudian Chan yanjiu: Zhong Tang zhi Wudai Chanzong fazhan xintan* 古典禅研究: 中唐至五代禅宗發展新探, rev. ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chuban she, 2013), chap. 4.

[44] Berling, "Bringing the Buddha Down to Earth," 84.

[45] Sharf, "Ritual," 266.

possible avenues for speech and action available to Chan abbots ascending the hall, Sharf argues, that their performances would be legible to audiences as "recognizably 'Channish.'"[46] In the sections of this article that follow, I ask how exactly the rhetorical conventions of Chan mastery related to the ritual frame according to which Chan masters were treated like buddhas. For the rest of this section, I focus on another question: How might the "script" of Chan mastery have changed over time, at the interface of ritual performance and literary composition?

The idea of ascending the hall as reenactment presupposes a unidirectional relationship between Chan literature and Chan ritual. That is, it imagines that first there was literature and then there was ritual. But this is not historically accurate. Chan Buddhists were composing and revising discourse records attributed to legendary Tang dynasty Chan masters at the same time that they were ascending the hall and becoming the subjects of discourse records of their own. Writing and ritual performance were thus intertwined activities for Chan Buddhists in the Song. Readers of Chan discourse records attributed to both Tang period and Song period masters surely brought expectations shaped by this literature to their attendance at live performances of the ascending the hall ceremony. Specific real-life ceremonies of ascending the hall, too, were probably sometimes written down in a form that at least loosely resembled the live performance and used in the production of new discourse records or were remembered and circulated as word-of-mouth gossip. Sometimes gossip itself was written down, from the early twelfth century onward, in collections of Chan-themed miscellaneous writings, through which masters' reputations were affirmed or contested at a slightly greater remove than discourse records, which were often compiled by masters' own disciples.[47] For this reason, I propose that a circular relationship—a kind of feedback loop—obtained between performances of the ascending the hall ceremony and literary representations of this ceremony.

Depending on the case, specific Chan masters' performative interventions in the normative "script" of Chan mastery might have been great, small, or entirely without impact on the broader culture. Although some of these interventions were likely done behind the scenes, in the private quarters of Chan abbots or their disciples editing discourse records to make them as compelling as possible, we have no reason to think that all the important creative work took place on paper and that none of it happened in performance. The ascending the hall ceremony was a routine feature of monastic life at all public Chan

[46] Sharf, "Ritual," 266.

[47] For an introduction to this understudied genre of Chan literature, see Chao Zhang, "Chan Miscellanea and the Shaping of the Religious Lineage of Chinese Buddhism under the Song," *Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies* 21 (2017): 243–82.

monasteries in the Song; surely Chan masters sometimes contributed to the script of Chan mastery by actually giving compelling and memorable live performances.

It is helpful to recall that elite Chinese Buddhists did not always think and talk about mastery, liberated personhood, or buddhahood in terms of the Chan ceremony of ascending the hall. Chan Buddhists themselves had to make that ceremony into a plausible and appealing space for such thought and discussion through a combination of ritual and literary work.[48] In this connection, let us consider a series of questions about the relationship between text and ritual raised by Catherine Bell: "What is the significance or functional effect of writing ritual down, both vis-à-vis ritual and as a written text? How does writing a text or depicting ritual in a text act upon the social relations involved in textual and ritual activities? Ultimately, how are the media of communication *creating* a situation rather than simply reflecting it; how are they restructuring social interactions rather than merely expressing them?"[49] Bell's questions help sharpen our attention to the way each performance of ascending the hall and each composition of a discourse record or other literary artifact depicting a Chan master ascending the hall was invested with a significance bigger than itself. Both practices not only aimed to achieve ritual or literary ends specific to a particular occasion but also participated in the larger cultural process by means of which the Chan tradition's reputation for excellence was enacted and, in some cases, contested.

Of course, Chan Buddhists serving as abbots of public monasteries in the Song typically had the power to decide which parts of such rituals went into their discourse records and what was left out. Precisely because they held such power, discourse record literature provides us with a window onto Chan Buddhists' own views of the ceremony's significance and parameters. At the same time, records of Chan ceremonies of ascending the hall written by literati, who were not always content only to repeat Chan Buddhists' insider perspectives, offer a sense of what Chan discourse records do not tell us. By reading these two kinds of sources side by side, we can begin to recover the religio-cultural significance of ascending the hall as more than just a static ritual genre with a fixed meaning but rather as an important discursive foundation on which the "text" of Chan identity was worked out. In the words of Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, such analysis allows us "to focus attention on contextually contingent semiotic processes involved in achieving text—and culture. These are recoverable in some measure only by analytically engaging with textual

[48] I do not mean that all elite Buddhists in the Song envisioned mastery, liberated personhood, or buddhahood in these terms; only that a significant number of them did.

[49] Catherine Bell, "Ritualization of Texts and Textualization of Ritual in the Codification of Taoist Liturgy," *History of Religions* 27, no. 4 (1988): 369.

sedimentations."[50] Because text and world enfold each other, we can follow Stephen Greenblatt in "investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text."[51]

II. UNSPECTACULAR BUDDHAS

Reading Chan literature from the Song dynasty, one finds that Chan Buddhists return again and again to the question: What phenomenal signs index buddhahood? The "index" is another category of signs in Peircean semiotics. Unlike the "icon," Peirce writes, an indexical sign "refers to its object not so much because of any similarity or analogy with it, nor because it is associated with general characters which that object happens to possess, as because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand."[52] To illustrate what he means, Peirce provides a series of examples, including "I see a man with a rolling gait. This is a probable indication that he is a sailor. I see a bowlegged man in corduroys, gaiters, and a jacket. These are probable indications that he is a jockey or something of the sort."[53] These examples make clear that, for Peirce, indexical signs can refer to features of a person's appearance or manner that call on a preexisting nexus of cultural associations to signal to onlookers some aspect of that person's identity.

According to tradition, the most obvious signs indexing the Buddha's status as a buddha were the thirty-two major and eighty minor "marks of a great man" (Sanskrit [Skt.] *mahāpuruṣa-lakṣaṇa*; Chinese [Ch.] *da zhangfu xiang* 大丈夫相 or *daren xiang* 大人相) visibly adorning his body, as well as the various miracles attending many of his activities. Because these signs were typically said to be evident to the casual observer, they were understood as capable of convincing even skeptics that the special authority attributed to the Buddha was legitimate.[54] Certain Mahayana scriptures undercut these traditions, however, by criticizing them for mistakenly identifying signs observable in the phenomenal world as essential features of buddhahood, when

[50] Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, "The Natural History of Discourse," in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2–3.

[51] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.

[52] Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic," 107.

[53] Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic," 108.

[54] On the "marks of a great man," see Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 4; and Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the "Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā-sūtra"* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), chap. 1.

properly speaking buddhahood transcends all such signs. Most famous for such criticism is the *Diamond Sutra* (Skt. *Vajracchedikā Sūtra*; Ch. *Jin'gang jing* 金剛經), in which the Buddha says: "All existing marks are empty delusions. Only if you view all marks as non-marks will you see the Thus-come One."[55]

Chan Buddhists in the Tang and Song often quoted this passage in their own sermons and writings. But they seem not to have been satisfied with the purely apophatic emptiness doctrine found in the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā) scriptural corpus to which the *Diamond* belongs. Instead, they often supplemented invocations of emptiness doctrine with the kataphatic identification of phenomenal signs in the mundane world that might indeed be viewed as indexes of buddhahood. For example, a famous episode from the Song period discourse record of Chan master Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (807–69) describes him replying to the question, "What is the Buddha?" with the answer, "Three catties of hemp thread."[56] Another dialogue attributed to the Chan master Yunmen Wenyan 雲門文偃 (864–949) articulates the same idea in a more off-color way: "[Someone] asked, 'What is Śākyamuni's body like?' The master replied: 'A dried piece of shit.'"[57] And a famous saying attributed to Layman Pang (Pang *jushi* 龐居士, d. 808), a Tang period lay disciple of Mazu Daoyi, equates supernatural abilities with mundane activities: "Spiritual powers and wondrous function; carrying water and hauling wood."[58]

Whether suggesting that no signs index buddhahood or that any sign can index buddhahood, such musings built on long-standing Mahayana themes that worked to detach the concept of buddhahood from the person of the Buddha Śākyamuni (and other buddhas of the Mahayana pantheon). Indeed, passages like Dongshan's "three catties of hemp thread" seem to imply that it is naive or deluded to think special bodies or miracles could reliably index buddhahood in the first place. A "dried piece of shit," Yunmen suggests, is as likely to embody buddhahood as is the spectacular body of a "great man."

Yet all such ideas break down in the ascending the hall ceremony, during which buddhahood is identified not with the entire phenomenal world but instead with the particular person of the Chan master presiding over the

[55] 凡所有相, 皆是虛妄; 若見諸相非相, 則見如來. *Jin'gang bore boluomi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 235, 8: 749a24–25.

[56] 僧問洞山:「如何是佛?」洞山云:「麻三斤.」*Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 386c21.

[57] 問:「如何是釋迦身?」師云:「乾屎橛.」*Yunmen Kuangzhen chanshi guanglu* 雲門匡真禪師廣錄, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1988, 47: 550b15. Such responses dovetail with the idea popular among Chan Buddhists that even insentient objects possess buddha nature; see Sharf, "How to Think with Chan *Gong'an*," 210–24.

[58] 神通并妙用; 運水與搬柴. *Pang jushi yulu* 龐居士語錄, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1336, 69: 131a16–17.

ceremony—an identification that implies the Chan master's hierarchical superiority to everyone else in attendance. Indeed, without some further rhetorical step, the philosophy of buddhahood's complete immanence in (or transcendence of) the world, on the one hand, and the ritual worship of particular people as living buddhas, on the other, are perfectly at odds with each other. If buddhahood is everywhere or nowhere in the phenomenal world, why worship any individual person with the honor granted to Śākyamuni?[59] More to the point: Why did Chan masters in particular deserve such reverence? Chan Buddhists never agreed on a single shared answer to this question. Rather, as we will see, they justified their own receipt of ritual worship as buddhas in a variety of ways.

