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Conspiracy's Truth: The Zen of Narrative Cunning in the Platform Sutra

CHAN AND THE REINVENTION OF TRADITION

As anyone in Chan 禪 Studies will tell you, the past thirty years have seen interesting upheavals in the field. Among other things, it has become increasingly clear that traditional Chan authors are rather unreliable when it comes to their accounts of the masters and their teachings. More troubling, important texts in tradition seem to have been composed in bad faith in the sense that their authors present a variety of claims that they most likely knew to be false and fabricated. In trying to make sense of these findings, some scholars in the field – myself included – have come to see in the history of Chan literature the regular demonstration of sophisticated literary talents, including the talent to make literary inventions disappear into the mirage of simple historical narration. Moreover, it would seem that these various talents increased over time as authors built on their predecessors' successes. If this is true, then, it would seem worthwhile imagining Chan writers of the Tang dynasty (and later) belonging to what we might tentatively call “virtual literary guilds” in which a variety of strategies for rewriting the past were gradually established and transmitted, in one way or another, to later generations of writers.¹ In short, Chan Buddhism – for as simple and no-nonsense as we once took it to be – is increasingly appearing to have been produced by a rich and complicated lit-

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¹ It is perhaps a sign of the times that similar perspectives have come to the fore in Christian studies as seen in Bart Ehrman's recent work, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2013), which takes up parallel issues regarding purposeful deception in Christian writing. See, in particular, his discussion of the “Question of Intent,” (*ibid.*, pp. 128 ff), where Ehrman points out the various problems

erary tradition, full of subtle and cunning inventions, repetitions, and subversions.²

As a test-case of sorts for this perspective on the development of Chan, this essay provides a close reading of an important Chan story, as found in the front section of the eighth-century *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* 六祖壇經, in order to identify what appears to be an impressive body of literary strategies at work shaping and delivering the text's message; in particular, I want to demonstrate the clever use of multiple perspectives as the author worked to present a seductive "history" of a conspiracy at the top of the Buddhist hierarchy, a "history" that would upend the previously published "histories" that had identified the leaders of Chinese Buddhism. In making this case, I will also briefly suggest how the *Platform Sutra* fits within a longer arc of Buddhist conspiracy theories that, of course, reaches back to India.

Though we have no idea who wrote the *Platform Sutra*, it is clearly a pivotal work in the genesis of the Chan tradition. Among its lasting contributions, it provided an intriguing narrative about how Master Huineng 惠能 (n. d.; also written 慧能), though illiterate and completely unfamiliar with the Buddhist tradition, magically gains enlightenment and comes to be recognized by figures within the story as the owner of Buddhist truth and tradition, and therefore the defacto leader of Chinese Buddhism; at the same time, the story explains why Master Shenxiu 神秀 (d. 706) was an imposter, even though in real life he had been publicly recognized as the leader of Buddhist China by the imperial court and the Buddhist elite in general.³ In brief, then, the story presents Master

with holding to the view that forged works were written without the intent to deceive. Ehrman's book can be profitably read next to Anthony Grafton's *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1990).

² Readers familiar with Robert Campany's discussion of the production of religious narratives in China, in his *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 2009), will note that I am arguing for a more intentional and self-aware kind of authorship in the invention and recycling of Chan material. See esp. Campany's chap. 1.

³ I am using the language of *ownership* here because that vocabulary best reflects Chan's claim that enlightenment is a kind of private property (sometimes referred to as a "dharma-jewel 法寶") that is passed down in lineages that are modeled, to some extent, on Confucian and imperial styles of patriarchal succession. That is, the whole logic of Chan rests on the conceit that enlightenment, as the final and fullest form of tradition, can be privately held as a Thing-like entity by members of a Chan lineage; of course, too, as a kind of heirloom, enlightenment supposedly can also be given from one man to another in sudden and inexplicable moments of transmission. For more discussion of this aspect of Chan, see my *Fathering Your Father: The Zen of Fabrication in Tang Buddhism* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2009), esp. the introduction and chap. 3; see also my "Upside Down/Right Side Up: A Revisionist History of Buddhist Funerals in China," *History of Religions* 35, no. 4 (1996), pp. 307-38.

Huineng as a perfectly innocent character who effortlessly ascends to the top of the Buddhist hierarchy, and yet this story of perfect innocence carries within itself another story that exposes the supposedly fraudulent nature of Shenxiu's exalted status, while also explaining why everyone failed to recognize Shenxiu's devious and unsavory nature. In short, the narrative sets a vision of Huineng's magical innocence next to a revelation of Shenxiu's conniving duplicity, and it is precisely that powerfully attractive combination that raises interesting questions about the author's talents (and motives) as a storyteller.⁴

Below I will consider how these complex images of innocence and deception were carefully pieced together, but before starting into a close reading we need to consider the *Platform Sutra* within the context of other contemporaneous claims regarding Huineng and the other supposed owners of tradition. Though there are some fundamental problems regarding the dating of the relevant texts, the *Platform Sutra* appears to be but one of a number of texts from the mid- to late-eighth century that put the figure of Huineng to work ratifying someone's claim to own the totality of tradition. In what appears to be the first account of Huineng – in Wang Wei's 王維 funerary stele for Huineng that was probably written in the 740s – a certain Shenhui 神會 (684–758) is made to benefit, since the stele explains that Shenhui inherited

⁴ Recently, *Readings of the Platform Sūtra*, ed. Morten Schlütter and Stephen F. Teiser (New York: Columbia U.P., 2012), provides many interesting essays on the *Platform Sutra* but also shies away from the stickier issues involved in sorting through this complex narrative. For instance, John Jorgensen's essay, "The Figure of Huineng," ducks the troubling details in the story and chooses to read the *Platform Sutra* as "a form of romance" (ibid., p. 31) modeled, supposedly, on Confucius' biography (ibid., p. 36). Jorgensen's essay builds on his major monograph, *Inventing Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch'an* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); see also his helpful essay, "The Platform Sutra and the Corpus of Shenhui: Recent Critical Text Editions and Studies," *Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie* 20 (2002), pp. 399–438. This approach seems problematic for several reasons; for instance, one need not reach back to Confucius's biography to find a likely template for the story of Huineng leaving his hometown, due to karmic predispositions, in order to receive the totality of the Buddhist tradition from Master Hongren since, in fact, this narrative replays the basic elements of the biography for Faru 法如 (d. 689) that was cut in stone at Shaolin Monastery in 690. For more discussion of Faru's biography, which is arguably the first Chan narrative, see *Fathering Your Father*, chap. 3. And, as the members of the editorial board at *Asia Major* kindly pointed out to me, Huineng's biography in the *Platform Sutra* also has several themes in common with Dao'an's 道安 (312–385). The latter was a well-known figure in the early period of Chinese Buddhism and his biography in Huijiao's 6th-c. *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳) paints him as a man of great simplicity who, in particular, was willing to work in the fields for three years while he waited for the resident master to accept him as a student. (For this entry, as published in the Taisho edition of the Buddhist canon, see T 2059, vol. 50, p. 351c.) Dao'an's biography also mentions that he had a uncanny ability to read and understand Buddhist texts without any formal background in Buddhist literature. Arguably, variations on these two themes – labor-loving simplicity and an inexplicable ability to master the Buddhist literature imported from India – are also central to Huineng's biography.

total truth from Huineng and thus Shenhui was to be recognized as the next patriarch and the next leader of Chinese Buddhism.⁵ Then some years later a biography-of-sorts for Huineng was put into circulation, the *History of the Great Master [Huineng] of Caoqi* 曹溪大師別傳; in this text, Shenhui still is mentioned as an heir, but a certain monastery in Caoqi, Baolin 寶林, now seems to be foregrounded as the place where tradition can be found, totally apart from the figure of Shenhui; and, besides Shenhui, several newly invented co-inheritors are mentioned in the second part of the story.⁶

At about this same time – circa 780 – someone wrote the *Platform Sutra*, a text that again puts the figure of Huineng to work making new endorsements. In this third version, Shenhui is pushed aside as a second-rate disciple and a certain Master Fahai 法海 is identified as Huineng’s more important heir, along with other figures; and, instead of privileging a certain monastery, as the *History of the Great Master [Huineng] of Caoqi* had, the narrative explains that the text itself is the fundamental cause for the reproduction of the lineage-of-truth.⁷ Presumably this new form of disseminating the essence of tradition via the text itself appeared as a viable possibility after the An Lushan Rebellion in the 750s when the power and reach of the central government was much reduced and the throne was no longer able to control the identification of Buddhist leaders, leaders who were often given the imperial title “National Teacher 國師.” Regardless of these dynamics, in the decades that followed, the figure of Huineng continued to attract the attention of Chan genealogists – in fact, all modern Chan and Zen lineages include Huineng in their genealogies.⁸

⁵ Jorgensen translates the Wang Wei stele in his *Inventing Hui-neng*, pp. 145–51. For analysis of this stele, and an alternative translation of the first third of the text, see *Fathering Your Father*, pp. 214–21.

