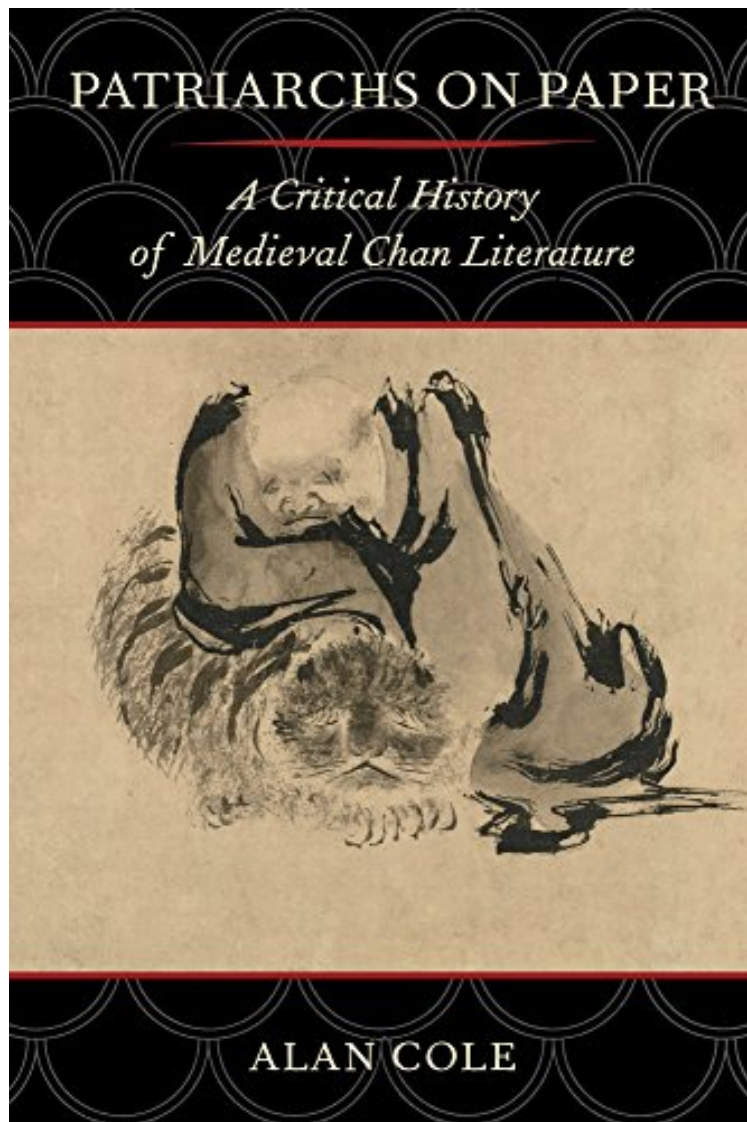


# Patriarchs on Paper: A Critical History of Medieval Chan Literature

Alan Cole

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#464298 in Books University of California Press 2016-11-01 Original language: English 9.00 x .80 x 6.00, .0  
#File Name: 0520284070344 pages University of California Press | File size: 20.Mb

**Alan Cole : Patriarchs on Paper: A Critical History of Medieval Chan Literature** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Patriarchs on Paper: A Critical History of Medieval Chan Literature:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Invaluable Scholarly Insight into the Chan Literary Tradition By Seth Zuih Segall Alan Coles "Patriarchs on Paper" draws together some recent scholarly research on Chan Buddhism's core