According to the 952 CE *Patriarchs' Hall Collection*, toward the end of his life the Chan master Longhui Congsheng 龍迴從盛 (fl. early tenth century) ascended the hall and engaged in ritual conversation with members of the ceremony's audience. There ensued the following dialogue, which concludes Longhui's record: "The master [Longhui] asked his attendant: 'In former times, at the Vulture Peak assembly, the Buddha Śākyamuni uncrossed his legs and emitted a hundred rays of jeweled illumination [from the bottoms of his feet].' The master then uncrossed his own legs and said: 'How many [rays of light] am I emitting now?' [The attendant] replied: 'In former times there was Vulture Peak; today there is you, master.' The master used his hands to make the gesture of lifting [long] eyebrows out of his eyes. 'You're not disappointed, are you?'"[60] This scene plays humorously on the Chan master's manifest unlikeness to the Buddha Śākyamuni. Whereas the Buddha was known from scriptural accounts of sermons—which often take place at Vulture Peak—to have routinely performed miraculous displays like emitting beams of light from his feet,[61] Longhui's record makes clear that he is incapable of introducing any similar kind of spectacle into the ritual arena of the ascending the hall ceremony.

When Longhui mimes lifting long eyebrows out of his eyes before delivering his final line, it accentuates the scene's thematization of what it means to

[59] On the tension between personal and metaphysical understandings of buddhahood in Chan contexts, see also Buckelew, "Becoming Chinese Buddhas," 369–83, 385, and 398–99.

[60] 師問侍者:「昔日靈山會上,釋迦牟尼佛展開雙足,放百寶光.」師卻展足云:「吾今放多少?」對云:「昔日靈山,今日和尚.」師以手撥眉云: 「莫不辜負摩?」 *Zutang ji* 12, 2.573–74. The closing line contains a confusing double negative that literally means, "you're not not disappointed, are you?" But subsequent versions of this story all instead have the more straightforward, "you're not disappointed, are you?" 莫孤負麼? See, e.g., *Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 393a8. Because the two phrases likely intend the same meaning, I have adopted the simpler English wording.

[61] This particular episode seems to have been drawn from the *Flower Ornament Sutra* (Skt. *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*; Ch. *Huayan jing* 華嚴經); see *Dafang guangfo huayanjing* 大方廣佛華嚴經, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 278, 9: 422b17–29.

stand in for the Buddha in his absence. This gesture alludes to the story of King Aśoka's meeting with the arhat Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja, who is said to possess very long eyebrows. According to legend, Piṇḍola remained alive in the world to help protect the Dharma after the Buddha had passed into *parinirvāṇa* and until the arrival of the next buddha, Maitreya.[62] (It is needless to say that the idea of Chan masters as buddhas contradicts the tradition according to which Maitreya will be the next buddha of our world after Śākyamuni.) In the story of Piṇḍola's meeting with Aśoka, the king is overjoyed to encounter someone who personally met the Buddha and exclaims that by seeing Piṇḍola he has thereby seen the Buddha himself.[63] Piṇḍola lifts the long eyebrows out of his eyes and proceeds to recount several occasions on which he saw the Buddha, praising (among other things) the Buddha's golden body, thirty-two special bodily marks, and moon-like visage.[64] Piṇḍola possesses none of these marvelous features himself, but he does have thaumaturgic powers, long eyebrows, and a "pratyekabuddha's body."[65] Longhui, for his part, lacks even these signs of spiritual advancement. By miming lifting long eyebrows out of his eyes, we might say that Longhui connects himself to the Buddha by way of gestural likeness to Piṇḍola. At the same time, Longhui's use of this gesture acknowledges his own and his audience's greater distance from the Buddha than that of Piṇḍola and Aśoka.

"You're not disappointed, are you?" Longhui asks. This closing rhetorical question—the episode ends where my translation ends, before any answer can be given—suggests, on the one hand, that audience disappointment in the face of Longhui's buddha unlikeness is to be expected. He is not even as convincing a stand-in for the Buddha as Piṇḍola. On the other hand, however, Longhui's greater distance from the Buddha allows the scene to stage a neater contrast between Longhui's mundanity and the Buddha's miraculousness. Aśoka's perception of Piṇḍola's buddha likeness, we are made to understand, derives from his sense that Piṇḍola carries a trace of the Buddha's aura on his person by virtue of having witnessed the Buddha's glory firsthand. Longhui, for his part, is more radically unlike and disconnected from the Buddha. Yet precisely this unlikeness and disconnection allows his attendant to propose that "in former times there was Vulture Peak; today there is you, master." That was then, in other words, and this is now. Times have changed, and

[62] See John S. Strong, "The Legend of the Lion-Roarer: A Study of the Buddhist Arhat Piṇḍola Bhāradvāja," *Numen* 26, no. 1 (1979): 50–88.

[63] 我今見尊者, 便是見生佛. *Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 99, 2: 169c1. This story is also recounted in the *Aśokāvadāna*. An English translation is found in John S. Strong, *The Legend of Aśoka: A Study and Translation of the "Aśokāvadāna"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 260–64.

[64] *Za ahan jing*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 99, 2: 169c6–7.

[65] 辟支佛體. *Za ahan jing*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 99, 2: 169b26.

buddhas no longer emit beams of light from their bodies. Instead, they make jokes about their inability to do so. Chinese buddhahood as a feature of Chan mastery, this scene suggests, is not a function of resemblance.

Nothing about this scene, it should be noted, would make sense to a reader who did not already expect a Chan master ascending the hall to play the role of a buddha. Although Longhui's dialogue with his attendant may be embellished or fictional,[66] the way it plays with the question of the Buddha's proximity or distance by juxtaposing the Buddha's and the Chan master's mutual unlikeness foreshadows what would become, over the next several centuries, a recurring theme in Chan ritual and literature. The scene suggests that if the ascending the hall ceremony was guided by a framing likeness to image-worship cuing ritual treatment of the abbot as a living buddha, it remained for Chan Buddhists to explain all the ways that the ceremony was unlike descriptions of the Buddha's sermons found in Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, most notably in its conspicuous lack of spectacular miracles.

In the remainder of this section, I explore an overlooked ritual convention of the ascending the hall ceremony—most commonly found in Chan masters' inaugural ascending the hall performances, ceremonies of "opening the hall"—according to which newly appointed Chan masters were asked to explain their own or the ceremony's unlikeness to the Buddha or the occasions on which he delivered sermons. The bulk of examples of this convention are found in records dating to the Northern Song, although examples from the Southern Song are also found. Regardless of whether this convention originated as a literary invention or as a live ritual creation, by the eleventh century, records of such dialogues became so common that it is hard to imagine they remained confined to the literary realm and never emerged onto the ritual stage. On the contrary, given the sheer number of records portraying such questions being asked of Chan masters, it seems more likely that these questions became routine features of live ceremonies of opening the hall as well as their literary representations. Analyzing this convention allows us to explore the ways Chan Buddhists worked through the problem of likeness by means of circumstantially contingent ritual and literary work.

Let us begin with a scene from the record of Chan master Xuanhua Huizhong's 宣化惠忠 (fl. Northern Song) opening the hall ceremony, performed upon his appointment to the abbacy of Xuanhua Monastery in Huzhou (present-day Zhejiang province), which is preserved in the 1036 CE *Tiansheng-Era Extended Record of the Lamp* (*Tiansheng guang denglu* 天聖廣燈錄). Huizhong

[66] Indeed, subsequent Chan texts attribute this dialogue to an entirely different person, a fellow student of Longhui's master named Mingzhao Deqian 明招德謙 (dates unknown [d.u.]). See, e.g., *Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 393a4–11; and *Zuting shiyuan* 祖庭事苑, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1261, 64: 420b20–c2.

opens the ceremony by giving a short sermon and then invites questions from the audience. In many discourse records, the first audience member to step forward at this point in an opening the hall ceremony asks the newly appointed abbot the following pair of questions: "Master, which house's tune do you sing? To whose lineage style are you heir?"[67] Such questions interpellated the master's ceremonial identity primarily in terms of Chan genealogy rather than buddhahood. But Huizhong instead receives a different kind of question from the audience: "At that time a monk asked: 'When a buddha appears in the world, four kinds of flowers rain down from the heavens and the earth quakes six times. Today you have [also] appeared in the world, master. What auspicious omens have there been?' The master [Huizhong] said: 'Raining flowers are no longer needed.' [The monk] stepped forward and said: 'In that case, the great assembly is moistened with [the dew of] your kindness. Your student will now bow in thanks.' The master said: 'On the contrary, it is I who thanks you.'"[68] Here, the monk who steps forward compares the occasion of Huizhong's opening the hall ceremony to the Buddha Śākyamuni's miraculous birth or attainment of enlightenment. These are two among a number of events in the Buddha's life story said to have induced a miraculous response from the environment, for example, by causing the earth to shake and flowers to fill the air. The monk draws this comparison by referring to both the Buddha's and Huizhong's "appearance in the world" (*chushi* 出世), a term used in Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures—along with variations like *chuxian yu shi* 出現於世—to refer to the rare cosmic event of a buddha appearing in the world to benefit all sentient beings.

By Huizhong's lifetime, Chan Buddhists had already borrowed the term *chushi* to describe a Chan lineage holder's appointment to an abbacy, implying that such appointments amounted to beckoning Chinese buddhas out of reclusion and into public life so that they would offer teachings of equal moment and authority to the Buddha's sermons recorded in canonical scriptures. This play on words claimed a likeness between the Buddha's appearance in the world to aid sentient beings and a Chan master's emergence into the world as abbot of a public monastery. By the early twelfth century, this comparison had been codified in the *Pure Rules for Chan Monasteries*, which says that "[when abbots] first turn the wheel of the Dharma, it is called 'appearing in the world.'"[69]

[67] 師唱誰家曲? 宗風嗣阿誰? This phrase appears upward of dozens of times in each of the Chan lamp records of the Northern Song and continues to appear in many subsequent records.

[68] 時有僧問:「一佛出世, 天雨四華, 地搖六動.和尚出世, 有何祥瑞?」師云:「更不要雨華.」進云:「恁麼則大眾霑恩, 學人禮謝.」師云:「我却謝儞.」*Tiansheng guang denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1553, 78: 573c9–12.

[69] 初轉法輪, 命為出世. *Chanyuan qinggui*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1245, 63: 542c14. Compare Yifa, *Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes*, 216.

Huizhong's response makes explicit an idea that I suggested was only implicit in Longhui's dialogue with his attendant: that miracles like spectacular beams of light or raining flowers are no longer needed to attest to someone's buddhahood in Song period China. Indeed, as with Longhui, here it seems that precisely Huizhong's performative disavowal of the need for miracles is supposed to bespeak a deeper authenticity that ends up attesting to his buddhahood. The monk's respectful response suggests that Huizhong's answer has succeeded in ritually confirming his buddhahood, and the congregation can now gratefully benefit from any enlightened teachings the master sees fit to bestow. The conditional tense of the monk's statement ("In that case, . . .") implies that, at least in principle, the ceremony of opening the hall was meant to provide occasion for the audience to scrutinize the newly appointed abbot and render either favorable or unfavorable judgment. In the next section, I examine a passage from the writings of a Song period literatus in which newly appointed abbots were indeed said to be subjected to this kind of critical scrutiny while opening the hall. But statements of the kind that the monk gives here in response to the abbot—sanctioning the abbot's reply to the initial question and formally acknowledging the validity of the master's authority—are recorded as having been given in almost every instance of the ritual convention juxtaposing Chan masters' and buddhas' respective "appearances in the world," implying that the exchange recorded in this passage was actually a relatively formulaic ritual procedure.