⁶ For a translation of this text, see Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, pp. 677–705. The date and provenance of this text are most perplexing and I find Jorgensen’s reasoning on the matter hard to accept. I do agree that, like many early Chan texts, it likely was written in at least two stages as later authors sought to graft themselves onto the Huineng biography; for Jorgensen’s comments to that effect, see *ibid.*, pp. 588 ff.

⁷ Of course, Fahai was soon pushed aside, too, so that other latter-day descendants of Huineng could be named in more “up-to-date” genealogies.

⁸ In these later works Huineng is usually presented as the joint on to which newly invented sections of ancestral piping were attached. However, in one genealogy, the *Lidai fabao ji* 歷代法寶記, Huineng is carefully circumvented as the author invents a story explaining that it was a certain monk named Zhixian (600–702?) – and not Huineng – who was supposedly Hongren’s real heir, a “fact” then ratified by Empress Wu when she supposedly identified him as the leader of Chinese Buddhism. In short, the narrative in the *Lidai fabao ji* tries to do to the Huineng “history” exactly what the Huineng “history” had tried to do to the Shenzhi “history,” which, for its part, had applied a similar strategy to overcome claims made in the “Faru’s Biography” written at Shaolin Monastery. For a brief discussion of the *Lidai fabao*

While Chan Studies has, for decades, acknowledged that much that was written about the masters in these genealogies is mythic and unreliable, there hasn't been much discussion regarding how we ought to understand the production of these texts that so freely rearranged the past in order to slot the authors or their masters into the lineages that others had, by the same process, invented for themselves. Instead, we find half arguments that point out the inconsistencies or impossibilities with this or that particular claim, and then stop. For example, consider how John Jorgensen treats the invention of Huineng in a recent essay: pulling no punches he writes, "It is unlikely, despite his claims, that Shenhui ever met Huineng or was his disciple... . As Shenhui had little information about the actual Huineng, he had to invent a biography of him... . It would seem that Shenhui invented the figure of Huineng, for his claims would make Shenhui the true heir of the single line of transmission from the Buddha in the Southern lineage."⁹ This is, arguably, pretty shocking news for those who thought there was some real connection between Master Huineng and his disciple Shenhui, and who also thought that the owners of truth would surely tell the truth about how they got to own truth – and yet Jorgensen offers little insight regarding how we ought to theorize the situation.¹⁰

Nevertheless, if we accept Jorgensen's reasonable claim that it was precisely in literature, and with connivance, that Shenhui invented

ji's narrative, see Adamek's "Transmitting Notions of Transmission," in *Readings of the Platform Sūtra* p. 127. For a fuller discussion and translation of this text, see her *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and Its Context* (N.Y.C.: Columbia U.P., 2007). I should add too that, though Adamek doesn't explore the matter, the *Lidai fabao ji* also presents an elaborate conspiracy theory as it tries to explain how Wuzhu 無住 ended up inheriting the essence of tradition; for Adamek's translation of this section of the *Lidai fabao ji*, see *ibid.*, pp. 343–56.

⁹ See Jorgensen, "The Figure of Huineng," in *Readings of the Platform Sūtra*, pp. 35–36.

¹⁰ Henrick H. Sorensen's essay, "The History and Practice of Early Chan," the third essay in *Readings of the Platform Sūtra*, is another good example of the theoretical fence-sitting that I am critiquing here. He writes, "Although several theories exist about the formation of the early Chan school, scholars today generally agree that the traditional Chan perception of an unbroken patriarchal lineage from Śākyamuni to a series of Chinese patriarchs is the product of *pious imagination* and sectarian assertions. In other words, the early Chan lineages cannot be understood to have any historical reality prior to the *ex post facto* efforts of its creators." (*Ibid.*, p. 56, with italics added.) Why "pious imagination," in league with sectarianism, might be the operating motivation here isn't explained; worse, Sorensen's analyses regularly break his rule that the Chan genealogies aren't to be trusted for historical claims. Consider his comment that, regarding Master Bodhidharma, "Only one of the works attributed to him, *The Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* (二入四行), is considered authentic." (*Ibid.*, p. 59.) This is a very strange statement since few in the field are confident that Bodhidharma ever existed, much less that he authored this work. However, we get a sense for how the field of Chan Studies is functioning when we follow Sorensen's note supporting this claim back to John R. McRae's groundbreaking work, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early*

Huineng, then Huineng's hallmark simplicity, directness, and *illiteracy* become a good bit more interesting. Put in this light, the problem isn't just that Shenhui publicly fathered his father – a pretty remarkable gesture, to be sure – but rather that the themes of simplicity, directness, and freedom-from-literature – key elements in later Chan discourse – were first seized on not as particular styles of practicing Buddhism, or vestiges of the masters' real teachings, but as narrative elements put to work in a calculated literary putsch dedicated to furthering the career of one ambitious man.¹¹

Reading the *Platform Sutra* with this kind of skepticism, we will also need to see the text as a well-honed art-product – an advertisement, really – designed to shift the audience's opinion regarding the identity of the Sixth Patriarch.¹² Thus, among other agendas, the narrative of Huineng's life works to seduce the reader or listener into making new assessments regarding Buddhist leadership – it should be Huineng and company at the top, not Shenzhi and his disciples – while also making it seem that such a shift in commitments ought to come naturally once the supposedly historical events are brought into view by the narrative. Framed that way, we also ought to conclude that the author has involved himself in a shrewd kind of intersubjectivity in

Ch'an Buddhism (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 1986), p. 101, where we find: "Only one work, it is generally agreed, can legitimately be attributed to Bodhidharma: *The Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices*." Then, in the very next paragraph, McRae adds, "It is uncertain, of course, whether the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* was actually written by Bodhidharma." In pointing out the durable quality of this bad logic, I am suggesting that there may be important ideological forces shaping how it is that we shape our narratives of Chan Buddhism.

¹¹ Some early readers of this essay appear to have been upset by this claim regarding Shenhui's "calculated literary putsch," and yet I can think of no other way to explain how Huineng was first invented. Though the figure of Huineng was later developed and written into other narratives – such as the *Platform Sutra* and the *History of the Great Master [Huineng] of Caoqi* – that served the interests of figures besides Shenhui, in the earliest instance, Huineng was designed solely to benefit Shenhui's bid to replace those masters who claimed to be in Shenzhi's lineage – most notably Puji.

And for those who think that Shenhui was unique in his audacious fathering of his father, Carl Bielefeldt's analysis of Zen Master Dogen (1200–1253) leaves little doubt that Dogen, in the midst of a bitter struggle to become Japan's leading master, involved himself in just the same kind of project as he redesigned his master, Rujing 如淨, to be the sole owner of tradition. For Bielefeldt's careful and insightful discussion, see his "Recarving the Dragon: History and Dogma in the Study of Dogen," in William LaFleur, ed., *Dogen Studies* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 1985), pp. 21–53.

¹² Here I am drawing on the useful work of Pierre Bourdieu; see, for instance, his *The Field of Cultural Production* (N.Y.C.: Columbia U.P., 1993). Bernard Faure, early in his career, published an essay that sought to integrate literary studies into the field, but little else followed in this vein; see his "Bodhidharma as Textual and Religious Paradigm," *History of Religions* 25.3 (1986), pp. 187–98.

which he chose to present his material with an eye on how it was to be consumed by his anticipated audience. Within the logic of this kind of intersubjectivity, the image of simple, rustic, and illiterate Huineng is the perfect inverse of the competitive, scheming, literate author who deployed him.¹³ In effect, it would seem that Huineng is as innocent as his inventor was conniving. And here we shouldn't overlook the basic fact that the earliest source for Huineng – Wang Wei's stele – presented him as an illiterate farmer, but does so with a slew of passages from classic texts from the Chinese and Buddhist traditions. Thus from the beginning Huineng's identity as outside or opposed to the literary tradition was fabricated *in the literary tradition* and *by means of the literary tradition* and this has important implications for how we ought to consider this character.¹⁴

While adopting this approach might seem jarring to some, I can promise that once we begin to address the form and function of the narrative in the *Platform Sutra*, we will be well placed to understand both the nuts and bolts of the narrative and its place within the history of other Buddhist narratives that function in similar ways.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THE SPLIT-SCREEN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

The *Platform Sutra* opens with Master Huineng sitting on a dharma throne at Dafan Monastery 大梵寺 giving a supposedly impromptu autobiographical account of how he got to be the Sixth Patriarch; this story

One early reader of this essay balked at treating politics and polemics as art, perhaps imagining that the word "art" ought to refer to things of beauty. For my part, I define art to be: any human creation that is made with a sense for how it will be received by the Other – an *intersubjective offering*, as it were. Thus, anything from breakfast to fabricated Buddhist texts – such as the *Platform Sutra* – could qualify as art if can be shown that the item was made with an eye on how it would be received by the Other (with the category of the Other also including anticipated versions of one's self). Given this definition, politics and polemics are, of course, squarely in the zone of art.

