

LECTURER INTERVIEW

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Interview with Dr. Albert Welter, Professor at University of Arizona

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Billy: Why is it important to understand the history of Chinese Buddhism during the transition from the Tang (618-907) to the Song Dynasty (960-1279)—that is, the transition from the early medieval and early-modern periods of Chinese history?

Albert: I don't think the implications of the Naitō Kōnan thesis have really been addressed for Buddhism (Naitō Kōnan postulated that the social, political, demographic and economic changes that occurred between the mid-Tang Dynasty and early Song Dynasty represented the transition between the medieval and early modern periods of Chinese history). The roots of domestic "East Asian" modernity are located in the Tang-Song transition. We know that Confucian thought underwent a transformation in this period, and Buddhist thought did too. The Ideological impact of domestic East Asian modernity was twofold. Firstly, the early east Asian modernity with the Rise of Neo-Confucian "learning of the school of principle" (Chinese: *lixue* 理學). Secondly, it witnessed the reformulation of the Buddhist tradition in the form of "Neo-Buddhism." The form of Buddhism that emerges in response to demands for a more rigorous administration and foundation for Buddhist theory and practice I dub "Neo-Buddhism." Neo-Buddhism is a recovering of the resources of the Buddhist past, but also a reaction in some sense to contemporary challenges posed

by Neo-Confucianism, such as the Neo-Confucian theories of heavenly principle or *li* and the ideal of "natural law" that they establish. Buddhist thinkers needed to respond to the demands of the time for a rigorous foundation for Buddhist thought and new ideas about administration and about Buddhist doctrine provided this foundation. The Neo-Buddhist thinkers such as Yanshou 延壽 (907-975) and Zanning 贊寧 (919-1001) appropriated the vocabulary of Confucian traditions, which were already suffused with Buddhist terminology, and re-assimilated these back into the traditions of Buddhist thought. Neo-Buddhism provides a parallel to the contemporary rise of the "new schools" of Buddhism in Kamakura-period (1185-1333) Japan such as Chan and Pure Land. These were contemporaneous developments with those in Chinese Buddhism.

Billy: Why is the local history of Hangzhou important?

Albert: Hangzhou was a Buddhist hub and watershed not unlike the storied Nalānda University in ancient India. This is why we need more Hangzhou projects. We need to shift the center of cultural gravity from Indo-centric model of Indian Buddhism and then everything else is a degeneration or deviation from a venerable Indic past. We also need to move beyond a narrative of decline for the post-Song period of Chinese Buddhism.

Billy: It seems that this narrative of decline has been entrenched in many textbook accounts of Chinese Buddhism and is found in such early synoptic histories

of Chinese Buddhism in Western-language secondary scholarship, such as Arthur Wright's (1959) *Buddhism in Chinese History* and Kenneth Chen's (1964) *Buddhism in China*.

Albert: You are right. We need to move beyond this narrative of decline to reclaim post-Song Dynasty Buddhism as a source of novel ideas about Buddhist thought and practice that we do not find in earlier periods. I have been working on this as part of my ongoing project on Buddhist administration (Dr. Welter has recently completed a project on the social and institutional history of Chinese Buddhism as conceived through a text compiled in the early Song dynasty, Zanning's *Topical History of the Buddhist Clergy* [*Da Song Seng shilie*], published by Cambria Press in 2018).

Billy: The late scholar John McRae lays out "four cardinal rules" of Zen Studies in his 2013 book, *Seeing through Zen*. The fourth of these "cardinal rules" is that "romanticism breeds cynicism." McRae writes: "Storytellers inevitably create heroes and villains, and the depiction of Zen's early patriarchs and icons cripples our understanding of both the Tang 'golden age' and the supposedly stagnant formalism of the Song dynasty." McRae further warns about "the collusion between Zen romanticists and the apologists for Confucian triumphalism," which has Song Neo-Confucianism climbing to glory on the back of a defeated and passive Buddhism. The point that I take McRae to be making is that over-romanticism for certain periods as "golden ages" leads to cynicism and pessimism about other periods of history. To what extent has modern scholarship on Chan Buddhism fallen into the quagmire of romanticism breeding cynicism? Should we be worried about the "collusion" between on the one hand, the Zen romanticists who harken back to the "glory days" of the Tang Dynasty, and who read the history of Chinese Buddhism after the Tang Dynasty as a history of "decline," and on the other hand, the proponents of Neo-Confucian triumphalism who read the history of Chinese thought after the Tang Dynasty as the history of a triumphant Neo-Confucianism and a stagnant Buddhism? You can see that romanticism about Tang Dynasty Buddhism has bred cynicism about the quality and significance of Chinese Buddhist thought after the Tang Dynasty in the early textbooks on Chinese Buddhism by Kenneth Chen and Arthur Wright. One can also see it in such standard texts on Chinese philosophy as Feng Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy*, which literally writes the history of Chinese Philosophy as the history of the efflorescence of Chinese Buddhist thought under the Sui and Tang Dynasties, and the history of Neo-Confucian triumphalism under the Song Dynasty. To what extent has more recent scholarship on Chan Buddhism under China's Song Dynasty, such as the

work of Morten Schlütter, moved beyond the problem of romanticism breeding cynicism, to embrace an attitude of "cold realism," as McRae proposes?

