Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition

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to knit together groups for a variety of nonritual purposes, from economic and political cooperation to banditry and rebellion. It is precisely because the ritual groups of Southeast China have repeatedly demonstrated the potential to form competing power structures (albeit with a significant spiritual dimension) that they have been so often suppressed.

Dean's work suggests a number of avenues for future research. Particularly intriguing is the role that overseas Chinese are playing in rebuilding these traditions in China (often simultaneously establishing cultural and economic links). The traditional disciplinary boundaries should be rethought in order to explore fully the transnational networks that are currently being revived. At the same time, the involvement of the overseas Chinese suggests that the rebirth of local temples may have economic dimensions worth exploring. For example, a recent press account reports that the overseas Guos are rebuilding their ancestral burial grounds in China at the same time that they are forming a holding company with startup capital of $10 million for investment in China (*Straits Times* [March 4, 1993], p. 25).

Dean's interdisciplinary book breaks new ground and will be of great interest to a variety of readers, including historians and anthropologists, as well as those involved in Taoist studies and the history of religion. In particular, the richly documented case studies that form the core of the book are a significant contribution to our understanding of Chinese Taoism and popular cults. The book is as well an impressive testimony to the great depth and tenacity of local traditions in China.

JEAN DEBERNARDI, University of Alberta.


This book continues Bernard Faure's ongoing effort to break free of the constraints of traditional Chan/Zen historiography and philology by approaching Zen with the full compliment of postmodernist critical tools. *Chan Insights and Oversights* thus shifts the discussion away from traditional, and in the author's view, epistemologically naive preoccupations with "Zen as such," to Zen as a continually emerging phenomenon constructed through its representations; in the author's own words, it is "an analysis of the conditions of possibility of a certain type of discourse labeled Chan/Zen and of the various constraints that have informed it. Its main purposes are to present a 'topology' of Chan . . . and to open the field of Chan/Zen studies to the questions raised in other academic disciplines in the hope of bringing Chan/Zen closer to the mainstream of Western thought" (p. 3).

In many respects this book serves as a companion volume to the author's *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), a groundbreaking study that established Faure's place as the most original and provocative modern interpreter of Zen thought and history. Much of *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* is dedicated to an analysis of the "margins" of the Zen tradition—aspects of the tradition, including thaumaturgy, mortuary practices, dreams, and sexuality—largely ignored in contemporary accounts. *Chan Insights and Oversights* accordingly begins with one of the more
pressing issues to emerge from the earlier study, namely, the genesis of the widespread but misguided notion of Zen as a species of "Oriental mysticism."

Part 1 of *Chan Insights and Oversights* traces the evolution of contemporary discourse about Zen, chronicling the history of Western interaction with Zen beginning with the Jesuits in the sixteenth century. Faure goes on to demonstrate the degree to which the rhetoric of modern Japanese Zen apologists and philosophers, including D. T. Suzuki, Nishida Kitarō, and Nishitani Keiji, is structured around categories derived from Christian missionaries and nineteenth-century Orientalism. Indeed, in Faure's account modern Zen discourse emerges as a form of "reverse Orientalism"—that is, it constitutes a subspecies of Japanese nativism predicated on an inversion of Orientalist schemas.

*Chan Insights and Oversights* then moves on to an analysis of the development and character of contemporary Zen studies in both Japan and the West, exposing what Faure terms the "historicist (objectivist) fallacy," the "teleological fallacy," and the "essentialist fallacy." Faure concludes part 1 by laying out various alternative strategies, including structuralist, hermeneutic, and performative approaches to Zen phenomena, all of which are shown to be more attuned to the ideological dimensions of Zen rhetoric.

The second part of the book is organized thematically, exploring various "epistemological paradigms"—bipolar structures such as great/little (or elite/popular), literacy/orality, temporal/spatial, objective/subjective, and so on—that inform the study of Zen. The author's extended discussion of such polarities critically engages a host of contemporary theorists in the fields of religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and critical theory. Invariably, Faure is drawn to the conclusion that such paradigms are profoundly distorting yet ultimately unavoidable—a position that some readers may regard as equivocation. In his defense, Faure claims that a deep reading of the Zen tradition must remain open to the "overdetermined" nature of Zen discourse. One is occasionally led to suspect that Faure's position is itself a rhetorical ploy, stemming from his desire to find points of contact between medieval Buddhist thought and French theory. Nevertheless, these topical discussions are replete with trenchant analyses and brilliant insights.

The most pressing problem, around which Faure circles throughout the book, is the status of "Zen" as an object of scholarly investigation. Faure spends much of the book deconstructing Zen, arguing that it "is not primarily a concrete social reality, but a complex and elusive epistemological object that never existed as a given outside representations, but was always in the making" (p. 270). But while his treatment shows Zen to be an "artificial construct," Faure does not want to see Zen dissolve into "pure ideological discourse." Rather, Faure insists that "Zen needs to be preserved as a specific, tangible object of knowledge" (p. 271). Here one can plainly see the two sides of Faure—the skilled philologist/historian and the astute critical theorist—struggling to come to grips with one another despite what may be irreconcilable differences. While some readers may line up on one side of the fence or the other, the importance of Faure's work lies precisely in his effort to straddle both sides and endure the chafing.

This book is a "must read" for all students of Zen, as well as for those interested in the application of critical theory to the field of religious studies. It is particularly recommended for comparative religionists and those interested in interfaith dialogue, who all too often uncritically accept Suzuki, Nishida, Nishitani, and their intellectual heirs as authorities, if not native informants, on the subject of Zen Buddhism.

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