¹³ Once we understand Shenhui's invention of the totally apolitical Huineng as the best way to further Shenhui's political agenda, we ought to admit that we are not too far from the dynamics involved in 19th-c. European claims that one's art was made for art's-sake – and not for economic interest – even though that very claim was crucial for driving the emerging art market. Here again I am relying on Pierre Bourdieu's analyses; see his *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of a Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1996).

¹⁴ For more discussion of this problem, see *Fathering Your Father*, pp. 217–21. The recent work of Christoph Anderl sheds new light on the literary techniques involved in producing the image of simple Chan and its supposedly literature-free ways. See, for instance, his "Zen in the Art of Insult: Notes on the Syntax and Semantics of Abusive Speech in Late Middle Chinese," in Christoph Anderl and Halvor Eifring, eds., *Studies in Chinese Language and Culture: Festschrift in Honour of Christoph Harbsmeier on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday* (Oslo:

leads into his chaotic and rambling dharma instructions for the assembled crowd; this teaching is followed by a sudden leap forward forty years where Huineng's death is related in another narrator's voice that concludes with advice on how to take the whole text to be the essence of the Buddhist tradition, with a certain Master Fahai appearing as the one trying to identify himself as Huineng's main disciple.¹⁵ Without attempting to solve the complex problems regarding the composition of the entire work, it seems fair to say that the front part of the text that has Huineng narrating his life-story has a certain integrity to it and can be read as a carefully constructed conspiracy theory.

Put more exactly, the basic agenda of Huineng's "autobiography" is to explain why everyone in the world of Chinese Buddhism *thought* Master Shenxiu (d. 706) received the transmission of total enlightenment, and the title of "Sixth Patriarch," from the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hongren 弘忍 (d. 674?), whereas in fact it had been secretly given to Huineng in a series of events that were carefully kept from the public eye. Hence, in accord with the typical structure of conspiracy theories, the narrative carefully shows us the emergence of bad truth, while also taking us backstage to show us where the real truth *truly* was. Thus, one reads getting accustomed to a split-screen narrative of truth and falsity, one that needs both its halves to accomplish its self-assigned tasks. Taking this approach, we ought to be ready to admit that, as with all conspiracy theories, the point of the story isn't *simply* to produce a supposedly correct version of events in contrast to a supposedly false version, but rather to explain why it was that the false version got produced in the first place.

Framing Huineng's life-story as a conspiracy theory seems all the more reasonable when we remember that two of the Mahayana sutras that were most critical for the development of East Asian Buddhism – the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa* – are clearly structured as conspiracy theories.¹⁶ Both these Indian texts develop their new revelations of truth by explaining that the narratives that held together old-style Buddhism were nothing but fictions that the Buddha gener-

Hermes Academic Publishing, 2006), pp. 377–91; see also his "Chan Rhetoric: An Introduction" in Christoph Anderl, ed., *Zen Buddhist Rhetoric in China, Korea, and Japan* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 1–94.

¹⁵ Throughout the coming discussion I will be relying on Philip Yampolsky's excellent translation, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (N.Y.C.: Columbia U.P., 1967; hereafter, *Platform/PY*).

¹⁶ Such an analysis of both texts can be found in my *Text as Father* (Berkeley: U. California P., 2005), chaps. 2, 3, and 6.

ated in order to prepare his followers for the supposedly full version of truth given in either of these texts. No surprise then that both these texts work up elaborate split-screen dramas in which readers learn how to negotiate two contradictory narratives regarding the essence of Buddhism; or, more exactly, both texts produce narratives of new truth that carry around with them proof of their truthful nature in the form of the condemnation of older claims to truth. Given the prominence of conspiracy in either text, it presumably isn't coincidental that both these texts are amply cited in the *Platform Sutra*.

Thus, it would seem that while Buddhist authors – in India and China – were quite comfortable handling such narrative strategies, modern scholars of Buddhism haven't been so eager to recognize the importance of Buddhist conspiracy theories – something I am obviously trying to change with this essay. With the following close reading I hope to convince readers, first, that taking the story of Huineng in the *Platform Sutra* as the revelation of an elaborate conspiracy makes otherwise odd and contradictory elements in the text a whole lot more sensible, and, second, that this style of interpretation is useful in other settings as well.¹⁷

HUINENG'S CHILDHOOD AND ENTRANCE INTO THE MONASTERY

Huineng's life-story breaks easily into four parts. In the first part, he briefly describes his miserable childhood, an account that leads into that magical moment when he, in passing, hears the *Diamond Sutra* recited, suddenly gets enlightened, and decides to head off to Hongren's monastery, on East Mountain 東山, in modern day Hubei province. The second is marked by his account of his entrance into Hongren's monastery, a sequence that begins with an odd dharma-debate that

¹⁷ Buddhist Studies hasn't been alone in overlooking the trope of conspiracy since arguably the best way to organize a reading of the Gospel of Mark – the oldest gospel – is to see that it also develops a split-screen situation wherein the real identity of Jesus as Son-of-the-Father is presented to the reader, the disciples, and a range of non-religious figures – the ill, the insane, the leprous, the possessed, the Roman centurion, etc. – whereas the general public, and the Jewish authorities in particular, are shown receiving partial or purposefully confounding accounts (the parables), and at any rate remain unmoved by the evidence that they do receive. Frank Kermode's insightful reading of the Gospel of Mark – published in 1979 as *The Genesis of Secrecy* – goes a long way towards clarifying this problem, but the full implications still seem out of focus in Christian Studies. For more discussion of this problem, see my *Fetishizing Tradition: Desire and Reinvention in Buddhist and Christian Narratives* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY P., 2015).

has Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch, looking foolish and unnerved. The third part, and by far the longest and most interesting, presents the poetry contest that Hongren hosts as he seeks to decide who will be the Sixth Patriarch. Then, in the fourth and final phase – long after the poetry-contest was supposedly won by Shenxiu – Huineng is secretly declared the Sixth Patriarch and smuggled out of the monastery, running for his life.

Like so many things in this narrative, the account of Huineng's childhood is far from straightforward. Now, one might think that this detour into his youth would have little to do with what follows, but I think the opposite is the case. Huineng begins his account explaining that his father was an official in Hebei province who, for unexplained reasons, was dismissed from his post and demoted to the rank of commoner. This scandal forced the family to move to Lingnan in the extreme south of China – first in Xinzhou (near modern day Guangzhou) and then in Nanhai (also in the Guangzhou area). Huineng's nameless father dies at some unspecified time along the way, leaving Huineng alone with his mother, and in poverty.

Now, in his coming encounter with Master Hongren, their debate will center on Huineng's ethnicity, with Hongren assuming that if Huineng is from Lingnan, then he must be a barbarian – a non-Chinese, that is. However, we have just been given sufficient information to conclude that Huineng isn't really from the South and not a barbarian at all. Why? First, obviously, Huineng appears to be from good Chinese stock: his father was, after all, an official serving in Hebei province in the heartland of China. Huineng never gives us his surname which would have clarified to some extent his ancestral paternity, but at the very least it is clear that Huineng is the son of a government official – a rather illustrious identity according to standard Chinese cultural logic. Second, Huineng doesn't appear to be from the South at all, since his current residency in Lingnan is a very recent development. More exactly, and especially in the context of Chinese notions of hometowns, Huineng's audience would more likely associate his origins with his father's place of residence back up North. In short, though in the upcoming debate Huineng will speak once of his "barbarian body," as a very recent transplant to the deep South of China, he hardly seems like a candidate for the title "barbarian." In fact, the point of these contradictory details seems designed to present Huineng as a dual figure: he's from the South, sort of, and yet he is also a good Chinese of gentry stock. One might think that this confusion of origins is irrelevant, but given that the rest of the story makes abundant use of doubles and duplici-

ties, I believe that we ought to see in this initial set-up a meaningful split-screen at work. I should add that a similar ambiguity regarding his place of origin is apparent in the older biography that the famous poet Wang Wei wrote for Huineng.¹⁸

At any rate, having fallen, geographically and socially, from his prior status as the son of a Hebei official, Huineng begins to climb back upwards. First, while selling firewood in the marketplace in Lingnan he bumps into an official who takes him back to a “lodging house for officials”¹⁹ – already a step up – where Huineng happens to hear someone reciting the *Diamond Sutra* as he is leaving. Hearing the recitation, Huineng is suddenly enlightened and thereby takes another step up, becoming an untutored buddha-of-sorts. After this magical transformation, Huineng asks the man how he acquired the *Diamond Sutra* and learns that he, and a multitude of others, had been at Hongren’s monastery in Hubei (central China), and heard Hongren recommend recitation of this text as the key to seeing into one’s nature and becoming a buddha. Huineng, upon hearing this, realizes that he has some special karmic connection with Hongren and decides to go visit him. Huineng’s upward mobility continues as he, once at Hongren’s monastery, immediately has an interview with Hongren, an interview that Huineng dominates. In short, in a couple of sentences the narrative has lifted Huineng from the bottom of the social register to the top, though his place at the top has yet to be ratified. Stranger still, in the conversation with Hongren, Hongren is shown making obvious mistakes: he misidentifies Huineng as a real Southerner and therefore a barbarian; he then claims that barbarians can’t be enlightened – a racist claim that flies in the face of all Buddhist thought; and then, in a moment of anxiety, Hongren sends Huineng away, supposedly worried what others might say – a gesture that appears hardly in keeping with Hongren’s august status.