Albert: The understanding of the Song as the age of Buddhist decline, on the one hand, and the rise of Neo-Confucianism dominance, on the other, suffers from a number of methodological problems. While there is no doubt that Neo-Confucianism recovered during the Song, Zhu Xi did not live until the end of the Song and Zhu Xi orthodoxy was not institutionalized until the Yuan and Ming. The Song dynastic history, written in the Yuan, imagines the period from a thoroughly Neo-Confucian perspective, with coverage of the Confucian doctrines of loyalty, righteousness and ethics, emphasizing well-known scholars like Zhou Dunyi, Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi. It amounts to little more than a teleological retrospective of the era, with the main (and allegedly only important) road leading to Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Based on authoritative sources like the *Song shi*, scholars have been led to follow this interpretation, rather unquestionably, and it has been repeated ad infinitum down to the present. No fans of Buddhism, Neo-Confucians like those who compiled the *Song shi* also effectively erased the memory of Buddhism from the official record, something that is found more or less thoroughly throughout official dynastic histories. While it is convenient to follow the Confucian perspective on the Song, ample evidence points to a much more complicated (and interesting) picture, and one where the role of Buddhism, far from being effaced, assumes an active role in the Song intellectual landscape. My work on the early Song intellectual terrain (explored in chapter 7 of *Yongming Yanshou's Notion of Chan in the Zongjing lu*, and elsewhere), outlines a milieu of six types of positions vying to contribute to a nascent definition of *wen* (literary culture): strict *guwen* (following the rhetoric of Han Yu), tolerant *guwen* (e.g. Wang Yucheng), Confucian monks (Zanning), Doctrinal or moral Buddhist (Yongming Yanshou), Linji Chan monks who espouse freedom from moral strictures, and Chan literati (Yang Yi and Li Zunxu) who promoted Linji Chan at the Song court and won for it a large modicum of respect in the Song establishment. While the intellectual environment was particularly fluid in the early decades following the assumption of Song rule, it set the tone for much of what followed and Buddhism continued to prosper and have a strong presence through the Southern Song dynasty. Even Zhu Xi recognized that Buddhists like Dahui Zonggao represented principal rivals for literati support. Far from being effaced, Buddhism continued to suggest meaningful avenues for intellectual expression. Future scholarship, like that of Morten Schlütter and the Japanese scholar Araki Kengo, will need to continue to explore and expose the Buddhist

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contributions to Song intellectual life. The perseverance of these influences into the Ming and Qing (like my colleague Jiang Wu's work on Buddhism in the Ming) need to be explored and exposed as well. In general, my main methodological point is that we need to read "beneath" our sources and not trust them as presenting objective information. We have now long been exposed to the fallacies of objectivism and we must look to our "trusted" sources like the dynastic histories for their inherent perspectival biases to find their true value. This brings us to basic questions to inform our research: who wrote/compiled what, and why, rather than focusing just on what they say. This, of course, applies to all other sources as well (not just Confucian), but it just so happens that the dominant narrative on the meaning of the Tang-Song transition is largely a Confucian informed one and needs to be unraveled. Uncovering and exposing author/compiler motive puts narratives on a different track and creates new understandings of how the narrative process informs our work and hopefully, creates new and more accurate renditions of the past.

Billy: What led you to select the prolific 10th-century cleric Yongming Yanshou 永明延壽 (904-975), a figure recognized as a "patriarch" in both Chan and Huayan traditions, as the focus for your third book?

Albert: A prolific writer and leading cleric in the pro-Buddhist kingdom of Wuyue 吳越 (907-978), Yanshou is a major figure in Chinese Buddhist history. Because of his ecumenical stance, wide-ranging interests, and multifaceted thought, in later East Asian Buddhism Yanshou came to be represented in a variety of guises: as a Chan/Zen master, a Pure Land patriarch, a proponent of devotional practice, a scholar of Buddhist doctrine (especially Tiantai 天台 and Huayan 華嚴), and even as a "promoter of blessings." In addition to pointing to the socio-religious milieu, historical exigencies, and ideological agendas that engendered a series of retroactive reimaginings of Yanshou and his approach to Buddhism, the book looks at the life, identity, thought, and literary output of this fascinating figure, as well as

the important changes in the Buddhist landscape that marked a fascinating epoch in Chinese history. That also serves as a springboard for considering larger issues in the scholarly study of Chinese Buddhism, including the relationship between Chan 禪 and the canonical tradition, as well as more broadly the study of Chinese religious and intellectual history.