Even so, the fact that it felt necessary to ask, over and over (as we will see), why Chan masters did not resemble the Buddha Śākyamuni attests to an ongoing interest among Chan Buddhists and their patrons in the problem of likeness. It did not go without saying, in other words, that miracles were no longer needed to demonstrate someone's status as a buddha in Song period China. On the contrary, the routine ritual and literary reiteration of the idea that miracles are no longer necessary suggests that this idea did need to be said and repeated again and again in order for the ritual attribution of buddhahood to Chan abbots—seemingly ordinary humans—to seem plausible. Each time Chan Buddhists ritually staged this problem and its resolution, they both iteratively justified their own treatment as buddhas and participated in a larger Chan project of translating (as it were) the personal status of buddhahood into a Chinese cultural idiom.

Let us consider another answer offered by a different Chan master faced with a similar question. In his entry in the *Jingde-Era Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄), printed in 1009, we are told that Chan master Jiuling Tong 鷲嶺通 (fl. late tenth century) was asked by a monk in the audience: "When the World-Honored One [the Buddha] attained the Way, the gods of the earth reported it to the gods of the sky. I haven't yet determined who reported it when you attained the Way,

master."[70] In reply, the master said: "I thank *you* for coming forward to report it."[71] This clever response resolves the problem of unlikeness raised by the questioner by recruiting the questioner himself into assuming the position of a god passing along the message that a buddha has newly entered the world. Like Huizhong's insistence that miracles are no longer needed to demonstrate buddhahood, Jiuling's response implies that in Song period China, an anonymous monk is just as qualified for this task as a god. On the one hand, Jiuling's answer relies on a claim to likeness: both the Buddha's sermons and Chan ceremonies of ascending the hall are fundamentally interactive, relying for their significance on the presence of an audience. Indeed, favorable audience reception of a Chan master's performance while ascending the hall made that master seem all the more buddha like by recalling the joy with which audiences are described as receiving the Buddha's sermons in canonical scriptures. Yet on the other hand, Jiuling's reply also relies on the juxtaposition of two obviously unlike things: a god, whose presence in the Buddha's life story lends it a sense of the miraculous, and an ordinary monk, who does not lend this ceremony of ascending the hall any such sense. Jiuling's response, in other words, justifies his ritual status as a buddha by rhetorically balancing features of likeness and unlikeness operating in the ceremony.

In the next section, I introduce evidence suggesting that audience members unfriendly to the newly appointed abbot were present in some ceremonies of opening the hall and that such audience members sometimes had the power to sabotage the ceremony and embarrass the master. This means that the ceremonial buddha status of any given abbot during this ritual was contingent rather than guaranteed. But the patrons and government officials involved in the abbot's appointment, and typically present at the ceremony of opening the hall, surely hoped for things to go well in most cases. Indeed, a happy resolution to the problem of likeness promised to flatter not only the Chan master himself but also the government official or officials who oversaw the appointment. Consider, for example, the following dialogue from the record of Chan master Dongshan Fanyan 洞山梵言 (fl. Northern Song): "[Someone] asked: 'When King Brahmā invited the Buddha [to preach], four kinds of flowers rained down from the heavens. [Now] the prefect has invited you [to take up this abbacy and preach]. What auspicious omens have there

[70] 僧問:「世尊得道, 地神報虛空神. 和尚得道, 未審什麼人報.」*Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 403a7–8. For an example of this episode in a canonical account of the Buddha's first sermon, see *Guoqu xianzai yinguo jing* 過去現在因果經, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 189, 3: 644c13–22. I thank Dessislava Vendova for this reference.

[71] 師曰:「謝爾報來.」*Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 403a8–9.

been?' [The master] said: 'Willow branches sag with last night's rain; / Peonies bloom in the newly sunny sky.'"[72]

Here, the questioner explicitly compares the prefect—who oversaw the invitation to Fanyan to take up this abbacy—to Brahmā, the Indian deity who (along with Indra) is said to have first requested that the Buddha Śākyamuni share his wisdom with the world following his enlightenment. Fanyan replies with a verse couplet, answering the questioner's invocation of a miraculous rain of flowers with a more mundane—but still auspicious—poetic image of rain clearing and flowers blooming. Similar to the case of Jiuling Tong, Fanyan's response relies on a comparison of likeness—the trope of "raining flowers" is transformed into a poem about rain and flowers—even as it also clearly contrasts the miraculous with the mundane. This couplet suggests, once again, that a miraculous rain of flowers is no longer needed to attest to someone's buddhahood and that ordinary, nonmiraculous weather patterns might themselves be interpreted as auspicious signs. Like other such responses, it also might be read as implying that buddhahood, understood in a metaphysical sense, is immanent in these material objects and processes. At the same time, the response performs Fanyan's literary prowess—a skill that allowed Chan masters to participate in Song period literary culture but that sometimes also risked compromising their perceived authenticity by disclosing an interest in aesthetic pursuits unbecoming of Buddhist monastics.[73] Finally, like Jiuling Tong's comparison of the monk questioning him to gods of the earth and sky, by resolving the problem of Fanyan's buddha unlikeness with a bit of poetry, this dialogue implies that the prefect who issued the formal invitation to Fanyan to take up this abbacy is analogous to the god Brahmā. Translating the interactivity of buddhahood into a Chinese cultural idiom, then, also sometimes provided occasion for a newly appointed abbot to impute honorific status to patrons and officials who had supported the appointment.

Although ritual questions like these inquiring of a Chan master's buddha unlikeness typically followed a pattern, it is worth recognizing that such questions are, in the first place, very clever. They rely on the kinds of punning and juxtaposition that analyses of ascending the hall often associate only with the Chan master presiding over the ceremony. Recognizing the ingenuity of such questions posed by members of the audience helps us see the role of interactivity in shaping the ceremony's dynamics.

[72] 問:「梵王請佛, 天雨四華. 太守請師, 有何祥瑞?」曰:「柳條垂宿雨, 華藥綻初晴.」*Jiatai pu denglu* 嘉泰普燈錄, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1559, 79: 332b24–c1.

[73] See Robert M. Gimello, "Mārga and Culture: Learning, Letters, and Liberation in Northern Sung Ch'an," in *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and Its Transformations in Chinese Buddhist Thought*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Robert M. Gimello (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 371–437; Beata Grant, *Mount Lu Revisited: Buddhism in the Life and Writings of Su Shih* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 91–92; and Protass, *Poetry Demon*.

The responses Chan masters provided to such clever questions ideally had to be at least equally clever, but their answers seem to have varied considerably from ceremony to ceremony. We almost never find identical answers in two separate records. Because there are far too many instances of this convention in Song period Chan discourse records and lamp collections to comprehensively survey here,[74] five more examples must suffice to give a sense of their variety:

1. Lianhua Shenlu 蓮華神錄 (fl. early tenth century), on the occasion of his appointment to an abbacy by the king of the state of Min (909–46): "A monk asked: 'The king has invited you to appear in the world, master. I'm not yet sure how today's event resembles that of Vulture Peak.' The master said: '[Buddhahood] penetrates the ancient and passes to the present.'"[75]
2. Zifu Zhiyuan 資福智遠 (895–977): "Someone asked: 'The appearance in the world of all buddhas [has always been accompanied by] four kinds of flowers raining down from the heavens and the earth quaking six times. What auspicious signs have you had today, master?' The master said: 'Not a single thing is born, yet

[74] I offer a list of citations that is as comprehensive as I have been able to make it in order to demonstrate how widespread this convention was. In texts from the Southern Song, examples decrease in number, which may indicate that this ritual convention gradually had its intended effect—"translating" buddhahood into a Chinese cultural idiom—such that at a certain point it was no longer needed. *Zutang ji* 12, 2.572 and 13, 2.600–601; *Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 330b29–c3, 365a12–13, 371b27–29, 374c24–25, 378b23–c3, 379b14–17, 382a2–3, 382a29–b3, 382c15–18, 383a11–13, 383b4–8, 390c18–19, 395b8–10, 400b25–28, 402b14–19, 404b23–26, 411c3–5, 414c13–20, 416c26–29, 418a23–25, 419c26–28, 420a21–22, 420b14–15, 423c9–12, and 425c25–27; *Tiansheng guang denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1553, 78: 478c15–17, 490a23–b1, 493c23–494a1, 495b16–19, 496b23–c1, 504c13–16, 510c14–17, 517a19–22, 521c14–17, 525c13–16, 529c7–9, 530c18–19, 531a13–14, 533b23–c2, 534a16–18, 534c14–15, 539b1–4, 541b8–10, 549b22–23, 551b10–12, 552c19–21, 556b1–6, 558b3–5, 560a2–4, 563b14–16, 563c12–13, 565b13–16, 566c24–567a3, 568a4–7, 568b11–13, 569b3–7, 569c17–19, 571c21–22, 573a12–14, 573c16–18, 574a4–6, and 574a16–23; and *Jianzhong jingguo xu denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1556, 78: 655c4–5, 657a17–20, 657c23–24, 665a20–23, 693c3–5, 698a10–12, 700b11–14, 703c23–704a3, 710b15–18, 711a4–6, 735a18–20, 741a4–6, 749b17–20, 752c2–5, 756b5–7, 766a2–4, 771a11–14, 771b1–4, 774a22–24, 777b19–22, 796a11–12, and 801c14–16; *Jiatai pu denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1559, 79: 338b1–4 and 347c17–20; *Yunmen Kuangzhen chanshi guanglu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1988, 47: 548a14–16; *Fenyang Wude chanshi yulu* 汾陽無德禪師語錄, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1992, 47: 595c5–7; *Yangqi Fanghui heshang yulu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1994A, 47: 641a24–27; *Fayan chanshi yulu* 法演禪師語錄, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1995, 47: 662c17–20; *Mingjue chanshi yulu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1996, 47: 674a3–7; *Shishuang Chuyuan chanshi yulu* 石霜楚圓禪師語錄, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1338, 69: 185b1–4 and 190c12–13; *Touzi Yiqing chanshi yulu* 投子義青禪師語錄, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1423, 71: 739a8–13; *Baoning Renyong chanshi yulu* 保寧仁勇禪師語錄, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1350, 69: 278b1–3; *Dahui Pujue chanshi yulu* 大慧普覺禪師語錄, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1998A, 47: 833c2–3; *Hongzhi chanshi guanglu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2001, 48: 8b29–c2; and *Xutang heshang yulu* 虛堂和尚語錄, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2000, 1004a27–b1.