Introducing Hongren’s fear here, however, accomplishes two useful things for the development of the narrative; first, it clarifies the presence of a dangerous and intrusive public that stands against Hongren and Huineng, a public that the author will find useful in shaping two other critical moments in his story and which, of course, explains why

¹⁸ Wang Wei writes, “The Chan Master was surnamed Lu, and was from such and such [*sic*] region and province. Names are empty and vain, [and anyway] he was not born of an aristocratic family. The dharma has no center or periphery and he did not dwell in China.” For details, see Cole, *Fathering Your Father*, p. 215; for a slightly different translation, see Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, p. 145.

¹⁹ *Platform/PY*, p. 126.

the coming conspiracy was necessary in the first place; and, second, the presence of this threatening public serves as a pretext for leaving this first conversation unfinished and thereby delaying Hongren's recognition of Huineng as the next patriarch. This delay is crucial to the story since it opens up space to recount the other half of the split-screen drama – the one that portrays Hongren's sham transmission to Shenxiu, the master whom previous eighth-century genealogies-of-truth had identified as the leader of Buddhism. Thus, this initial interview between Master Hongren and soon-to-be-master Huineng dangles in an inconclusive and tantalizing manner until the end of the story when Hongren and Huineng finally again converse and Hongren secretly recognizes Huineng as his unique heir, thereby formally inducting him into the lineage-of-truth as the Sixth Patriarch. The basic form of the text, then, is structured like a sandwich with these two interviews between Hongren and Huineng holding together a messy interior that is taken up with explaining how the faux version of transmission – from Hongren to Shenxiu – made its way into the public record.

After the initial interview is broken off, Hongren has Huineng led away by a postulant 行者 who takes him to the threshing room.²⁰ With this new downward mobility that is as sudden as his ascent to the presence of Hongren, it seems that Huineng's life is defined by bouncing from high and low zones of symbolic and social power: he begins as the son of an official from the heartland of China, but falls to selling firewood as a pauper in the South, from whence he suddenly heads back up to the heartland to be with Hongren where he presents himself as a solid interlocutor scoring points against a living buddha, but that encounter results in him being sent back down the social hierarchy to perform more menial labor, winnowing rice in the monastery with the other helper-types. Of course, in the next phase he will – no surprise – be whisked back upstairs to the pinnacle of power and prestige. From there he is sent back down South, on the run and undercover, and only later comes back up to take “the high seat at the lecture hall” in order to preach this sermon.²¹ Sketched out, the narrative is best described as a triple-U.

²⁰ The author takes pains to have Huineng led to and from the threshing room by low-status figures. Thus besides this role given here to this nameless postulant, later, when Huineng comes from the threshing room to the great hall, he will be led by a neophyte, a 童人. These details no doubt emphasize that Huineng is, for this phase of the narrative, a status-less figure led about by other status-less figures.

²¹ *Platform/PY*, p. 125.

THE POETRY CONTEST

Directly following the very brief account of Huineng's work in the threshing room, we learn that Hongren is hosting a poetry contest in which anyone can offer a poem to demonstrate his enlightenment and, thus, his right to become the Sixth Patriarch. Learning of Hongren's announcement, the monastery's monks conclude that the head monk, Shenxiu, really is their leader, so there is no point in competing since surely he is to win the competition. Shenxiu, for his part, appears quite unnerved. First, it seems that Shenxiu has no idea if he is enlightened or not, and, worse, finds himself in a double-bind since if he competes by offering a poem it would seem that he is doing so out of personal ambition, and yet without offering a poem he has no chance to win the title of Sixth Patriarch. Shenxiu's solution to this impasse was, supposedly, to secretly offer his poem, and then wait to see if Hongren accepted it before claiming it as his own. He reasons: "If the Fifth Patriarch [Hongren] sees the verse tomorrow and is pleased with it, then I shall come forward and say that I wrote it. If he tells me that it is not worth while, then I shall know that the homage I have received for these several years on this mountain has been in vain, and that I have no hope of learning the Dao."²²

The reader, now aware of this duplicitous plan, has clear "evidence" of how different Shenxiu is from Huineng. Huineng, with his accidental enlightenment from the *Diamond Sutra*, moved up the register of Buddhist wisdom naturally, effortlessly, and with no thought – in fact, we never hear a word of what Huineng was thinking, and certainly he is never shown debating with himself over how to influence the Other's opinion of him. Shenxiu, on the other hand, is presented as a developed site of intersubjectivity and calculation since he is thinking about how to control the way those above and below him in the social hierarchy view him. And, quite obviously, he is more than willing to employ subterfuge to arrange things to his liking. (Where this interesting and complex version of Shenxiu – so at odds with prior accounts – might have come from will be a key issue in my concluding remarks.)

Equally worth noting is that while Huineng's quasi-commoner status appears as an asset – it is a sign of his simplicity, innocence, and distance from Buddhist politics – Shenxiu's internal reflections show him considering that his ambition is the very thing that would make him out to be a commoner. As he says to himself: "If I am seek-

²² This passage is taken from the Koshoji manuscript because the Dunhuang text is clearly corrupt here; see *Platform/PY*, p. 129, n. 29.

ing the patriarchship, then it cannot be justified. Then it would be like a common man usurping the saintly position.”²³ In short, Shenxiu is Huineng’s opposite in terms of identity and motion: Shenxiu is at the top where he has been receiving worship for the past couple of years (weirdly, since the monks should have been worshipping Hongren),²⁴ and yet any action that he might take to solidify that privilege in terms of becoming the new truth-father will cast him down to commoner status. Huineng, for his part, is at the bottom of all relevant hierarchies, is totally unaware of the competition, takes no action, and yet will find himself effortlessly on top. Put that way, it would seem that the author of the *Platform Sutra* is working with standard motifs from the *Daode jing* that claim that leadership functions best by appearing to invert social hierarchies.²⁵

Resolved to follow his ruse, Shenxiu secretly writes his poem in the middle of the night on the wall outside the master’s hall. This wall, it turns out, is something of a “public canvas” since this is the site on which scenes from the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, along with scenes from the coming transmission moment, were to be painted. Now this detail about the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*’s centrality is important because several earlier genealogies-of-truth claimed that the totality of tradition was to be found in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*.²⁶ For the moment, then, Hong-

²³ *Platform/PI*, p. 129.

²⁴ Like so many other small details in the narrative, mentioning here that Shenxiu was receiving the monks’ worship at first just seems odd but in fact turns out to conform to an important thematic: the narrative seems to be telling the story of Huineng’s inheritance of truth from Hongren, but in fact this inheritance is arguably also coming from Shenxiu who is slowly being emptied out of legitimacy in a manner such that that legitimacy can be gathered up and attached to the figure of Huineng. Thus mentioning that Shenxiu was somehow the head monk and receiving worship in the monastery fits this slightly submerged logic regarding the dual origins of Huineng’s title and his claim to own the truth-of-tradition.

²⁵ For more discussion of this theme, see my “Simplicity for the Sophisticated: Rereading the *Daode jing* for the Polemics of Ease and Innocence,” *History of Religions* 46.1 (2006), pp. 1–49.

²⁶ The first effort to produce a genealogy for those Chinese masters supposedly connected to Bodhidharma appears in the interpolated section of Huike’s biography in Daoxuan’s *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (T. vol. 50, p. 552b) which explains that the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* is to be taken as the talisman of transmission. This story is clearly a fabrication, quite at odds with the other half of Huike’s biography; for translation, see Jeffrey Broughton’s *The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1999), pp. 60–65. Another early genealogy, Jingjue’s *History of the Masters and Disciples of the Lankāvatāra Sūtra* 楞伽師子記, is, at least in title, organized around the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* as the fetish of the genealogy of the truth-fathers. More important for understanding the polemical strategies of the *Platform Sutra* is the way that Du Fei’s *Record of the Transmission of the Dharma-Jewel* 傳法寶記, a text from the first decade of the 8th c., includes the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* as a piece of the transmission package from Bodhidharma to Huike, but downgrades it to a secondary measure; for more discussion, see Cole, *Fathering Your Father*, pp. 143–46, and pp. 152–55. In short, the *Platform Sutra*’s strategic dismissal of the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* was already clearly prefigured in Du Fei’s text.

ren appears poised to take action that would accord with those older lineage claims, and yet once these expectations are established within the narrative, they will be completely reversed *though this reversal will never be made clear to the public inside the narrative*. Thus, as the poetry contest develops, both the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* and Shenxiu are first publicly identified as icons of tradition, but they will in a short time be completely undermined for the reader of the *Platform Sutra*. In short, here we begin to see how the narrative is carefully explaining how a lie about the ownership-of-truth was manufactured and given to the public, just as it also works to present a supposedly truthful version of truth's proper owner.

