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*Fathering Your Father:
The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism*

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A Review of *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism*

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Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism. By Alan Cole. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, xix + 340 pages, ISBN: 978-0520254855 (paperback), US \$29.95; ISBN 978-0520254858 (cloth).

Alan Cole's latest book builds upon the work of Bernard Faure, John McRae, T. Griffith Foulk, and other scholars who have questioned traditional understandings of Chan Buddhism by examining the Tang dynasty (618–907) development of Chan as a form of rhetoric meant to enhance the symbolic capital of particular people, monasteries, and sectarian groups. Cole attacks the historicity and truth-value of Chan lineage construction in order to reveal its underlying agenda of embodying Buddhism within specific Chinese masters and cementing the relationship between those masters and the state, thus convincing the public to lionize the masters. Cole argues that the hallmarks of Chan (simplicity, extra-textual transmission, sudden enlightenment, and so on) developed as rhetorical devices meant to strengthen claims of Chan's ownership of the truth as well as to broaden its appeal. Moreover, the development of lineages in Tang-era Chan that lead to the establishment of Huineng (638–713) as the perpetual father to later Chan masters was a gradual and conscious act of fabrication in which partisanship resulted in the theft of ancestors.

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Cole lays the foundation for his argument by examining pre-Chan lineage construction in the biographies of Zhiyi (538–597) and Xinxing (540–594). First, the various, contradictory biographies of Zhiyi written by his disciple Guanding (561–632) are put forth as the basis of future Chinese Buddhist genealogies. Guanding's first biography of Zhiyi was commissioned by Emperor Yangdi (r. 605–618) of the Sui dynasty (581–618), and included tales of state-supporting miracles performed by Zhiyi in an effort by the state to co-opt some portion of Zhiyi's extensive cultural capital. This biography also included an anecdote in which one of Zhiyi's teachers, Huisi (515–577), informs Zhiyi that the two of them had both been present at the Buddha's recitation of the *Lotus Sutra*. Guanding later dropped this trans-historical, spiritual connection between Zhiyi and the historical Buddha in favor of a lineage based on person-to-person transmission.

In his preface to the *Mohe zhiguan*, Guanding seems to have borrowed liberally from the dharma lineage found in *The Account of Causes and Conditions of Transmission of the Dharma-Treasury* (*Fu fazing yinyuan zhuan*) in order to trace Zhiyi's dharma back to the original dharma preached by the historical Buddha. Not surprisingly, after his death Guanding was added into this lineage by his disciples even though Zhiyue (543–616) was Zhiyi's chosen successor. Thus we see two important characteristics of Chan genealogy being established in the Sui: the linking of a Chinese master to the historical Buddha in order to allow that master to function as a new focus of authority and authenticity, and the employment of such lineages to create and maintain state patronage of particular communities.

In the teachings of Xinxing (540–594), the leader of the Teachings of the Three Levels (*Sanjie jiao*), Cole sees several literary developments that would become genre fixtures of Chan genealogies. Based on anxiety regarding the Final Age of the Dharma (*mofa*), Xinxing located authentic

Buddhism within himself and his group's practices. These practices included meditation and asceticism. Most striking in comparison to later Chan rhetoric, Xinxing had an ambivalent relationship with textual Buddhism. On the one hand, Xinxing rejected the study of sutras as an ineffective practice in the Final Age of the Dharma. However, he also created his own body of literature that quoted extensively from the sutras in order to legitimize his claims that his teaching was an authentic and efficacious form of Buddhism. Combined with Xinxing's emphasis on universal Buddha-nature (*foxing*), it isn't difficult for Cole to convincingly depict Xinxing's work as valid predecessors to Chan rhetoric.

After exploring the roots of lineage, anti-textual rhetoric, and the embodiment of Buddhist authenticity in particular individuals in the Sui Dynasty, Cole turns his view towards the co-optation and development of these ideas in Chan during the Tang Dynasty. Cole follows other Chan scholars in tracing the roots of Chan genealogy to a funerary stele for Faru (d. 689) located at Shaolin monastery. The inscription on this stele outlines a specific lineage that held up Bodhidharma (n.d.) as the one true inheritor of Indian Buddhism, and laid out a line of transmission from Bodhidharma to Huike (487–593) to Sengcan (d. 606) to Daoxin (580–651) to Hongren (601–674) and finally to Faru. Although the lineage presented in this inscription seems to be borrowed in part from Daoxuan's (596–667) *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan*), it is unique both for tracing Bodhidharma's teachings back to the historical Buddha, and for tracing that lineage forward to Faru. The stele inscription contains other hallmarks of later Chan rhetoric as well: Faru is presented as having perceived the truth experientially while studying under Hongren, and there is no mention of Faru having studied sutras. Additionally, Faru's entrance into Buddhism and meeting with Hongren are explained as the fruition of pre-existing karmic bonds. Lastly, the inscription establishes an oral transmission beyond the sutras that is

spread from one master to one disciple. Thus, although individual components of Chan rhetoric can be seen in preceding works, it is the inscription on Faru's stele that brings them together.