[75] 僧問:「國王請師出世. 未委今日—會何似靈山.」師曰:「徹古傳今.」*Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 374a3–5.

the entire body [of buddhahood] is revealed; / Who knows this brilliant splendor right in front of their eyes?'"[76]

3. Dasheng Dezun 大乘德遵 (fl. Northern Song): "A monk asked: 'In India, when a buddha appears in the world, gold issues forth from the earth. Today you have [also] appeared in the world. What auspicious omens have there been?' The master said: 'Inside tattered robes is a perfect pearl.'"[77]
4. Longhua Wusheng 龍華悟乘 (964–1022): "A monk asked: 'When a buddha appears in the world, all the gods pay homage at his feet. Now that you have appeared in the world, master, who will pay homage at your feet?' The master replied: 'It is enough to recognize [Bodhidharma's] intention in coming [to China from the West].'"[78]
5. Ganlu Zhen 甘露真 (fl. Northern Song): "A monk asked: 'In former times, King Brahmā invited the Buddha [to preach] for the sake of all sentient beings. The prefect has [now] invited you [to preach], master. What purpose is it for?' The master said: 'You tell me: what purpose is it for?'"[79]

Lianhua Shenlu's reply is perhaps the most straightforward. With the phrase "[buddhahood] penetrates the ancient and passes to the present," he suggests that the apparent distance between his own position atop the Dharma hall's ritual stage and the Buddha's position atop Vulture Peak is bridged by the unbroken mechanism of Chan lineage, which has transmitted buddhahood seamlessly across time and space.

By contrast, Zifu Zhiyuan ignores questions of temporal continuity and replies with a poem about the immanence of buddhahood in the phenomenal world, buddhahood's total obviousness to anyone willing to see it here and now. By appealing to the metaphysics of immanent buddhahood, Zhiyuan sidesteps the question of his own status, implying that it would be a mistake to identify buddhahood with any particular person. Of course, precisely this appeal amounts to a performance of his own buddhahood. Moreover, like Dongshan Fanyan's reply to a similar question considered above, Zhiyuan's use of verse introduces a lyrical note of aesthetic pleasure into the ceremony's proceedings, suggesting he is a person of literary cultivation.

Dasheng Dezun's reply—"inside tattered robes is a perfect pearl"—calls to mind parables from the *Lotus Sutra* and other Mahayana Buddhist scriptures implying that buddha nature or the Buddha's wisdom, figured as a jewel-like treasure or small buddha statue, is hidden inside clothing or

[76] 問:「諸佛出世, 天雨四華地搖六動. 和尚今日有何禎祥?」師曰:「—物不生全體露, 目前光彩阿誰知?」*Jingde chuandeng lu*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2076, 51: 377c2–4.

[77] 僧問:「西天—佛出世, 地布黃金. 今日出世, 有何祥瑞?」師云:「破布裏真珠.」*Tiansheng guang denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1553, 78: 510c14–16.

[78] 僧問:「—佛出世, 諸天捧足. 和尚出世, 什麼人捧足?」師云:「足認來意.」*Tiansheng guang denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1553, 78: 567b16–17.

[79] 僧問:「昔日梵王請佛,蓋為群生. 知郡請師,當為何事?」師云:「儞道, 為什麼事?」*Tiansheng guang denglu*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1553, 78: 568c1–3.

wrapped in dirty rags—that is, occluded to the naked eye by the unassuming exterior of each sentient being's mundane person.[80] Here, however, rather than simply appealing to buddha nature's universality, the effect is to explain Dezun's particular buddha unlikeness as the result of his buddhahood lurking just beneath the surface of his own ordinary physical appearance.

In the fourth example, Longhua Wusheng puns on the word *zu* 足, which can mean both "feet" and "enough," to pivot away from the terms on which the monk has asked his question (about gods worshipping at a buddha's *feet*) and justify his authority by claiming that it is *enough* for a Chan master to understand the intention of the patriarch Bodhidharma's coming from India to China. Understanding "Bodhidharma's intention in coming from the West" served as shorthand in Chan ritual and literature for understanding the basic raison d'être of Chan and, by extension, for being enlightened. In the form of a question—"What was the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?"—it was often posed to Chan masters during ceremonies of ascending the hall.

Finally, in the last example, Ganlu Zhen is asked to compare the cosmic import of his appointment to an abbacy with the tremendous benefits for all sentient beings that the god Brahmā knew would ensue from the Buddha's preaching career. Rather than attempting to claim that his preaching career will have a similarly massive impact to that of the Buddha, Ganlu circumvents the premises of the question by turning it back around on the questioner, after which (according to his record) another monk steps forward to ask a different question. Chan abbots often turned questions back around on their questioners during these ceremonies—we saw a literary example from the *Record of Linji* in the previous section—and the effect was both to suggest that questioners needed to figure out the answers on their own and also to imply that the premises of the questions posed might have been faulty to begin with.

From these examples, we learn that the idea that Chan masters should be treated like buddhas in spite of their ordinary appearance and inability to perform miracles was not necessarily taken for granted by Chan Buddhists; at least in the tenth and eleventh centuries, it was a novelty that required justification.[81] The justifications Chan masters provided, in turn, varied considerably from case to case, but none of them tried to claim that there really were spectacular miracles accompanying their inaugurations as abbot. Instead, they

[80] *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 262, 9: 29a5–22; translated in Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 164–65. See also Michael Zimmerman, *A Buddha Within: The Tathāgatagarbhasūtra; The Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-Nature Teachings in India* (Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2002), 38.

[81] See also Buckelew, "Becoming Chinese Buddhas," 369–83.

deployed various rhetorical techniques to strike a balance between likeness and unlikeness to the Buddha's example. In so doing, they often played creatively on the ceremony's obvious mundanity in comparison with the miracles found in Buddhist scriptures to propose an altogether new semiotics of buddhahood, according to which buddhahood might be indexed by various mundane phenomenal signs.

Although there was precedent in earlier periods for eminent monastics downplaying the importance of thaumaturgy and miracles,[82] medieval Chinese Buddhist hagiographies also regularly used accounts of eminent nuns' or monks' supernatural powers or miraculous phenomena accompanying their lives and deaths to demonstrate that they had attained a lofty spiritual status. Such powers and miracles included healing abilities, powers of prophecy, the appearance to onlookers of strange lights, a pleasant smell in the air, the monk's or nun's body being preserved after death, and so on.[83] Yang Gang and Christoph Anderl suggest that "possessing and practising special powers had become an inherent feature of the image of the ideal monk by the early Tang."[84]

A number of Tang period Chan masters, too, were remembered as having wielded thaumaturgic powers.[85] Some were even said to have been visibly extraordinary. Mazu Daoyi, for example, was described in a funerary inscription composed shortly after his death as possessing a "tongue that was [exceptionally] broad and long, so that it could cover his nose, while the markings on his feet were arranged in a manner that formed characters."[86] These are two of the "marks of a great man" said to have adorned the Buddha's body, and ascribing them to Mazu amounted to claiming for him a kind of partial buddha likeness. Later versions of Mazu's biography dating to the Song period retained the description of his possession of these two "marks of a great man"

[82] Kieschnick, *Eminent Monk*, 80–81 and 87–88. For the purposes of this article I bracket the complex question of how exactly traditional South Asian Buddhist literature conceived of the miraculous, but on that topic see, e.g., the series of articles on the theme of "Miracles and Superhuman Powers in South and Southeast Asia" in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (2010).

[83] See, e.g., Kieschnick, *Eminent Monk*, 5, 96–109; Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 150–56; Sharf, "Idolization of Enlightenment"; C. Pierce Salguero, "'A Flock of Ghosts Bursting Forth and Scattering': Healing Narratives in a Sixth-Century Chinese Buddhist Hagiography," *East Asian Science Technology and Medicine* 32 (2010): 89–120; and Funayama Tōru 船山徹, "Seija kan no ni keitō: Rikuchō Zui Tō bukkyōshi chōkan no ichi shiron" 聖者観の二系統──六朝隋唐仏教史鳥瞰の一試論, in *Sangyō kōshō ronsō* 三教交渉論叢, ed. Mugitani Kunio 麦谷邦夫 (Kyoto: Kyōto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 2005), 398–404.

[84] Yang Gang and Christoph Anderl, "Prognostication in Chinese Buddhist Historical Texts: The *Gaoseng zhuan* and the *Xu gaoseng zhuan*," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung* 73, no. 1 (2020): 39–40.

[85] Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, chaps. 5 and 6.

[86] 舌廣長以覆準，足文理而成字. Iriya Yoshitaka 入矢義高, *Baso no goroku* 馬祖の語録 (Kyoto: Zen bunka kenkyūjo, 1984), 210; translation follows Poceski, *Records of Mazu*, 178.

but also registered ambivalence about this representation of his extraordinary appearance, adding: "Although the sense faculties and the objects perceived by them are [ultimately] identical with the dharma essence, still [Mazu's] physical appearance was exceptional and unlike other illusory bodies."[87] Indeed, it was much less common for Chan masters who lived in the Song to be credited with commanding thaumaturgic powers or described as possessing unusual bodily features like the Buddha's "marks of a great man."[88] Yet as we have seen, Song period Chan Buddhists did not just follow the *Diamond Sutra* in disputing the capacity of any phenomenal sign to index buddhahood. Rather, they began to suggest that buddhahood might be indexed by a whole new array of nonmiraculous phenomenal signs.

Questions posed during ceremonies of opening the hall contrasting the abbot with the Buddha at once presupposed that a newly appointed abbot ascending the hall ought to be treated like a living buddha and also implied that the same Chan master had some explaining to do before the audience would grant its ritual blessing on the abbot's appointment. As we have seen, Chan masters faced with such questions often chose to explicitly embrace their own manifest buddha unlikeness. This embrace was rhetorically effective, at least in part, because it participated in a larger Chan discourse suggesting that any phenomenal sign might index buddhahood. If buddhahood could be found in "three catties of hemp thread" or "a dried piece of shit," why could Chan masters not be buddhas too? Yet in the context of ascending the hall, Chan masters' rhetorical embrace of their own mundanity served not to integrate them into the fabric of an immanent metaphysical buddhahood understood as pervading all things but rather to set them apart as buddhas in the more traditional sense: individuals whose words and actions Buddhists consider religiously authoritative and exemplary to the maximum degree, by virtue of those individuals having achieved the highest possible religious attainment.