The problem, and it will get increasingly awkward, is that Hongren – the putative holder of truth – will be identified as the origin of both good and bad versions of the truth-of-transmission. In a sense, this isn't such an odd thing in the Buddhist tradition since in the *Lotus Sutra* this double role is precisely the one invented for the Buddha.²⁷ And, as if echoing the *Lotus Sutra*, Hongren's motivations are aligned with those of the Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra* since in both cases the deceitful promotion of a low-brow version of truth is justified as a stop-gap measure, supposedly useful for encouraging those less developed trainees until they are ready for the final version of truth.²⁸ Noting this rhyme with the *Lotus Sutra* suggests that the author of the *Platform Sutra* was quite aware of how prior forms of Buddhist literature worked *as literature*, and consciously adopted those previous narratives-of-overcoming in order to construct his own effort at a literary refiguration of tradition.²⁹ Likewise, this replay of the *Lotus Sutra's* dynamics also

²⁷ For an exploration of this dynamic in the *Lotus Sutra*, see Cole, *Text as Father*, chaps. 2 and 3. The same dynamic is visible in the *Vimalakīrti* where the Buddha is made to say that he has purposefully produced our awful world for us as a kind of teaching device. Naturally, our bad world merited a bad form of Buddhism, which the Buddha also produced in a conspiratorial manner, and the *Vimalakīrti* narrative then works to show how that bad form of Buddhism is to be replaced with its own version of Buddhism. For more discussion of this problem, see *Text as Father*, chap. 6.

²⁸ Later in the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng is shown giving an involved commentary on the *Lotus Sutra*, a commentary that explicitly replays the *Lotus Sutra's* claim that the Buddha had, at times, to give inferior teachings due to the limitations of his audiences (pp. 165–68).

²⁹ In a different work, Shenhui seems to have worked in a similar way by relying heavily on the *Vimalakīrti* to structure his attack on Puji; for more discussion, see Cole, *Fathering Your Father*, chap. 6, esp. 274–80. The crucial point, with both the *Platform Sutra* and Shenhui's writing, is that East Asian authors were reading the aggressive polemics of Indian sutras as identifiable tropes that they then lifted out of the Indian context so as to put them to work solving their own local problems with authority. This, of course, suggests a sophisticated reading of these Indian texts *as narratives*, and surprising audacity in putting one's (supposedly) hallowed texts to work in advancing one's current political agendas. In effect, then, at least some medieval Buddhist authors in East Asia were reading Buddhist narratives with a good deal less piety than modern scholars are.

suggests that while on one level texts such as the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* or the *Diamond Sutra* might be fetishized as the essence of tradition in the narrative, on another level it is the *Lotus Sutra*'s model of overcoming former versions of the Buddhist tradition that appears *structurally* more important for the author of the *Platform Sutra*.

In the morning, when Hongren notices Shenxiu's unsigned poem on the central panel of the wall, he cancels his plan to have the paintings done. Justifying his course of action to the painter, he says: "It is said in the *Diamond Sutra*: All forms everywhere are unreal and false."³⁰ Now one might rightly wonder why, after planning to have these scenes from the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* painted in the context of the transmission of total tradition, Hongren is suddenly thinking in *Diamond Sutra* terms about the unreality of forms. In short, if we were to take the narrative as an account of historical events, this scene would make no sense at all. However, reading the narrative as a story designed to reveal a conspiracy, Hongren's abrupt shift in allegiance reads out nicely as an explanation for why there are these earlier genealogical texts that explain how Hongren took the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, and Master Shenxiu, to be the holders of total-tradition. The narrative is, in effect, saying: "Yes, well, Hongren did for some time support the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, and even thought to have scenes of it painted next to the master's hall, but later rejected it in favor of the *Diamond Sutra*." That is, our author is providing the reader with details explaining how it was that the false version of truth – as found in the older genealogies – got put into the public sphere. In short, here is a good example of how the narrative details in the *Platform Sutra* appear to be carefully reworking prior genealogical claims.

This agenda becomes clearer when the narrative has Hongren announce that he plans to leave this poem of Shenxiu's on the wall since it will, supposedly, aid deluded practitioners and keep them from falling into bad rebirths. In effect, then, Hongren publicly endorses Shenxiu's poem as fulfilling *some* of tradition's normal functions, just as the Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra* is made to partially ratify the limited uses of old-style Buddhism. As Hongren explains to the painter, "It would be best to leave this verse here and to have the deluded ones recite it. If they practice in accordance with it, they will not fall into the three evil ways. Those who practice by it will gain great benefit."³¹

³⁰ *Platform/PT*, p. 130.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Hongren then goes a step further, calling together all the monks and burning incense in front of the poem, he encourages them to have faith in this poem, now claiming that it will keep them out of bad rebirths *and* give them insight into their fundamental natures, with that second claim contradicting his statement to the painter and, more importantly, contradicting the final assessment of the poem that Hongren will give, *in private*, to Shenxiu later that day. In the public sphere, however, we see that the monks were delighted with Hongren's endorsement of the poem and cried out "How excellent!"³² Given how Hongren is shown publicly supporting icons of older versions of the Chan tradition – in the form of the *Lankavatāra* and Shenxiu – we have to say that the text is skillfully establishing Hongren as that complicated site where good and bad versions of truth and tradition coexisted in a manner that, now years after the events, need to be correctly understood – a task, of course, that the narrative takes as its own *raison d'être*.

Right after the above scene in which he misleads the benighted but happy monks, Hongren calls Shenxiu to his room to ask him if he is the author of the poem. Once Shenxiu arrives, Hongren first explains to him that whoever wrote this poem will get transmission – a bald lie, of course. Taking Hongren at his word, Shenxiu naturally claims the poem as his own, and begs Hongren to tell him if he has any understanding or not. Here again, then, Shenxiu is stuck in intersubjective no-man's land since he is begging the Other to define his own interior. In this sense, Shenxiu is something like a "fashion victim" insofar as he keeps dressing himself up in the hope that the public will take him to be a star, and yet it is precisely his over-reliance on public-approval that ends up making him look so bad. Huineng, of course, is the opposite since he is never shown caring for appearances or what the Other might have to say about him, and certainly never engages in competitive events with something like Shenxiu's hope of winning something from the Other. Actually, in a short while Huineng is going to be shown backing into the poetry contest, but every effort will be made to have this engagement in the contest appear accidental, spontaneous, unmotivated, after-the-fact, and completely free of intersubjective expectations. In short, Shenxiu is everything Huineng isn't, and it would seem that it is precisely in negating Shenxiu's style that Huineng's fashionable qualities are established.³³

³² Ibid.

³³ The key in considering regime-change in religion as akin to shifts in fashion is the productive quality of negating prior content, content that has to be in place for the new style to have the flavor it so desperately hopes to have: thin ties only look hip after everyone has been

Once Shenxiu confesses that he is the author of this poem, Hongren tells him directly that he doesn't have any real understanding and that he stands outside the door of patriarchs. Hongren reiterates that what Shenxiu has is a second-rate form of tradition that will be useful for keeping the deluded from falling into bad rebirths, but that it neither comes from, nor leads to, insight into one's original nature – enlightenment, that is. Thus, though clearly labeling Shenxiu's understanding as a low-brow form of Buddhism, useless for the final goal of enlightenment, Hongren doesn't reverse his orders that the poem be left on the public wall outside his room. In short, besides tricking Shenxiu at the outset of their private conversation, Hongren also persists in deceiving his monks by putting before them a second-rate form of tradition with the assurance that it is a fully effective version of tradition. Slightly later the narrative makes clear that though Hongren never publicly endorsed Shenxiu, the monks have learned that Shenxiu is the author of this poem and thus, given Hongren's endorsement of the poem and the stated rules of the poetry-competition, they naturally conclude that Shenxiu has been chosen as the Sixth Patriarch.³⁴

Up till now no one has been able to explain what all this deception is doing in the *Platform Sutra*. In fact, modern authors have consistently avoided the matter, even though both the Chinese and Buddhist literary traditions have prominent examples of usefully deploying deception – in fact, elements taken from the *Daode jing* and the *Lotus Sutra* seem to be powerfully combined here to give the reader a simple, earthy, statusless Buddhist king who came to own the final version of Buddhist truth that the previous buddha had kept hidden, in good *Lotus Sutra* fashion, from the masses due to their limited capabilities. Considered in light of these literary precedents, not only do these key moments of deception in the narrative support reading the story as a conspiracy theory, they also suggest impressive levels of artistic control at work throughout the entire story. As one watches the author organize mini-narratives of deception and complicated intersubjectivity, it becomes obvious that the level of narrative cunning here is quite high, and all the higher if I am right that our author is mixing and matching previous discourses on deception from Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions.

