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*How Zen Became Zen:
The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of
Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China*

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A Review of *How Zen Became Zen:*
The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of
Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China

Jack Meng-Tat Chia¹

How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China. By Morten Schlütter. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008, 289 pages, ISBN: 978-0-8248-3255-1 (cloth), US\$48.00.

Chan (more popularly known as Zen) Buddhism is probably one of the most globally known Buddhism schools. The co-existence of both the Caodong (Jp. Sōtō) tradition and the Linji (Jp. Rinzai) tradition in the present-day masks a great deal of competition and dispute that occurred during the Song dynasty (960–1279). This book examines the two major developments of Buddhism in the Song: the growth of Chan Buddhism and its establishment as the leading form of elite monastic Buddhism; and the sectarian conflict between the Caodong and Linji traditions over approaches to enlightenment and practice, namely between silent illumination (*mozhao*) of the Caodong and the *kanhua* Chan of the Linji. Morten Schlütter argues that both developments were interrelated and must be examined within the context of secular political, social and economic forces in Song China. He suggests that the dynamics within Chan Buddhism, coupled with the impact of the broader forces, shaped the Chan school, and gave it its distinct literature, doctrine, and institution that we are familiar with today.

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Schlütter's wide range of primary sources include government manuals, law codes, official histories, commemorative inscriptions for monasteries, funerary inscriptions for Chan masters, essay collections, travel descriptions, private letters, and various kinds of Buddhist sources. He begins by tracing the historical development of Chan Buddhism in the Song. Schlütter notes that sectarianism in general and the dispute between the Buddhist traditions in particular were absent during the Northern Song. Therefore, the later dispute between silent illumination and *kanhua* Chan was a significant episode in the sectarian division in Chan Buddhism. Buddhism became very attractive to the elite literati class during the Song. Despite the emergence of Neo-Confucianism, the majority of the educated elites regarded Buddhist teachings as essentially in harmony with the worldview of their social class. During the Northern Song period, the state tried to control all aspects of Buddhism, including the granting of name plaques and the registration of monasteries. Nevertheless, government policies on the whole were beneficial to monastic Buddhism. Furthermore, there were a burgeoning number of public monasteries in the Northern Song period. Powerful elites supported the establishment of public monasteries over the hereditary ones. The system of public monasteries greatly contributed to the institutionalization success of the Chan schools. However, government support for Buddhist monasteries began to wane in the Southern Song. In the absence of state patronage, Chan Buddhist monasteries had to depend on the literati and local government officials for both financial and political support. Consequently, this led to the increased competition for support among groups of elite monastic Buddhism, and the dispute between Caodong and Linji traditions in particular.

The Caodong tradition, which had almost disappeared, experienced an extraordinary revival in the midst of secular political, social, and economic transformations in the late eleventh century. Furong Daokai and Dahong Baoen revived the tradition by amending the trans-

mission line and emphasized the importance of the last two past masters, Touzi Yiqing and Dayang Jingxuan. Their disciples, Hongzhi Zhengjue and Zhenxie Qingliao, played an important role in epitomizing the reinvented Caodong tradition. The new Caodong tradition attracted a number of literati to its silent illumination teaching. Silent illumination was a characteristic teaching by Daokai of Caodong tradition in the twelfth century. Hongzhi and Qingliao, as well as other Caodong masters of their generation, were key propagators of the silent illumination approach, which placed strong emphasis on seated meditation to achieve a mental tranquility so as to enable the inherent Buddha-nature to emerge by itself.

Dahui Zonggao, the famous Chan master of the Linji tradition, was a major critic of silent illumination. Dahui was a staunch believer in *kanhua* Chan, which focuses intensely on the crucial phase, or “punch line” (*huatou*), of a *gongan*. He taught that focusing single-mindedly on a *huatou* in meditation and in performance of daily tasks would eventually lead one to enlightenment. Dahui attacked the silent illumination Chan for being a “soteriological dead end” which can never lead one to enlightenment. However, as Schlütter argues, the silent illumination teaching was hardly different from the earlier meditation techniques, and in fact was very much in line with the Buddhist doctrine. He points out that Dahui’s *kanhua* Chan, on the contrary, was unorthodox in the de-emphasis of inherent enlightenment, as well as the focus on working toward a moment of breakthrough enlightenment. Although Dahui rarely mentioned any names or specifics in his criticisms, Schlütter suggests that the attacks were directed at Hongzhi, Qingliao, and above all, the twelfth-century Caodong tradition. This study concludes that the dispute between the two Chan traditions was rather peaceful. While there was no all-out confrontation between the two camps, the conflict could have damaged the prestige of Chan Buddhism in the Southern Song, and led to its subsequent decline towards the end of the dynasty.

I have two minor criticisms of this book. First, while Schlütter offers a detailed discussion of Dahui's attacks on silent illumination, and how the Caodong tradition was the target of attacks, it seems that the blows were mainly unidirectional, i.e. Linji attacked, Caodong received. It would have been better if Schlütter had been able to provide more discussion on Caodong's counter-strategies, if any. It seems rather curious that the Caodong tradition lost the fight in the end even though their silent illumination was more doctrinally orthodox than Linji's *kanhua* Chan. Second, chapter seven, which discusses the silent illumination, would better serve its purpose if it were placed after chapter four. It is quite difficult for readers to follow through the many criticisms of the Caodong silent illumination teachings in the two earlier chapters (chapters five and six) without first learning about the origins and characteristics of this Chan practice. Nonetheless, *How Zen Became Zen* is a well-researched and impressively documented book. It is indeed an important addition to the extensive literature on Chinese Buddhism and Zen studies.