The tension between the idea that buddhahood either categorically transcends or pervades the cosmos, on the one hand, and the assumption built into ceremonies of ascending the hall that buddhahood is an authoritative status that might be ascribed only to a select few individuals, on the other, could never be fully resolved. Instead, ascending the hall became a ritual

[87] 根塵雖同於法體, 相表特異於幻形. *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2061, 50: 766a17; translation adapted from Poceski, *Records of Mazu*, 260.

[88] Bernard Faure writes of this shift away from valorizing supernatural powers among Chan Buddhists in the Song: "Chan had to affirm *shentong* [supernatural powers] as a *weapon* in its rivalry with Daoism and indigenous cults when it was trying to gain ground in Chinese society and to expand geographically. Once firmly established, it chose to draw closer to Confucianism and to shift toward the other pole of Chinese ideology," as well as to prioritize the ideal of the bodhisattva. Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 125. The rejection of supernatural powers also shaped the reception of Chan (as Zen) in Japan; see Carl Bielefeldt, "Disarming the Superpowers: The *Abhijna* in Eisai and Dōgen," in *Dōgen: Textual and Historical Studies*, ed. Steven Heine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 193–206.

and literary space wherein this tension and the provisional rhetorical solutions Chan masters offered in response could play out again and again. The explicit metasemiotic discussions about what signs index buddhahood that we have considered in this section likely helped Chan Buddhists prevent the ceremony from devolving into semiotic incoherence and instead bring about the desired end of identifying Chan mastery with buddhahood. But successfully achieving that identification was not necessarily guaranteed. Such discussions, in other words, may have constituted an important part of the contingent process by which Chan masters came to be ritually treated like buddhas.

The questions posed to Chan masters that we have considered in this section draw attention to the powerful narrative infrastructure of Buddhist scriptures, which regularly mobilize raining flowers, earthquakes, adoration from gods, and other miraculous phenomena to reaffirm the Buddha Śākyamuni's uniquely exalted status. By contrast, in the live ritual setting of opening the hall and ascending the hall ceremonies, as well as in literary representations of these ceremonies, we witness an open recognition that no such spectacular signs could be called on to verify a Song period Chan master's authority. Although this recognition might seem like common sense to us, it bears emphasizing that in the Song dynasty it constituted a break from established norms of Buddhist authority. As I have just suggested, it was common for eminent Buddhist monastics in medieval China, including Chan masters, to be credited with thaumaturgic powers and special bodily appearances. Ascending the hall ceremonies thus provided space for Chan Buddhists to creatively reimagine how likeness to the Buddha's example ought to figure into Chinese Buddhist understandings of authority.

By elaborating a new normative paradigm according to which there was no way to compellingly imitate the miracles attending the Buddha's sermons, Chan Buddhists did not just participate in deconstructing the concept of buddhahood in the style of the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures. They also cleared the way for a new, Chan-specific understanding of buddhahood in the traditional sense of a personal status carrying maximum Buddhist authority. In so doing, they addressed their own unlikeness to the Buddha and proactively incorporated this unlikeness into the ceremonial proceedings of ascending the hall itself—making unlikeness into a feature of Chan mastery as buddhahood, rather than a bug, as it were. Ceremonies of opening the hall, and literary representations of this ceremony, thus ended up providing Chan Buddhists with the occasion to translate the concept of buddhahood as a personal status from an almost unimaginably lofty station reserved for the Buddha Śākyamuni and the other buddhas of the Mahayana pantheon into a status that might be plausibly ascribed to a living Chinese person.

Yet as I suggested in the previous section, following Silverstein and Urban, ceremonies of ascending the hall were "contextually contingent semiotic

processes."[89] The fact of their contingency means that any given ascending the hall ceremony might succeed or fail in convincing the audience that the Chan master really deserves to be treated like a buddha, depending on factors that can be determined only by examining particular cases. If ritual success sometimes involved the rhetorical embrace of a Chan master's own unspectacular appearance and inability to perform miracles as signs of a deeper authenticity, ritual failure occurred, I argue, when some feature of the Chan master's buddha unlikeness—typically brought to everyone's attention by a member of the audience—proved too much for the master to discursively assimilate. Such a situation resulted in the unfortunate revelation that the master in question was no buddha at all but rather just an ordinary human person undeserving of the exalted status attached to a public monastery abbacy. In the next section, we turn to writings about ascending the hall written primarily by literati, which provide examples of how ritual failure might have looked in Chan ceremonies of ascending the hall. The examples we analyze offer a new perspective on how ascending the hall worked both soteriologically and socially, as part of a complex Song dynasty world, and demonstrate that there were limits on Chan Buddhists' abilities to convince audiences that any mundane sign at all might index buddhahood.

III. WHAT COULD GO WRONG IN CHAN RITUAL?

The *Pure Rules for Chan Monasteries*, the earliest extant monastic code expressly written for the administration of public Chan monasteries, concludes its instructions for the routine performance of the ascending the hall ceremony with the following warning: "If a questioner should say something funny, you may not burst out laughing or even break a smile. You should maintain a demeanor of sincerity and solemnity while listening to the profound sound [of the abbot's words]."[90] On the one hand, this injunction implies a normative expectation that ascending the hall is serious business, not a laughing matter. On the other hand, this passage also bespeaks concern about the possibility that members of the audience might disrupt the ceremony's formal tone, indeed might subvert or make a mockery of the master's authority.

In his article on Buddhist ritual, Sharf argues that a Chan master's performance while ascending the hall had to "be impeccable lest the metalinguistic frame be ruptured," implying the possibility of ritual failure—that is, the possibility that an incompetent performance might lead to a Chan master's failure

[89] Silverstein and Urban, "Natural History of Discourse," 2.

[90] 如問話人有可笑之事, 不得喧堂大笑及破顏微哂. 當生慇重肅聽玄音. *Chanyuan qinggui*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1245, 63: 527b19–20. Translation follows Yifa, *Origins of Buddhist Monastic Codes*, 136, with alterations.

to compellingly perform buddhahood.[91] Sharf does not further pursue this avenue of analysis, but more recent scholarship on the subject of ritual failure invites us to seek out records of the ceremony going wrong. Scholars have begun to show that ritual cultures across the world have always been shaped in complex ways by the possibility that some important aspect of a ritual might fail.[92] The study of ritual mishaps is not just a morbid curiosity, because these mishaps often reveal something important about the social worlds in which the rituals in question take place. As Edward L. Schieffelin writes in his introduction to an edited volume on the subject of ritual failure, "important aspects of the actual play of social forces between the ritual and wider social domain . . . may be difficult to see in the smooth surfaces of well-done rituals performed in conventional circumstances. But rituals that are flawed or that fail can provide the opportunity to see them."[93]

In this section, I consider a handful of records written by Song period literati that bespeak the ascending the hall ceremony's vulnerability to ritual failure. Such accounts provide outsider perspectives on the ceremony of a kind that we do not easily find in Chan literature proper. Of course, this is not to say that literati were uniformly or even typically hostile to Chan. On the contrary, support from literati was integral to the Chan tradition's success.[94] We even have surviving examples of certain literati expressing appreciation for the ceremony of ascending the hall. In a commemorative inscription for Yanxiang Temple 延祥寺 on Mount Luofu 羅浮山 in Huizhou 惠州 (present-day Guangdong), for example, Yu Jing 余靖 (1000–1064) wrote of the monastery's abbot, Chan master Yunda Shaolong 雲達紹隆 (d.u.): "In the [Dharma] hall, listening to Master [Yun]da's exchanges of question and answer [with members of the audience], one knows that his words match the occasion."[95] As another example, in his preface to a now-lost discourse record for Chan master Donglin Zhaojue 東林照覺 (1025–91), the imperial official Huang Shang 黃裳 (1044–1130) introduced what he saw as distinguishing features of the Chan tradition: "As for Chan teachings, they draw people in and move them to awakening. Opening the hall and ascending the [high] seat, [Chan masters] respond to questions as they come, their rapid technique flashing like

[91] Sharf, "Ritual," 266.

[92] See esp. Ute Hüsken, ed., *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); and Michael David Kaulana Ing, *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[93] Edward L. Schieffelin, "Introduction," in Hüsken, *When Rituals Go Wrong*, 18.

[94] See Mark Halperin, *Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960–1279* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006); Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*; and Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, chap. 3.

[95] 於其堂, 聞達師之問答, 而知其言之當. Yu Jing, "Huizhou Luofu shan Yanxiang si ji" 惠州羅浮山延祥寺記, in *Wuxi ji* 武溪集, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taibei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1983), *juan* [j.] 9, 20a.

lightning, their marvelous talk biting off the arrowhead [of arrow-like questions 'shot' from the audience]."[96] Huang goes on to describe how he read Donglin's discourse record, which was compiled by a disciple, before actually meeting Donglin in person, and he repeats the same words about lightning-quick technique to praise Donglin's particular performative style as narrated in his discourse record.[97] These passages offer concrete examples of the process by which the ceremony of ascending the hall was conventionalized as the paradigmatic space within which the contours of Chan identity could be worked out, not only among Buddhist monastics but also in the minds of a larger elite public, at the interface of ritual and literature.

If these words of praise for ascending the hall reinforce the sense we get from Chan discourse record literature of Chan ritual's performative power, however, other writings by literati that critically discuss the ceremony's ritual fragility, failure, or artifice offer a striking contrast to accounts of ascending the hall contained in Chan discourse records. Taking them together, we can treat these different kinds of sources as complementary and use them to reconstruct a fuller picture of this ceremony's real-life dynamics than each source provides independently. By offering the perspective of members of the ascending the hall ceremony's audience, literati writings enhance our sense of the ceremony's basic interactivity. As we will see, the circumstances under which the ascending the hall ceremony failed to present the abbot as a buddha can be attributed not only to incompetence on the part of the abbot presiding over the ceremony but also to a variety of factors outside of the abbot's control.

An anecdote preserved in the writings of the literatus Zeng Minxing 曾敏行 (1118–75) offers an example of how the ascending the hall ceremony might go wrong:

> There was a certain monk who came from a family of butchers. As he took up the study of Chan after becoming a monk, he became quite arrogant. His family wanted to cut him down to size, so they waited for him to ascend the hall, then told one of his disciples to pose the following question: "Is Chan also found on the butcher's table?" The monk replied: "Bring two catties of a fine cut." Instead of accepting this response and proceeding to the next phrase, the questioner suddenly fell silent, then laughingly said to the monk: "Do you want to eat it?" Everyone listening collapsed in laughter.[98]

[96] 復為禪教引物而感悟之. 開堂升坐, 隨問而應, 迅機激電, 妙談齧鏃. Huang Shang, "Donglin ji xu" 東林集叙, in *Yanshan ji* 演山集, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu*, j. 19, 5a. The trope of biting off the head of an oncoming arrow comes from a story about the Sui dynasty (581–618) master of archery Du Junmo 督君謨 (d.u.). See *Zuting shiyuan*, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1261, 64: 397c20–398a1.