The effects of Hongren's deception are made clearer in the story when, "one day," a low-level trainee passes by the threshing room, re-

wearing wide ones. For more discussion of this dialectic, see Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (Berkeley: U. California P., 1990).

³⁴ *Platform/PY*, p. 131.

citing Shenxiu's poem that Hongren had kept on the wall.³⁵ In shifting to this event, the author finds a way to move the action from the peak of social power, as found in the conversations between Hongren and Shenxiu, back down to the lowest level where the focus returns to Huineng. When Huineng hears the poem recited by the passing trainee, he immediately knows it to be a second-rate statement of enlightenment and "that the person who had written it had yet to know his own nature and to discern the cardinal meaning."³⁶ Thus, the narrative unflinchingly shows us that Huineng has the very same powers of assessment that the reigning master, Hongren, displayed in his private conversation with Shenxiu. And yet in a moment Huineng will ask this passing trainee to take him to the poem *so that he can worship it with incense*, as though he were one of the benighted monks who did likewise when they first met the poem. Right before that moment of duplicity – a duplicity that, it must be noted, matches Hongren's duplicitous response to the poem – the narrative has the poem-reciting trainee repeat everything that has happened regarding the poetry-contest, since Huineng, off in the threshing room as he has been, apparently hasn't heard anything about it.

As the trainee recounts the poetry-contest, the reader gets a vision of how the bad version of history that took Shenxiu to be the Sixth Patriarch has so thoroughly seeped into the collective memory of the monastery. Thus, this version of events, given in the narrative to inform the otherwise clueless Huineng, works well to prove that Shenxiu was, in fact, taken by the public to be the Sixth Patriarch. In response to this information about the poetry-contest and its supposed winner, Huineng insists on his total ignorance of the affair since after all he has been hard at work in the threshing room for the past eight months, and hasn't even been to the great hall once. Thus he tells this trainee that he would like to go to the hall and pay obeisance to Shenxiu's poem

³⁵ The exact timing of this scene vis-à-vis the poetry-contest isn't clear. However two things about the timing of events on this particular day can be established by other details in the narrative. First, given what will be said shortly, on this day the contest is long over, with Shenxiu's success – and presumably, his new status as the Sixth Patriarch – taken by the community to be well established. Second, in this scene Huineng will tell the neophyte that he knows nothing of the poetry contest since he has been working in the threshing room for "more than eight months 八箇餘月," a detail that matches the earlier comment made when Huineng was first taken to the threshing room. Arguably, then, one might think that the author is presenting the "more than eight months" that Huineng spent in the threshing room as a kind pregnancy. In a basic way this makes sense given that right after that period of silent incubation in the netherworld of the threshing room – so far from the public sphere of the dharma hall – Huineng will come forth and be identified by his truth-father as the proper truth-son, the real Sixth Patriarch.

³⁶ *Platform/PY*, p. 131.

in order that he can win rebirth in a buddhaland – motivations that he has, of course, never announced before. In fact, he declared the opposite in his first interview with Hongren where he said he wasn't searching for anything, just "buddhadharma" – the essence of tradition. And, certainly, this goal of seeking buddhadharma would have been read as more noble than the common desire to be reborn in a buddhaland, a desire that had already been grafted on to the nameless monks whom Hongren had chided for blindly "seeking after fields of merit," as laity would. Thus, again, though Huineng is so clearly already marked as the proper heir-apparent, the narrative has again cast him as an modest and mundane commoner, presumably in order to underscore the ambitionless quality of his movement upward toward the peak of symbolic power and value.

And, here, we have to admit that there are two interesting narrative problems in view. The first is the obvious fact that at this point in the narrative Huineng is abruptly shown having emotions and desires, desires even for second-rate forms of Buddhism, something that was completely absent from the profile offered earlier when he was both innocent of ambition and desire, and yet completely brazen and unyielding in that opening conversation with Hongren. Now, suddenly he is supposedly eager to worship Shenxiu's poem with the hope of obtaining the decidedly popular goal of rebirth in a buddhaland. Likewise, insofar as Huineng has already been shown challenging Hongren over the hard-core issue of buddhanature and barbarian bodies, not to mention having been initially enlightened by hearing the *Diamond Sutra*, we simply haven't been prepared to imagine a desirous and mistaken Huineng, eager to follow the herd in reciting what Hongren and Huineng (!) know to be an invalid articulation of the final form of tradition.

In short, Huineng is now shown innocently climbing up into the zone of power not driven by ambition, but rather by a *will-to-worship* that matches the submissive attitude already associated with the docile monks who have been worshipping the poem in a similarly unambitious and low-brow manner. That is, Huineng's movement upward to the peak of power, held for the moment by Shenxiu, is supposedly executed precisely with the desires of the common monk, desires that have been explicitly defined as uninterested in assuming the leadership position. The problem, of course, is that the more the narrative works to generate this image of Huineng's unmotivated movement toward the peak of tradition, the more it has to indulge in a variety of mini-plots that strain credibility in several directions.

Next to these inconsistencies, the second major narrative problem is equally glaring: the whole story of the poetry-contest, including the omniscient narration of Shenxiu's thoughts, have been part of an account that Huineng is relating in the first-person. That is, everything that has been recounted so far regarding the competition has come forth from Huineng's mouth as he sits on the dharma throne in front of the great gathering at Dafan Monastery in Shaozhou, reciting his life-story in the real-time of the text. Thus, we have to ask how Huineng could have both been off in the threshing room completely ignorant of the poetry contest *and* also privy not just to the conversations between Hongren and Shenxiu – private conversations that were specifically kept from the other monks – but privy to Shenxiu's interior reflections and his secretive nighttime actions, as well. One might think that Huineng simply learned of all these events later from other monks, and yet it is just this information about Shenxiu that the other monks would have lacked if they were worshipping Shenxiu's poem and taking him to be the Sixth Patriarch as they seemed to have been doing, according to the narrative.

The awkwardness of having to rely on Huineng's otherwise unwanted omniscience results, it would seem, from the fact that the key to the *Platform Sutra's* success is that it must, in the guise of presenting pure history, show how transmission in fact didn't go to Shenxiu but instead went to Huineng. Thus, Huineng can only be who he claims to be if he can prove "historically" that Shenxiu wasn't who he was taken to be. *This means, then, that the symbolic death of Shenxiu, presented in some supposedly uninflected and objective manner, is the only place where Huineng as the real Sixth Patriarch-of-truth can be born.* Hence, Huineng's story of himself has to extend to include the story of Shenxiu's failure, with Huineng strangely inside Shenxiu's head, giving us the information that absolutely destroys Shenxiu's credibility as the master of tradition.

Generating Huineng's identity exactly in the place once occupied by Shenxiu is also the key to understanding what happens next. Once at the wall that holds Shenxiu's poem, Huineng first pays obeisance to the poem, then asks that it be read to him because he is illiterate – of course, he has already heard the poem and judged it to be junk, but this rereading gives the author yet another chance to demonstrate Huineng's innocence. Shenxiu's poem reads:

The body is the Bodhi tree
 The mind is like a clear mirror
 At all times we must strive to polish it,
 And must not let the dust collect.³⁷

As the poem is read, Huineng seems to get enlightened yet again, as he supposedly now understands “the cardinal meaning 大意.” Then, with this new wisdom *won from Shenxiu’s bad poem*, Huineng composes his own poem. Though this seems illogical for several reasons, the narrative seems dead-set on making the moment in which Huineng overcomes Shenxiu one of innocence and joy. Moreover, by setting up the scene in this way, Huineng enters the poetry contest without actually competing in it since, in fact, Huineng didn’t come to the wall to offer a rival poem – he came to *worship* Shenxiu’s poem – and thus the poem that Huineng accidentally ends up composing on the spot is no more than an exuberant return-gift to Shenxiu. Huineng wins the competition that he never intended to enter, and thus though this poem would, with Hongren’s ratification, symbolically kill Shenxiu, the reader is being asked to believe that it was the most accidental of killings, born of joy and enlightenment.

And yet in the midst of this clever set-up, our author inexplicably provides two poems from Huineng, as though the author wasn’t too sure which of the two might look best, so he included both.³⁸ Actually, as Yampolsky suggests, one could argue that there are three poems offered since the two sentences before the two poems read out as a quatrain and seem thematically parallel to the two poems that follow.³⁹

Huineng’s poems read:

Bodhi originally has no tree,
 The mirror also has no stand.
 Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
 Where is there room for dust?

The mind is the Bodhi tree,
 The body is the mirror stand.
 The mirror is originally clean and pure;
 Where can it be stained by dust?⁴⁰

³⁷ *Platform/PY*, p. 130.

³⁸ At this point Yampolsky wisely quotes Hu Shi, who long ago made this point about the author’s apparent indecision regarding the poems; *ibid.*, p. 132, n. 39.