Rather than reading the stele inscription as history, Cole sees it as an element in Shaolin monastery's claim to own the Buddhist tradition, which allowed them to gain essential capital. The year 690 was recorded on two stelae inscribed at Shaolin Monastery. Besides Faru's funerary stele, the Shaolin monks also inscribed a letter, sent to them in 621 by Prince Li Shimin (the future Emperor Taizong, r. 626–649), granting land to the monastery for their military support of the Tang against the Sui. Furthermore, 690 was a year of general tumult in China as Wu Zetian (624–705) interrupted the Tang Dynasty by declaring herself empress of the new Zhou Dynasty (690–705). Therefore, the Shaolin monks had urgent need to both cement their claims to land ownership as well as their claims to ownership of Buddhism. They did this by focusing their claims on the person of Faru, who they argued possessed the true dharma and a lineage traceable back to Siddhartha Gautama.

Although Cole points out the political and economic importance of Faru's stele to the Shaolin monks who created it, he attacks the historicity of the inscription through textual analysis. First, he argues that the transmission of the dharma from Bodhidharma to Faru is not supported through the inclusion of dates, places, or even the details of transmission. Only two sources are cited in support of the lineage and neither offers the details so lacking in the inscription. Cole also argues that Faru's biography bears a strong resemblance to the biography of Fachong (587–665?) as found in an appendix to Daoxuan's *Continued Biographies*. Although Cole does not argue for or against the historicity of Faru himself, he does argue that Faru's biography was a conscious creation, which drew on pre-existing lineages in order to allow Shaolin monastery to co-opt the authenticity of this extra-textual transmission.

Cole continues his project by showing how later Chan genealogical works co-opted and re-imagined the material in Faru's biography in much the same way as the Shaolin monks had co-opted pre-existing material.

Cole moves on from Faru's stele to Du Fei's (n.d.) *Record of the Transmission of the Dharma-Jewel (Chuan fabao ji)* and Jingjue's (683–750?) *History of the Masters and Disciples of the Lankāvatāra Sutra (Lengqie shizi ji)*. Du Fei rewrote Faru's biography in order to portray Shenxiu (606?–706) as Hongren's true heir, and Jingjue drew from Du Fei's version in order to rewrite the lineage once again with Jingjue's master Xuanze (n.d.) as Hongren's true heir. Again, Cole's close reading of the two texts reveals a lack of historicity as well as a seemingly conscious re-working of prior material with the goal of advancing sectarian agendas. Du Fei embellishes the biographies of the monks in Faru's co-opted lineage, including details not found in any previous source. Of greater significance is the fact that the very existence of Xuanze is probably a fabrication, given that no stelae or biographical sources for Xuanze exist outside of Jingjue's works. This repeated process of stealing ancestors and re-writing lineage reaches a crucial turning point in the person of Shenhui (d. 758).

Shenhui re-wrote the Chan lineage in order to portray his master Huineng as the true heir of Hongren. Shenhui was so successful in this endeavor that the vast majority of Chan lineages since that time have traced themselves back to Huineng rather than Faru, Shenxiu, or Xuanze. According to Cole, Shenhui's success in claiming the transmission of Chan is not a story of truth triumphant, but of the power wielded through artful fabrication and state support. Employed by the Tang government during the An Lushan Rebellion (755–783), Shenhui was able to sell his lineage along with the ordination certificates he was hawking to refill the state's coffers. He made his lineage more appealing

by employing the poet Wang Wei (701–761) to write Huineng’s epitaph. To bolster his claims, Shenhui also attacked the lineage of his prime competitor, Puji (651–739).

With an audacity befitting his purported showmanship, Shenhui accused Puji of fabricating his claims to have received dharma transmission from Hongren. One technique that Shenhui used to do this was to focus on the physical transmission of Bodhidharma’s robe as a signifier of the transmission of the dharma from master to disciple. Shenhui goes so far as to write that Shenxiu had himself declared the robe to be in Huineng’s possession. Moreover, Shenhui accuses Puji of having sent followers to steal the robe from Huineng. Not only is Puji not Hongren’s true heir, he is an evil individual according to Shenhui’s new history. In the ultimate act of fabrication, Shenhui co-opted the lineage of Puji and subsequently attacked Puji for having done the exact same thing to his own predecessors.

Cole’s deep reading of these Chan texts is quite revealing. He pulls no punches in showing the lack of historicity and corroborating evidence endemic to Tang dynasty Chan genealogies. He is completely forthright regarding his employment of the hermeneutics of suspicion, going so far as to dedicate the book to Friedrich Nietzsche. At another point he also pays homage to Sigmund Freud with the chapter title “The Future of an Illusion.” Cole’s approach to Chan texts is not only suspicious and skeptical but also refreshingly irreverent. Although some may find it disrespectful to refer to koans as “jivey passages,” (pp. 191–92) it is precisely the fact that Cole strips away mythology and reverence that makes his work so revealing and provocative. In arguing against the historicity of early Chan genealogy by asserting that these texts were conscious fabrications, Cole works against the long tradition of scholarship that has held up Chan rhetoric as true and sacrosanct. Given that D. T. Suzuki and other advocates of Chan’s truth-claims are still read

in undergraduate courses, Cole's investigation of the fabrication at the heart of Chan rhetoric is a much-needed corrective.