[97] Huang, "Donglin ji xu," in *Yanshan ji*, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu*, j. 19, 6a.

[98] 又一僧本屠家子, 既為僧, 頗以禪學自負, 家欲折之, 伺其升堂, 教其徒往問曰:「賣肉床頭也有禪.」其僧就答云:「精底斫二斤來.」問者初未授教下句, 倉猝無言, 乃笑謂僧曰:「汝欲吃耶?」聞者絕倒. *Duxing zazhi* 獨醒雜志, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu*, j. 10, 6b.

The basic premise of this story is easy enough to follow. Members of a certain Chan master's family, annoyed at how conceited he has become since being admitted into a Chan lineage and accepting appointment to the abbacy of a public monastery, deliberately sabotage his performance of the ascending the hall ceremony, humiliating him in front of the entire assembly and precipitating a dramatic ritual failure. Beyond these essentials, some of the details of the exchange by which this conclusion is reached are worth unpacking.

The question first posed to the abbot in this scene—"Is Chan also found on the butcher's table?"—alludes to a story about Tang period Chan master Baoji 寶積 (fl. eighth century) but only found in materials dating from the Song dynasty onward. According to the story, Baoji was begging for alms in the marketplace when he overheard a conversation between a butcher and his customer. When the customer requested the butcher "bring one catty of a fine cut," the butcher put down his knife, joined his palms together, and replied: "Sir, which [cut] is not fine?" Hearing this unexpectedly "Channish" rejection of dualism coming from a butcher—a profession of low social standing that was especially deplored by Chinese Buddhists, who were expected to be vegetarian, for its role in the slaughter and consumption of living beings—Baoji suddenly attained awakening.[99] In the end, Baoji "found Chan" in an unexpected place—on the butcher's table. Song period readers of this story familiar with the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 would likely have noticed that it loosely recalls that collection's portrayal of the sagely Butcher Ding.[100] The story also participates in the larger Chan project of proposing that buddhahood or enlightenment can be found in mundane and even impure material objects and activities—here, meat and butchery—and by extension that anything at all in the phenomenal world might index buddhahood.

From Zeng's anecdote, however, we learn that the association of butchery with sagehood and of impure objects with buddhahood found in certain literary and religious contexts did not necessarily carry over to evaluations of the living abbot of a public Chan monastery. Instead, the ascending the hall ceremony is shown here to involve a much more complex negotiation of the semiotics of authority. Not having known about the question posed to him in advance, the quick reply offered by the abbot in Zeng's story can only be explained by his ready command over a vast canon of Chan literature. Little does the abbot know, however, that he has been set up; his Dharma family and his natal family are conspiring against him. In fact, the question is designed to allude not only to the famous story of Baoji's awakening but also

[99] *Liandeng huiyao* 聯燈會要, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1557, 79: 45a3–5.

[100] Yang Liuqiao 楊柳橋, *Zhuangzi yizhu* 莊子譯注, 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chuban she, 2007), 1:34–35; translated in Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 19–20.

to the abbot's own family roots in the profession of butchery. When his disciple declines to continue reciting the established dialogue—presumably his expected next line would have been "which cut is not fine?"—and goes off script, asking instead whether the abbot would like to eat the meat, the abbot loses all control over the ceremony as he is made a fool in front of the assembly. The audience's reaction suggests a shared familiarity with the abbot's family background, which—it turned out—no amount of ritual framing could make disappear. Ironically, the introduction into the ritual arena of a story that implies butchers too might be enlightened sages ends up revealing the audience's assumption that it is absurd for a butcher's son to act like a buddha.

Stories like this of disastrous ascending the hall ceremonies are seldom found in Chan literature proper, for the obvious reason that they make both the abbot in question and the tradition as a whole look bad. Of course, just because this story provides an outsider perspective does not mean we know whether anything like it ever really happened. Zeng does not seem to have held Chan in particularly high esteem and thus may be an unreliable witness to Chan monastic life.[101] Nonetheless, Zeng's story does reveal familiarity with Chan literature and ritual, lending it some credibility. In any case, by showing how a Chan master might have been made a laughingstock during the ascending the hall ceremony, Zeng's story perfectly complements the warning against subversive laughter found in the *Pure Rules*. It offers a glimpse of the way stories of ascending the hall ceremonies—perhaps especially stories that shed unflattering light on the master in question—might have circulated as gossip inside and outside of Chan monastic communities. It suggests a hunger on the part of literati skeptical of the authority that had come to be ascribed to Chan Buddhists—and even, somewhat perversely, on the part of a Chan master's own disciples—to see that authority publicly undermined. And it also demonstrates the limits of measuring a Chan master's authority according to the framework of reenactment. Here, the abbot's deep familiarity with Chan literature and ability to recite it from memory might actually distract him from seeing other possible implications of his disciple's question. He is quick enough to reenact a canonical dialogue but not quick enough to recognize a live threat.

Moreover, precisely because the source of subversion in this story originates from an unlikely source—the Chan master's own natal family—it offers a vivid sense of the unexpected contingencies that could emerge and threaten an abbot's authority during the ascending the hall ceremony. Although the master might be faulted for not seeing his humiliation coming when the topic of butchery was introduced, it would be unfair to lay the blame

[101] Zeng's use of the term "monk" to refer to the abbot, e.g., suggests a refusal to respect the master's authority as categorically different from that of ordinary monks.

for this outcome on his ritual incompetence. Instead, the abbot's family background—and perhaps also his reputation for arrogance—introduces an excess of buddha unlikeness into the ritual arena. This unlikeness, made manifest for all to see, ends up breaking the ritual frame according to which Chan masters were customarily treated as buddhas during ceremonies of ascending the hall. Put otherwise, on this occasion, signs indexing the abbot's socially disdained identity as a butcher's son overwhelm other signs built into the ritual's structure that index the socially esteemed identities of buddha and Chan master.

Another anecdote contained in Zeng's writings sheds further light on dangers to the Chan master's authority during the ascending the hall ceremony. This story concerns the ceremony of "opening the hall," an abbot's inaugural ascending the hall performance after being appointed to an abbacy, which served as our main focus in the previous section. Opening the hall ceremonies drew an especially large crowd. They were attended not only by the entire monastic assembly but also by government officials involved in or concerned with the abbot's appointment. Most of the time, this ceremony probably went smoothly, heralding an auspicious start to the newly appointed Chan master's career. But with so many important people in attendance, pressure on abbots to give a compelling performance was likely correspondingly high. At times, objections to the appointment of a particular Chan lineage member to a given abbacy spilled into the ritual space of the ceremony's question-and-answer session. In such cases, interruptions threatened to more seriously undermine the abbot's authority than they would during a typical ascending the hall ceremony.

Zeng writes:

> In the [ritual] dialogues of Chan monks, their words resemble those of comic theater. It is recorded that at a certain Chan monastery, every time a [new] abbot opened the hall, he would always be embarrassed by a court actor [in attendance]. Later, when appointing a new monk [to the same abbacy], [officials and monks involved in the appointment] had first to send this actor a bribe, and only then would he listen patiently [to the abbot's words]. If onlookers observed this person's interaction [with a newly appointed abbot during the ceremony], they could determine whether the abbot was capable [of doing the job] or not.[102]

This passage helps make clear how much was at stake for any newly appointed abbot during the opening the hall ceremony. Zeng tells us that bystanders in

[102] 禪僧問話, 語幾於俳. 嘗記一禪寺, 每主僧開堂, 輒為—伶官所窘. 後遇易僧, 必先致賂, 乃始委折聽服. 蓋旁觀者以其人之應酬,卜主僧之能否也. *Duxing zazhi*, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu*, j. 10, 6a. On this passage, see also Kanai Noriyuki 金井徳幸, "Sōdai zensetsu no jūji sajū to sono shūhen: Sō no yugyō to shomin no shinkō" 宋代禅刹の住持差充とその周辺—僧の遊行と庶民の信仰, *Zen bunka kenkyūjo kiyō* 禅文化研究所紀要 26 (2002): 171.

the audience would have been curious to know whether the new abbot would pass muster, implying that powerful people were evaluating the abbot's abilities during the ceremony and judging his viability as a long-term holder of the office and suggesting that favorable judgment was not guaranteed. Officials and monastics involved in the appointment, having presumably heard about the newly appointed abbot's reputation, would have been curious to see the master's skills firsthand. Given that the abbot's reputation played an important role in a monastery's capacity to fund raise, attract enthusiastic congregants, and build prestige for the local community vis-à-vis other communities and the imperial center, it is easy to imagine that a poor performance while opening the hall might bode ill for a Chan master's larger career.[103] Indeed, other anecdotes preserved in Chan literature suggest that officials who disliked a particular abbot could make life difficult for him and effectively force him out of the position.[104]

The story goes on to narrate how an especially capable abbot finally came along and confronted the actor, in the end upstaging him and earning his respect. This ending implies that earlier attempts to bribe the actor to not disrupt the ceremony merely covered up what may really have been those abbots' ritual inadequacy. Zeng leaves to our imagination how, exactly, this actor might have deliberately "embarrassed" (*jiong* 窘) newly appointed abbots as they attempted to open the hall of this Chan monastery. But the troublemaker's profession—acting—is suggestive.[105] An actor would likely have been attuned to the ceremony's subtle performative dynamics. Yet as an outsider to the tradition, this person is here portrayed as using that skill not to participate in the ceremony and help maintain its ritual frame but instead to sabotage it. Indeed, court theater in the Song was known to satirize government ministers, so it is perhaps no surprise that an actor plays a subversive role in this anecdote.[106]

[103] On the abbot's role in fund-raising, see Liu Changdong 劉長東, *Songdai fojiao zhengce lungao* 宋代佛教政策論稿 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2005), 240. On the abbot's importance for generating communal prestige, see Halperin, *Out of the Cloister*, 134–35 and 209–10. Indeed, a community's desire to recruit only the best abbots to their local monastery was one reason previously private monasteries were made public; see Liu, *Songdai fojiao zhengce lungao*, 241.

[104] In one such case, we are told that harassment by a government official led Chan master Lingyuan Weiqing 靈源惟清 (d. 1117) to write to another Chan master in complaint and eventually to obtain appointment at a different public monastery; *Chanlin baoxun* 禪林寶訓, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2022, 48: 1029b19–24.

[105] It is not exactly clear to me what kind of actor this person was. The term Zeng uses, *lingguan* 伶官, implies association with the music and theater performed at court, while his introduction of the anecdote as demonstrating Chan ritual's likeness to comic theater suggests that this actor may have been involved in that particular kind of theater.