³⁹ This quasi-poem reads: “If you do not know the original mind, studying the dharma is of no avail. If you know the mind and see its true nature, you then awaken to the cardinal meaning.” *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Clearly Huineng's poems grow out of Shenxiu's poem – in two ways, in fact. First, as we have seen, Huineng's new enlightenment and his newfound will to compose poetry is said to have been generated by Shenxiu's poem. Second, in both of the two Huineng poems, the content is generated by a line-by-line negation of Shenxiu's poem, with this act of negation appearing as a radical and awe-inspiring overcoming of a somewhat pedestrian understanding of Buddhist truth and practice. In this spectacle of overcoming we shouldn't miss that it is Shenxiu's *writing* that has produced Huineng's supposed *orality*, and yet it is with this orality that Huineng enters the world of writing, albeit in a manner completely sanitized of the literary tradition. More exactly, as the illiterate Huineng comes to the wall, empty-handed and ambitionless, he requires an unnamed bystander to actually pen his poem on the wall and thus the reader is left to conclude that this new literature – Huineng's winning poem – was pure speech, derived from the perfect experience of truth, and surely therefore altogether unrelated to that dog-eat-dog cycle of rewriting the genealogies-of-truth that had become so normal in 8th century China. In short, this mini-drama is the place where Shenxiu's contrived and selfish literary ambitions to own tradition magically give birth to their complete opposite: oral truth, spontaneously composed in a manner that supposedly stands completely clear of religious politics and greed.⁴¹ Of course, these complex narrative details only make sense when we remember that they all work to establish one agenda: Huineng “killed off” Shenxiu completely by accident, with absolutely no selfish or aggressive motivation in view, and certainly without literature as the murder weapon. With that theme in mind all these contradictory details fall into place.

It is worth pausing here to consider something else. The juxtaposition of the poems represents a spectacle of sorts – Huineng's harsh, topic-by-topic, negations visibly mimic the *Diamond Sutra's* attack on older forms of Buddhism back in India, and of course, the *Diamond Sutra* had been several times identified by the narrative as the best of sutras. Thus, as Huineng's poem replays the *Diamond Sutra's* basic trope

⁴¹ This radical sounding wisdom-of-negation, presented as a kind of ahistorical orality that naturally trumps calculated literary efforts, closely mirrors the *Daode jing's* supposedly oral and “wordless teachings” that appear to have been designed to overcome the more established Confucian and Mohist traditions; for more details, see my “Simplicity for the Sophisticated.” In this vein, it is also worth considering Paul de Man's reflections on the literary invention of preliterary perfection. His essay “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau” is particularly relevant for thinking about this theme; see, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota P., 1983), pp. 102–41. The following essay, “Literary History and Literary Modernity” (*ibid.*, pp. 142–65) also offers useful perspectives.

of negating old-style Buddhism, we see clearly that our author is relying on the heft of the literary tradition to make the illiterate Huineng's supposedly spontaneous poem look more profound and akin to what the Chinese took to be buddha-wisdom. In other words, our author is writing out the drama of orality-overcoming-literature knowing that it will appear acceptable only if it accords with the literary tradition as understood by his anticipated audience.

We shouldn't overlook, too, the fact that the *Platform Sutra* mimics the *Diamond Sutra* by delivering a frightening sounding rhetoric of negation in its interior, while relying on images of decorum and order in the introduction that are then balanced by standard Mahayana claims in the conclusion in which the reader is assured that (negated) tradition can be reconstituted via the transmission of this very text. Noting this parallel means that this poetic negation is offset not only by the reassuring passages of the *Platform Sutra* that promise the recovery of truth, presence, and authority, but also by the fact that this presentation of antinomian rhetoric comes to the reader nestled in a vast culture of reading and writing about Buddhist truth that always promises the recovery of tradition and buddha-presence from such nihilistic sounding literary gestures. In short, the negation of the Buddhist tradition had long ago been domesticated in *Buddhist literature*, in texts just like the *Diamond Sutra*, and thus Huineng's poem looks altogether traditional, non-threatening, and even decidedly cliché. What is new, and revolutionary, is that this Buddha-sounding rhetoric is coming out of an illiterate Chinese body, a gesture that naturally guarantees that Chinese Buddhists can confidently claim to have direct access to the otherwise distant origins of tradition in India, and in a manner that supersedes the daunting tasks of reading and interpretation. Likewise, and this has been obvious to scholars for a long time: the *Platform Sutra* represents a Chinese effort to take over the writing of tradition such that sutras no longer come from India but are "legitimately" found coming out of Chinese mouths.

The complexities regarding Huineng's "writing" of truth only increase when Hongren comes along, reads the new poem/s, and "realized that I [Huineng] had a splendid understanding of the cardinal meaning." But, "being afraid lest the assembly know this, he said to them: 'This is still not complete understanding.'⁴² This new piece of public duplicity, supposedly enacted for reasons that echo Hongren's fear in his initial conversation with Huineng, is quickly reversed in the

⁴² *Platform/PY*, p. 132.

next paragraph, in which we learn that at midnight Hongren called Huineng to him, recited the *Diamond Sutra* for him, thereby causing Huineng to get enlightened once again. As Huineng tells his audience: “that night I received the dharma. *None of the others knew about it.*”⁴³ Having now been accorded his formal identity as the legitimate son of the truth-father, Huineng is rushed out of the monastery that very night, supposedly with hordes of enraged people coming after him, eager to kill him.

By now the text’s basic agenda is quite clear. Summed up are three key elements: 1. explaining how it happened that the public came to misidentify the Sixth Patriarch – taking Shenxiu and the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* to be legitimate instead of Huineng and the *Diamond Sutra*; 2. confirming that Huineng’s installation as the Sixth Patriarch was a completely innocent affair that was based solely on his natural enlightenment, a promotion that had nothing to do with the literary tradition or Chan politics; and 3. convincing the reader that this newly revealed story represents simple, unadorned, historical fact: that is, *that the revelation of the supposed historical conspiracy – Hongren’s many deceptions – isn’t itself the result of a literary conspiracy*, which it most assuredly is. That final point is perhaps a little tricky, but it seems unavoidable that the supposed innocence of Huineng that appears *in* the narrative makes the narrative in which he lives appear equally innocent and uncontrived. How, after all, could the story of an innocent, illiterate master from the South of China be contrived and complicated, especially when that very story is coming out of that innocent master’s mouth? Our author has subtly disappeared, leaving only an innocent master who explains how it was that he so accidentally became the leader of Chinese Buddhism.

Standing back from this complex story – and it *is* one of the most developed Chan stories of all time – one might first conclude that the charges of deceit should be piled up on Shenxiu since, after all, he is the one person on stage who has been explicitly vilified. True enough, Shenxiu is the shifty one writing poems in the dark, just as he is also the one given to long, self-incriminating, internal monologues in which he tries to work out his schemes to gain the title of Sixth Patriarch. Against this conclusion it would seem that there is plenty of evidence to conclude that Hongren’s role in the conspiracy was much more pivotal than Shenxiu, even though presumably Shenxiu had to play along with Hongren’s inexplicable pretenses even after he had been so thoroughly rejected from the house of the patriarchs. Hongren was, as we

⁴³ *Platform/PY*, p. 133, italics added.

have seen, the “author” of the split-screen set-up: having pushed away the enlightened-sounding Huineng after their first encounter, he concluded the poetry contest by tricking Shenxiu into admitting his authorship of the bad poem, while also duping his monks with the promise that worshipping Shenxiu’s bad poem would benefit them and lead to enlightenment, something that he explained to Shenxiu, *in private*, to be completely impossible. And, of course, all this double-talk occurred after Hongren had initially set out to publicly endorse the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* with professionally executed wall-paintings, even though earlier in the story the man who was reciting the *Diamond Sutra* in the lodging house for the officials explained to Huineng that when he was in Hongren’s company, Hongren endorsed the *Diamond Sutra*.⁴⁴

Hongren’s shifty behavior continued when he publicly rejected Huineng’s winning poem, or rather poems. It was only later that night, again in private, that Hongren finally recognizes Huineng as the next truth-father but in such a manner that the public *inside the narrative* will never hear this from him – in fact, he immediately sends Huineng off without publicly identifying him as his heir, which, of course, supposedly was the whole point of the poetry contest. Having Hongren claim, again, that there were dangerous conspiratorial types in the monastery whom he expects would side against him, hardly hides the fact that Hongren has been designated as the main conspirator in propagating the false history of Shenxiu as the Sixth Patriarch.

Seeing Hongren’s lead role in the conspiracy raises a number of interesting issues regarding how Chan authors took poetic license in redesigning their ancestors. In this case, just like the figure of the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra*, Hongren has been made to appear as an unreliable narrator, especially for public pronouncements, since he has been shown to be quite ruthless in his choices of when, and to whom, he will speak truthfully. Once we see how our author has shaped Hongren, the supposed holder of perfect enlightenment, to suit his narrative purposes, we have solid grounds for rethinking the spirit in which early Chan writing was conducted. In short, our author has, in his effort to tell how Huineng innocently got Hongren’s inheritance instead of Shenxiu, needed to paint Hongren – the source of truth and tradition in the story – in a complicated and, arguably, unflattering light.