texts, e.g., its various Tang and Song Dynasty genealogies, transmission of the lamp compendia, and koan collections, as well as the Platform Sutra, and the monastic rules for purity (Chanyuan Qinggui) and presents them in the form of an historical overview for the interested general reader. Cole views these texts as products of historical, cultural, and literary evolution, charting the changes in their content and style over the course of centuries, and speculating on the various purposes these texts might have served. His basic orientation can only be described as ironic, that is, that the texts cannot be taken at face value in that: 1) they represent a literary tradition rather than a practice tradition, 2) they express in letters and words what is allegedly beyond letters and words, 3) they describe a process of dharma transmission that fictionalizes and romanticizes the actual process of transmission, 4) they reflect steadily increasing Taoist and antinomian trends in Chinese Buddhism that were at variance with both normative Buddhism and actual Chan monastic practice 5), they employed increasingly stylized rhetorical strategies that fictionalized the accounts of Chan ancestors in increasingly entertaining ways, and 6) they reflected, among other things, the exigencies of various patriarchs as they strove to secure their authority and win favors from the imperial court. Most interesting to me was the examination of the written historical record in terms of what is known about Zen patriarchs such as Bodhidharma, Huike, and Huineng. The stories about them change and are embellished with each passing generation. The pithy, witty, and archetypically Zen sayings attributed to them only begin to circulate centuries after they are long gone if, that is, they ever existed as more than literary protagonists at all. During the Tang Dynasty the sayings attributed to them are stock paraphrases of sutra passages. Only after a time do the fly whisks, unconventional behavior, and rhetoric of negation emerge, only fully making their appearance during the Song Dynasty. As such, these epigrammatic sayings are fictional inventions placed in the ancestors' mouths rather than the authentic accounts of the sayings and doings of real Tang Dynasty masters. Over time, the Chan patriarchs begin to look more and more like the protagonists from another, older Chinese literary tradition: the Taoist sages. When koan collections such as Wumens 13th century Gateless Barrier begin to appear, they include witty, ironic commentary and well-crafted poems that let you know that the authors are not simple Taoist sages, however, but accomplished Song Dynasty literati who are self-consciously introducing a new literary form written not for the benefit of simple monks but for consumption by other Chinese literati. The text suffers from the limitations of the authors' arch and ironic stance and his tendency to speculate beyond the data. He never considers the possibility that these texts might despite their constructed literary nature be vehicles for important religious insights or facilitate genuine spiritual attainment. The book also shares the limitations of any summary of detailed research for general readers in that one often finds oneself wanting more extensive and detailed examination of quotations from the texts than those that are offered. Despite these limitations, this book fills a genuine void. Zen practitioners who are unable to keep up with scholarly books and articles that means almost all Zen practitioners will find it an invaluable addition to their library. It will give them a much more complex and nuanced understanding of the tradition they have inherited, in much the same way that scholarly Biblical criticism since the 19th Century has transformed our understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The truth of Chan Buddhism better known as Zen is regularly said to be beyond language, and yet Chan authors medieval and modern produced an enormous quantity of literature over the centuries. To make sense of this well-known paradox, *Patriarchs on Paper* explores several genres of Chan literature that appeared during the Tang and Song dynasties (c. 600-1300), including genealogies, biographies, dialogues, poems, monastic handbooks, and koans. Working through this diverse body of literature, Alan Cole details how Chan authors developed several strategies to evoke images of a perfect Buddhism in which wonderfully simple masters transmitted Buddhism's final truth to one another, suddenly and easily, and, of course, independent of literature and the complexities of the Buddhist monastic system. Chan literature, then, reveled in staging delightful images of a Buddhism free of Buddhism, tempting the reader, over and over, with the possibility of finding behind the thick facade of real Buddhism with all its rules, texts, doctrines, and institutional solidity an ethereal world of pure spirit. *Patriarchs on Paper* charts the emergence of this kind of fantasy Buddhism and details how it interacted with more traditional forms of Chinese Buddhism in order to show how Chan's illustrious ancestors were created in literature in order to further a wide range of real-world agendas.

From the Inside Flap Cole offers an original, innovative, and compelling history of Tang-Song Chan literature that challenges and corrects many of the more long-standing misrepresentations of the tradition. *Patriarchs on Paper*'s great strength and originality is in taking Chan literature seriously as literature and allowing readers to access this world with all of the excitement of a literary detective story. With an extremely high degree of analytic sophistication, Cole has rendered this large and often contentious body of secondary scholarship into a coherent narrative of literary and institutional history intelligible and meaningful to the nonspecialist. The manuscript is exemplary in presenting a critical history of deeply complex material that is at once rigorous and engaging. "D. Max Moerman, Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures at Barnard and Columbia University "Using lively, provocative, and accessible prose, Alan Cole provides his readers with a compelling behind-the-scenes look at the emergence of Chan as a literary tradition. In *Patriarchs on Paper*, Cole retraces the steps of some of Chan's most celebrated authors to show how they tried to secure legitimacy, patronage, recognition, and much more through their creative use of new models of

authority, brand consciousness, conspiracy theories, and playful dialectics. This book is a must-read for anyone looking to take a brisk and refreshing stroll through the forest of conceptual thickets known as Chan or Zen."Juhn Y. Ahn, University of Michigan