[106] See Deng Qiaobin 鄧喬彬 and Xia Lingwei 夏令偉, "Songdai huajixi yu zaixiang" 宋代滑稽戲與宰相, *Qilu xuekan* 齊魯學刊, no. 6 (2008): 115–20.

For Zeng, the actor's role in the story also seems to suggest that the entire ceremony is artificial, nothing more than theater.[107] Indeed, Zeng implies that precisely the ascending the hall ceremony's special combination of the vernacular speech and dramatic gestures conventional of Chan mastery with the solemn ritual pageantry of worshiping a buddha image invites comic subversion from the audience. By comparing Chan ritual to comic theater in particular, Zeng seems to dispute the ceremony's framing solemnity, implying that the whole thing is ultimately a farce. In the person of a professional actor, Zeng suggests, Chan abbots meet their match. Zeng here stands in for a skeptical member of the ceremony's audience who, faced with an array of signs indexing various identities that might be ascribed to the abbot, concludes that the ceremony's likeness to comic theater overpowers its likeness to serious worship. In Zeng's account, the Chan master's ritual behavior indexes not the identity of Chan master or buddha but rather that of an actor playing the role of a clown.

Alongside Zeng's description of episodes in which Chan ceremonies of ascending the hall are disrupted, two other passages from the writings of Song period literati suggest that even in the absence of overt disruption, members of the ceremony's audience might have been concerned about a perceived disjuncture between the master's ceremonial buddha status and the same master's actual level of religious attainment. First, in a commemorative inscription for a Chan monastery, the famous poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101)—who in other contexts was an avowed enthusiast of Chan—wrote disapprovingly of the ways he perceived many Chan masters as seeking at all costs to maintain their authority while ascending the hall: "Administering their absurd speech, pulling up their robes and ascending the high seat, composedly engaging in question and answer [with the audience], [Chan abbots] are called 'venerable.' [Yet] when I've investigated their words, I've found that in general they labor to be unknowable, they lay out their weapons to counter their enemies, they hide their bodily forms to protect against defeat. If embarrassed [by a question], they fall into fluttery evasion and cannot be grasped. That's all there is to it."[108] In this passage, Su casts the ascending the hall ceremony as an empty show of the trappings of authority attending the master's ritual position. At the same time, Su's focus on the various measures abbots use to avoid

[107] In comparing Chan ritual to comic theater, Zeng echoed the famously anti-Buddhist literatus Hu Yin 胡寅 (1098–1156), who criticized the *Jingde chuandeng lu* in similar terms. See his "Chuandeng yuying jielu xu" 傳燈玉英節録序, in *Chongzheng bian, Feiran ji* 崇正辩, 斐然集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), j. 19, vol. 2, 399; quoted in Liao Chao-heng 廖肇亨, "Chanmen shuo xi: Yige fojiao wenhua shi guandian de changshi" 禪門説戲: 一個佛教文化史觀點的嘗試, *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 17, no. 2 (1999): 288.

[108] 治其荒唐之說, 攝衣升坐, 問荅自若, 謂之長老. 吾嘗究其語矣, 大抵務為不可知, 設械以應敵, 匿形以備敗, 窘則推墮滉漾中, 不可捕捉, 如是而已矣. Su Shi, "Zhonghe shengxiang yuan ji" 中和勝相院記, in *Su Shi wenji* 蘇軾文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), j. 12, vol. 2, 384.

"embarrassment" (*jiong*, the same word used by Zeng)—whether fighting back against perceived challenges from the audience or retreating into obscure language to avoid being caught in some misstep—reinforces our sense that Chan masters really did sometimes face potential challenges to their dignity and authority during the ascending the hall ceremony.

As a final example, a ghost story contained in the Southern Song *Record of the Listener* (*Yijian zhi* 夷堅志), a collection of anecdotes narrating tales of the supernatural compiled by Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202), goes beyond Su's skepticism to envision undeserving abbots who wrongly accepted ritual worship while ascending the hall being punished for this crime in the afterlife. In the story, a monk traveling to the Tiantai mountains loses his way and, wandering uncertainly, ends up at a large and well-kept mountain monastery whose identity is unknown to him. Finding it odd that such a remote monastery is so nicely maintained, he curiously enters the Dharma hall and sees a group of abbots sitting silently in front of the assembled monks in the audience. He is about to ask what is going on when someone waves at him to keep quiet, so instead he retreats to observe the scene from the nearby sangha hall. Soon he hears the first abbot invited to ascend the hall (*shengtang* 升堂). The abbot, amid wails of anguish, sits down in the high seat. Suddenly, he bursts into flames that quickly consume his entire body, not even leaving ashes behind. Then the next abbot in line is summoned to meet the same fate. Asking a nearby clerk for an explanation, the protagonist is told: "[These men] lived out their lives with no regard for the monastic precepts. Wrongly serving as monastery abbots, they slandered the correct Dharma of the Buddha, so now they're suffering this fate."[109]

The phantom ascending the hall ceremony described in this story, in which abbots' postmortem spirits are ritually immolated by a higher cosmic authority, stages a kind of poetic justice coming to fraudulent abbots by inverting the ceremonial logic of the very ritual in which those abbots were worshiped while alive. Instead of being celebrated, these abbots ascend the hall only to be ceremonially punished. The lack of ashes left behind after their immolation suggests that, unlike buddhas or eminent masters, their bodies produced no sacred relics. Although this story does not explicitly single out the Chan tradition for censure, its explicit mention of ascending the hall and the dominant position of Chan lineage members in elite Song period abbacies suggest that the story was likely intended to criticize the exalted ritual treatment to which Chan masters were subject. The close interconnection between live

[109] 平生無戒業, 妄作住持人, 謗佛正法, 故受此報. *Yijian zhi*, ed. He Zhuo 何卓 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), *jiazhi* 甲志, j. 15, vol. 1, 133. On the *Yijian zhi* as a whole, see Alister David Inglis, *Hong Mai's "Record of the Listener" and Its Song Dynasty Context* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).

ritual performance and the literary representation of that performance, moreover, means that this story amounted to a kind of literary subversion of the ascending the hall ceremony's ritual frame unfolding in the imagined realm of the dead. Even if Chan masters succeeded in passing muster as buddhas during live ceremonies of opening the hall, the story implies, those same masters might still be subject to a higher judgment of their authenticity after their death—a judgment that even the most finely honed rhetorical skill could not evade.

Chan Buddhists themselves sometimes voiced similar concerns. For example, a treatise attributed to Chan master Fayan Wenyi 法眼文益 (885–958) warns against those who "only know how to strive to become abbots. Unscrupulously calling themselves accomplished masters, they covet empty titles. Needless to say, they bring calamity on themselves, deafen and blind later generations, and wither and destroy the [Chan tradition's] teaching style. For ascending the broad and high seat of the Dharma King, they will end up prostrate on an iron bed [suffering punishment in hell]."[110] Fayan's warning is noteworthy not only because it bespeaks concern with the prospect of a Chan master's proper authority being fraudulently usurped by unscrupulous members of the tradition, and because it anticipates the threat of postmortem punishment narrated in the *Record of the Listener*, but also because it hinges on a comparison of likeness quite unlike the homology between ascending the hall and worshipping a buddha image. Instead, Fayan likens the high seat properly belonging to a "Dharma King" (another honorific term for the Buddha) to which a false Chan abbot ritually ascends to the iron bed of karmic punishment that awaits the fraudster in hell. Other warnings like this one were issued elsewhere in Chan literature as well.[111]

In his analysis of the ascending the hall ceremony, Sharf writes: "Chan enlightenment does not entail, in any literal sense, the elimination of passion, fear, doubt, and desire from one's karmic storehouse. The Chan tradition itself would seem to concur: the literature is filled with tales of masters who brazenly express their love of life, their aversion to death, their moments of doubt and melancholy. Such attitudes are, in the end, simply irrelevant to the process of 'ritual transduction' wherein one is transformed into a buddha."[112] Because this ritual transduction happens in the presence of audiences

[110] 但知急務住持. 濫稱知識, 且貴虛名在世. 寧論襲惡於身, 不惟聾瞽後人, 抑亦凋弊風教. 登法王高廣之坐, 寧臥鐵床. *Zongmen shigui lun* 宗門十規論, in *Xuzangjing*, no. 1226, 63: 37a14–17. Translation follows Benjamin Brose, "Disorienting Medicine: Fayan Wenyi's *Ten Admonishments for the Lineage*," *Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 28 (2015): 170–71, with minor changes.

[111] See, e.g., *Chanlin baoxun*, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 2022, 48: 1033b4–6.

[112] Sharf, "Ritual," 266–67.

to the ascending the hall ceremony, Sharf's theory implies that those audiences participated in the ceremony subjunctively, as a virtual world set apart from mundane life, in which the question of whether any given Chan master had truly attained a status resembling buddhahood was simply never asked. Sharf proposes that this ritual bracketing of the master's spiritual qualifications to perform buddhahood did not involve anyone's bad faith because it accords with the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness. "From a Chan perspective," Sharf writes, "the transformation of the abbot into a living buddha through the manipulation of metalinguistic framing rules is consonant with the appreciation of the intrinsic emptiness of all dependently arisen things."[113]

Yet the examples we have considered in this section suggest that we cannot look only to Chan Buddhists' professed doctrinal commitments to understand what ascending the hall meant and to whom. As we have seen, Chan Buddhists often drew on the *Diamond Sutra*'s apophatic criticism of signs as ultimately "empty," even as they proposed that buddhahood can be indexed by any and all phenomenal signs. Such ideas of buddhahood's categorical transcendence or immanence were manifestly central to Chan soteriology, and they were also rhetorically important to the Chan master's ritual performance of buddhahood during the ceremony of ascending the hall. But the story from the *Record of the Listener* that we just considered, along with warnings from Chan masters themselves about the danger of unqualified claimants to Chan authority, implies that at least some people did care whether abbots of public Chan monasteries really were what their office and ritual activities claimed them to be—liberated, buddha-like masters who could be counted on to provide authentic models of spiritual realization for their communities. Such cases offer further evidence that ascending the hall was an unavoidably social activity, in which Chan abbots enacted the Chan tradition's authority in a public setting and thereby justified the tradition's privileged access over other traditions to elite abbacies. For Chan masters serving as abbots of public monasteries to act like buddhas while ascending the hall, then break their monastic vows or commit other misdeeds in private, was evidently perceived by some (perhaps by many) as not only a betrayal of public trust but also a violation of cosmic law. To put it another way, it is possible that ritual framing could succeed in bracketing certain aspects of an abbot's personality perceived as ill fitting the ritual status of buddhahood, but certain behavior was nonetheless viewed as beyond the pale, rendering the abbot unacceptably un-buddha-like.