Billy: In particular, the *Zongjing lu* is heavily used as an encyclopedic work of Buddhist scholasticism by authors in early-modern China, particularly during the resurgence of Buddhist scholasticism under the latter years of China's Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). How is the *Zongjing lu* appropriated and used by later scholiasts and authors of exegetical works? In my own research on the resurgence of Yogācāra Buddhism, the tradition of Yogic practice, under China's Ming Dynasty, I have noticed that many authors of commentaries on Yogācāra Buddhist texts under China's Ming Dynasty draw heavily from and are deeply steeped in the explanations found in this text.

Albert: While the number of studies on Yongming Yanshou steadily increases, the nature of his difficult thought and doctrinal orientation remain opaque. Owing to the broad scope of Yanshou's Buddhist influence and to the social and intellectual transformations occurring within Chinese culture and society during the transition from the Tang (618-907) to the Song Dynasties (960-1279), it is easy to speak not of one but of many Yanshou-s. In addition to Yanshou the Chan master, there is Yanshou the Pure Land patriarch, as well as legitimate discussion regarding Yanshou's Lotus Sūtra devotionalism, his influence on Tiantai, his Huayan thought, his contributions to Yogācāra theory and so on. Given Yanshou's pan-Buddhist influences, it is natural to regard him in terms of a multifaceted identity.

What is Yanshou's editorial agenda in compiling the encyclopedic *Zongjing lu* or *Records of the Source-Mirror* in one-hundred fascicles? What is criteria for inclusion in his encyclopedic work?

Billy: Should Yanshou be included as a Chan master? If so,



what meaning does this designation carry with it?

Albert: Throughout his life, Yanshou identified himself as a Chan master (*Chanshi* 禪師). However, Yanshou has generally been excluded from Western accounts of Chan in Western-language secondary scholarship, as well as in Japanese scholarship on Zen Buddhism. In secondary scholarship he is seldomly treated or the content of his thought assessed. Where he is treated, Yanshou is cast as the architect of an impure Zen that modern purists relegated to decidedly inferior status. This was a judgement rooted in the ideology of modern Japanese, especially Rinzaï, Zen.

Billy: To what extent can Yongming Yanshou be characterized as a "syncretizer" or "syncretist"? Between Chan and Pure Land? Between meditation and scholastic teachings?

Albert: I have identified three basic stages in Yanshou's career: firstly, Yanshou as a "promoter of blessings" and of rituals generating good merit; secondly, as Chan master, and thirdly, as Pure Land advocate. Finally, I propose another image of Yanshou, drawn from his own writings, as advocate of bodhisattva practice.

The Rinzaï Zen orthodox interpretation of the Chan Buddhist lineage and intellectual history excludes Yongming Yanshou – they leave him to the scholastic school of Huayan Buddhism (Japanese: Kegon 華嚴). In the history of Zen, Yanshou was for years dismissed as the harbinger of a period of decline, and related to the status of a footnote.

Billy: What do you mean by "orthodoxy"?

Albert: As with other orthodoxies, Chan/Zen formulae function as fundamental statements of principles, devised

on the basis of political and social contingencies. What distinguishes orthodoxies, then, is not the assumption of a correct doctrine deemed as universally valid, a seemingly ubiquitous characteristic of ideologically-based belief systems, but the protocols that shape them and give them their unique formulation.

Chan and Zen are more about what one does, a series of cultural habits that define them, rather than what one believes. Chan places more emphasis on knowing *how* in terms of how to practice, rather *than* knowing that in terms of knowing *that* certain doctrinal propositions are true. I do not dispute the value of emphasizing orthopraxis over orthodoxy and its applications to the East Asian and other religious contexts for calling attention to religious practitioners' unconscious and unarticulated religious activities, but I do not see this as an excuse for ignoring the very powerful role exerted by orthodoxies in East Asia, including the Chan and Zen traditions. Controversies over orthodoxy in Chan, for example, rarely concerned internal issues of monastic training or spiritual cultivation. The focus was on the public, political role of Chan in society, on debates about how to secure prestige, patronage, and privileges (as witnessed in work of Morten Schlütter).

Rather than assume Japanese Rinzaï Zen interpretations as normative, as has frequently been the case in modern discussions of Zen in the West, I explore alternative models of orthodoxy in the Chan/Zen tradition, attempting to shed light on how questions relating to orthodoxy are decided and what criteria are used to determine orthodox principles and practices. Rather than posit a single orthodoxy, which is the aim of orthodoxy itself, multiple orthodoxies exist in Chan/Zen tradition, rooted in the sociopolitical and religio-spiritual concerns of contending groups and historical circumstances.