⁴⁴ The man said to Huineng, “I heard the master encourage the monks and lay followers, saying that if they recited just the one volume, the *Diamond Sutra*, they could see into their own natures and with direct apprehension become buddhas.” (See *Platform/PY*, p. 127.)

One could spend more time thinking about the implications of casting Hongren in this unsavory role, but I think it is more interesting to begin to close out our analysis by reflecting on how well Shenxiu's "interior" is developed in that Hamlet-styled passage where he is wrestling with himself over how to proceed in order to win the title of Sixth Patriarch. The first thing to remember is that if the *Platform Sutra* was written around 780, then Shenxiu had been dead for some seventy-five years and this scene with Hongren would have had to occur in an even more distant past since Hongren seems to have died in 674. There is, as far as we know, no prior textual source, or hint of a source, for this event. And, in fact, connecting Shenxiu with Hongren only appeared in narratives written after Shenxiu's death when various authors had reason to attach him to Hongren and the Bodhidharma lineage.

Thus, we have to wonder where this rich and detailed interior monologue came from. If it hasn't come to the author from the literary record – and the preceding accounts of Shenxiu present a completely positive image – my guess is that in Shenxiu's ruminations we see the author of the *Platform Sutra* foisting a portion of his own subjectivity onto Shenxiu, since the figure of Shenxiu is trying to do, in a simple way, what the *Platform Sutra* is itself designed to do: gain control over the patriarchy-of-truth through manipulating public opinion, by secretly inserting unsigned literature into the public sphere. In short, our author, though presumably hoping to find some way to benefit from this imaginary form of Huineng that he has invented, actually has much more in common with the version of Shenxiu he has constructed since, in the end, the author and his version of Shenxiu appear as scheming figures, dedicated to manipulating the reading public with anonymous proof-texts – poetic or otherwise – that supposedly justify new claims to own enlightenment.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Before leaving this close reading, I think we would do well to consider two theoretical points. First, in making sense of the narrative in a general way, we need to remember that claims of inheritance, however private, are really public affairs. Thus, Huineng can only be Hongren's truth-son if the public takes him to be such, based on the "publication" of a plausible-looking narrative. In this sense, claims to sonship are just like claims to owning property – they only mean something when they are accepted by the public at large. Of course, in the case of working up a story to identify Huineng as the Sixth Patriarch,

these two kinds of claims merge since the title of Sixth Patriarch carries within it the claim to be Hongren's heir *and* to own the totality of the Buddhist tradition.

Key here is that in generating a compelling account of Huineng's sonship for the public, it seems to have helped matters to have it appear that Huineng doesn't at all need public recognition in order to take possession of this title. In fact, winning this public recognition seems to be more easily accomplished by generating a scenario in which that public recognition appears unneeded, and certainly, unsought after. Thus, the dialectic of recognition is most easily advanced when the public recognition of an identity appears secondary to *an essence-of-identity that was supposedly always already there in the first place*. That is, though sonship in any patriarchal setting is always a socially-determined-identity, it is still the case that this kind of identity-claim works best when it denies its social origins. Thus, it would seem that to finesse this complicated play of dependence and (feigned) independence in the establishment of sonship, the narrative has Huineng blindly nudging his way into his sonship role with no notion that his actions and their assessment in the eyes of the public are the key to owning this identity. In fact, it seems he doesn't even know that this truth-sonship is an identity that can be won; in coming to meet Hongren, he defines his agenda with a denial: "I am seeking no particular thing, but only the buddhadharma"⁴⁵ – a bold claim that removes the possibility that Huineng arrived with plans to be recognized as Hongren's heir. Thus, though the narrative needs to explain how Huineng came to Hongren to receive his new identity, this transmission of identity will appear most plausible in the public eye when this story of transmission is purified of the intention to effect just this goal.

Lurking here is an interesting tension imbedded in what we could call "the phenomenology of identifying sons." Though identity is a brutal yes-no matter, public assent to identity is always partial, changeable, and organic in the sense of existing on a scale of probability: one thinks while reading the *Platform Sutra*, "Oh, sure, I bet this Huineng is the real Sixth Patriarch and not Shenxiu, or at least it's really starting to look that way – I wonder what others think..." Given this tension between the public's complex and fickle willingness-to-recognize-identity and the unforgiving yes-no quality of truth-sonship, and especially truth-sonship when it is expected that Hongren can have only one heir, the reader is slowly given reasons (and desires) to accept the suddenness

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of the coming coronation, since this magical moment will only succeed if the public has been suitably prepared with a series of “silent changes” by which Huineng’s sonship is constructed and Shenxiu’s is destroyed. In short, Huineng’s identity is made of the reader’s slowly building desire, and this desire has to be evoked and then managed in certain ways to get it to turn into a quasi-judicial declaration: “Yes, I hereby assent to the claim that Huineng is the Sixth Patriarch.” And, of course, this desire seems well managed by the elaborate conspiracy theory that the narrative has worked up for itself: as one comes to despise Shenxiu and his petty striving, one also comes to see that Hongren was an awfully complicated fellow, and that it was only Huineng who was a simple man of truth, interested in nothing but buddhadharma, and therefore, much like Cinderella, naturally has the right to win not just the contest but the reader’s love and admiration as well.⁴⁶

The second theoretical issue returns us to the intricate problem of how new literary forms overcome older literary forms. Key to see here is that the *Platform Sutra* is a literary work that proposes its opposite: the illiterate and yet enlightened Huineng, and his supposedly oral poetry, both of which, though supposedly free of the old literary tradition, are in fact supported in various ways by the *Diamond Sutra*. Thus, within the narrative of the *Platform Sutra*, we watch as the *Diamond Sutra* is magically injected into the purifying zone of Huineng’s illiteracy at the outset of the story. At that moment, the narrative is producing an image of *the perfect reading of tradition*, since the fullest truth of Buddhism has flowed from the Buddha, to the *Diamond Sutra*, into Huineng, with nothing lost or distorted along the way. The grueling and always-imprecise reality of reading has, as it were, been bypassed, and in its stead we have only the immediate, unerring, and effortless transmission of pure truth and tradition.

Put this way, this enlightenment, like the later ones, isn’t presented as some chance experience of truth generated by meditation or some abrupt event. Rather, each of Huineng’s enlightenments appears to be literature-induced. Thus, it is with a mysterious kind of textual-zapping – first from the *Diamond Sutra* after the firewood sale was completed, and then from hearing Shenxiu’s poem recited at the masters’ wall, and then again from hearing the *Diamond Sutra* when Hongren reads it to him on their final night together – that Huineng supernaturally overcomes the complexities of language, narrative, textuality, and Other-

⁴⁶ I am happy to note that Adamek also finds the Cinderella motif useful; see her essay, “Transmitting Notions of Transmission,” in *Readings of the Platform Sūtra*, p. 110.

ness in order to suddenly receive total truth and tradition. Thus, while the *Platform Sutra* is obviously about identifying new truth-fathers, it is also true that that political action is occurring simultaneously with the rearrangement of access to tradition and the literature that supports it. With Huineng popping out of the *Platform Sutra* as a supposedly historical figure capable of such miraculous readings of tradition, the whole of the Buddhist literary tradition has suddenly been radically overcome and redefined as a mere secondary source for accessing the essence of Buddhist truth. Henceforth, the illiterate Huineng and the text he lives in are not just the future truth-fathers of tradition, they are also the place where a final reading of tradition can be found because Huineng is that one figure who can read tradition perfectly, even though he can't read at all. What could be more zenny than that?

Put another way, as the author lined up this new figure Huineng to stand in place of Shenxiu, he also invented that moment when the entire Buddhist literary tradition was magically condensed and lodged in the imaginary body of Huineng, a body that only lives in the narrative. Then, with tradition fully domesticated in this manner, the narrative makes clear that from now on truth and tradition are available via this new textual entity – the *Platform Sutra*, itself. In that sense, our author has skillfully invented the opposite of his text – the illiterate black-hole of Huineng's perfect reading – in order to accomplish the narrative-goal of textually owning the totality of tradition, an accomplishment that is proudly announced by the final phase of Huineng's teaching where Huineng explains that henceforth the *Platform Sutra* itself should be seen as the essence of tradition.⁴⁷ Such a gesture, while replaying the standard cult-of-the-text as found in the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, does them one better since now all *those* sutras have been overcome and absorbed by Huineng and the text he lives. Thus, Huineng is that uncanny and unliterary opening in which the whole literary tradition was injected – at least for the believing reader – in just such a way as to then give birth to a whole new body of literature that, again, promises the reclamation of truth and tradition.

⁴⁷ There are several places within the teaching section where Huineng makes these self-referential claims; see *The Platform Sutra*, pp. 153, 162. Such claims are then repeated in the following section that narrates his final hours; see, pp. 173–74, 182. The reinstatement of tradition in new literary forms is also visible in the way Huineng's various poems are recommended as the key to winning enlightenment; see, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 159–62, 174–78, 180.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Platform/PY *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. Philip Yampolsky