Following Sharf's lead in his analysis of contemporary Zen ritual, Erez Joskovich entertains a hypothetical objection to the theory of ritual subjunctivity that "a talented actor can impersonate awakening without actually experiencing it" but counters that such an objection "stem[s] from a pragmatic,

[113] Sharf, "Ritual," 267.

positivist, and essentially protestant view of religion, which emphasizes faith over ritual and private spiritual conviction over public ceremony."[114] An objection like this is "alien to the Buddhist tradition," he proposes, because "in Zen, awakening is not merely a mental or psychological state; rather, it is manifested in body, conduct, and actions."[115] Sharf's and Joskovich's critiques of past scholarly overemphasis on the purported interiority of enlightenment are well taken, and like Sharf's analysis of Buddhist ritual generally, Joskovich's study of Zen ritual has much to offer. But just because interiority has been overemphasized does not mean it should be written out of the picture completely. By ruling out the possibility that Buddhists might be concerned about distinguishing authentic realization from fakery in ritual contexts, I worry Sharf and Joskovich foreclose a potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry. Taken together, Zeng Minxing's critical comparison of Chan ritual to comic theater, Su Shi's criticism of Chan masters seeking by ritual performance chiefly to maintain their high social standing, the story of Chan abbots' postmortem ritual immolation found in the *Record of the Listener*, and the warnings issued from within the Chan tradition against unqualified abbots make clear that the idea of Chan masters faking lofty spiritual attainment for the sake of worldly benefit is not entirely alien to the Buddhist tradition, at least insofar as that tradition was embedded in Song dynasty society. Beyond the Song, too, we see echoes of similar concerns about Chan ritual's authenticity. When Chan Buddhists attempted to revivify the ascending the hall ceremony in the seventeenth century following a period of the tradition's institutional decline, they looked to Song period discourse records for inspiration. Jiang Wu writes that "to make this revived Chan tradition appear to be authentic, Chan masters had to repeat or imitate what had been recorded in Chan texts," eliciting criticism from literati and even the emperor on the grounds "that this kind of performance was extremely artificial and no different from a theatrical performance."[116]

The *Record of the Listener* story we just considered in particular complicates Joskovich's suggestion that Chan or Zen awakening has always been understood to be straightforwardly "manifested in body, conduct, and actions," because that story describes Chan masters acting in two contradictory ways at once: publicly acting as respected abbots setting a good behavioral example for their monasteries while privately acting in violation of their monastic vows. Because this story stages a postmortem punishment coming to such false abbots, we are made to understand that those abbots got away with

[114] Erez Joskovich, "Playing the Patriarch: Representation and Transformation in the Zen Sermon," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2017): 487.

[115] Joskovich, "Playing the Patriarch," 487.

[116] Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment in Dispute: The Reinvention of Chan Buddhism in Seventeenth-Century China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 158–59.

it while they were alive: their public actions were successfully deceptive and their private actions were successfully hidden. The story, in other words, cautions people who might attend ceremonies of ascending the hall or read about such ceremonies in Chan literature to be on guard against fraudulent masters and to use their own judgment to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate wielders of the religious authority that elite society granted to Chan abbots.

Unlike metaphysical understandings of buddhahood as categorically transcendent or immanent, older understandings of buddhahood—as a status attached to a single or select few individuals deemed religiously authoritative to the maximum degree—treated that status as fundamentally relational. Like buddhahood in this older sense, Chan mastery was defined, in the Song, by the choice not merely to pursue one's own awakening but to serve as "teacher of humans and gods" (*ren tian shi* 人天師)—an epithet traditionally reserved for the Buddha that Chan Buddhists and their lay supporters appropriated to describe the ideal Chan master.[117] This relationality meant that ritual success did not depend only on the actions and abilities of the abbot. Instead, success emerged contingently out of the interaction between abbot and audience. The very possibility that the ceremony's ritual frame might break down evidently sometimes shaped the ceremony's proceedings, leading to the perception among some critics of Chan that abbots ascending the hall were chiefly concerned with maintaining their authority and avoiding embarrassment. At the same time, we can see how contingency provided precisely the dynamic context within which Chan Buddhists were able to creatively reinvent the personal status of buddhahood in Chan terms.

In this section, we have observed that a Chan master's authority during the ascending the hall ceremony was vulnerable to subversion from a variety of contingencies. These interruptions might seem utterly mundane, unrelated to questions of buddhahood. Yet however mundane these sources of contingency might seem, they were always closely bound up with problems of soteriology, because, as we have seen, ascending the hall always involved the Chan master's performance of buddhahood. What is more, since Chan Buddhists claimed to fully embrace the mundane itself as imbued with buddhahood, mundane interruptions of ascending the hall ceremonies that precipitated ritual failure carried not just social but also soteriological significance.

As we saw in the previous section, a recurring feature of ceremonies of opening the hall was the ritual negotiation of buddhahood's contours, by means of which abbots—having been explicitly compared to the Buddha Śākyamuni—used various rhetorical methods to address and overcome their own unlikeness to the Buddha. Chan masters were ritually established as buddhas only in and through such negotiations. Situations in which mundane

[117] Buckelew, "Becoming Chinese Buddhas," 397 n. 93.

contingencies broke the ritual frame are thus significant because they mark occasions when the Chan master's capacity to integrate unlikeness into a new form of distinctively Chinese buddhahood was overwhelmed. Such occasions, in other words, mark the limits of buddhahood's figural flexibility, demonstrating that if certain living individuals are to be ritually treated as buddhas and have their discourse records regarded as authoritatively equivalent to scriptures, some bonds of likeness must remain intact.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to the famous Tang period Chan Buddhist scholar-monk Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780–841), "the realization that one was a Buddha was not sufficient to guarantee that one acted like a Buddha," writes Peter Gregory.[118] Like Zongmi, Song period Chan Buddhists were committed to the doctrinal concept that "all sentient beings possess buddha-nature," first articulated in China in Dharmakṣema's fifth-century Chinese translation of the *Nirvana Sutra*.[119] Chinese commentaries on this scripture took its universalist premise even further, suggesting that by simply bearing witness to one's innate buddha nature, one will thereby become a buddha (*jianxing chengfo* 見性成佛)—a soteriological concept widely repeated in Chan literature.[120] Everyone is already a buddha, these Buddhists argued; they just do not know it yet.

Because academic studies of Chan Buddhism have often emphasized the moment of awakening to one's inherent buddhahood as central to the tradition's soteriological program, we might be tempted to interpret the phrase "see one's nature and become a buddha" as implying that awakening marked the crucial moment when living buddhas were imagined to distinguish themselves from passive possessors of buddhahood. Yet Zongmi's caveat—that even those who realize they are buddhas must somehow learn to act like buddhas—suggests that knowledge alone was not always considered sufficient to bring about this change in status on which so much depended. To fully activate buddhahood, one had to act. Indeed, without some kind of externally recognizable sign, no one could possibly know the inner state of an awakened person's mind one way or the other.

[118] Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 153.

[119] See Mark L. Blum, *The Nirvana Sutra (Mahāparanirvāna-Sūtra)*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai America, 2013), xiii–xvii.

[120] The phrase originates in a sixth-century Chinese commentary on the *Nirvana Sūtra*, entitled *Da banniepan jing jijie* 大般涅槃經集解, in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, no. 1763, 37: 490c25–491a3. Yanagida Seizan discusses the phrase's adoption by Chan Buddhists in *Yanagida Seizan shū dai ikkan: Zen bukkyō no kenkyū* 柳田聖山集第一巻—禅仏教の研究 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1999), 448–49.

But what exactly did it mean to act like a buddha in China? It is clear that Chan Buddhists could not ascend the hall and hope to be ritually recognized as living buddhas by mimicking the Buddha's actions or mouthing his words, as those actions and words are narrated in Buddhist scriptures. Yet neither was it self-evident in Zongmi's time, or even at the advent of the Song dynasty, that the way Chan masters spoke and engaged in dialogue with disciples might be equivalent to the Buddha's preaching. To seem plausible to a critical mass of the elite public (monastic and lay), the idea of such an equivalence required of Chan Buddhists time and effort, an important part of which was worked out in the context of the ascending the hall ceremony and its literary representation.

I have argued against the idea that Chan masters' buddha unlikeness was bracketed as irrelevant to the ascending the hall ceremony's ritual frame. Instead, I have proposed that integrating unlikeness into a Chan master's ritual buddha identity required of that Chan master contingent ritual work and that this ritual work was intertwined with the literary work that went into the composition of Chan discourse records. Put another way, each performance of ascending the hall participated in translating the personal status of buddhahood into a Chinese cultural idiom. In combination with practices of discourse record composition, these performances added up to the large-scale reimagination of buddhahood as an identity that could be plausibly affixed to living Chinese Buddhist monastics. The effect was both to elevate the religious authority credited to Chan masters' spoken and written teachings, especially vis-à-vis canonical Buddhist scriptures, and also—to paraphrase Judith Berling—to bring buddhahood down to earth.[121]

If, as Jonathan Z. Smith writes, "ritual is an exercise in the strategy of choice," then it is striking that Chan Buddhists chose to embrace the Chan master's buddha unlikeness as an explicit feature of the ascending the hall ceremony, to view unlikeness as ritually meaningful rather than as merely accidental to the ceremony's ritual logic.[122] By incorporating the problem of likeness into their ritual culture as an explicit object of discussion, Chan Buddhists turned a potential weakness at the heart of the tradition's evolving identity—a source of contingency in each Chan master's performance of buddhahood—into a strength, an integral feature of Chan identity. Of course, for Chan Buddhists, ritual was not only a strategy of choice; that is to say, the choice of what to include or exclude as ritually meaningful was not entirely up to Chan Buddhists themselves. Even if they exercised power over what went into their own discourse records, their rituals were not categorically set apart from the society in which they took place. As we have seen, ascending the hall was also

[121] Berling, "Bringing the Buddha Down to Earth."

[122] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 56.

discussed in texts composed and circulated by outsiders to the Chan tradition. Chan Buddhists could thus never entirely domesticate unlikeness or eradicate the possibility of ritual failure. But Chan Buddhists did succeed, over a period of several centuries, in navigating the problem of likeness to make buddhahood their own. Understanding how they succeeded requires that we view the Song period ascending the hall ceremony not just as the arena for reenacting an established script of Chinese buddhahood according to a fixed ritual frame. Rather, we should see ascending the hall as a centrally important space of ritual practice and literary imagination within which the very idea that Chan masters might be Chinese buddhas was pioneered, refined, and negotiated.

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