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Venerable Shengyan's Self-Representation in Relation to His Formulation of Chan Buddhism

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Abstract

This paper takes a narrative approach, looking at Chan master Shengyan's (1931-2009) autobiographies, and historicizing his response to life and the circumstances of Chinese Chan Buddhism in the zeitgeist of the twentieth century. The time-honored Chan Buddhist tradition, in the tumultuous sociopolitical transition, struggled for a space in the age of reason and rationality; this perceived struggle on the larger religious and sociological scale was encapsulated in Shengyan's own narration of his life, forming his personal and religious identities. My basic argument is that his Chan teachings were contingent on both his personal crisis and his perceived global crisis of a war-torn China. Against the backdrop of his individual struggles, the sociopolitical transformations of twentieth century China, the internal crisis of orthodoxy, and the external threat of non-Chinese forms of Buddhism in Taiwan, Shengyan envisioned Chan Buddhism as the doctrinal culmination and experiential fulfillment of the whole of Buddhism, manifested through creating the Dharma Drum Lineage.

Introduction

The late Venerable Shengyan 聖嚴法師 (1931-2009)[1] was one of the most respected and influential Chinese Chan Buddhist clerics of late 20th century. He contributed to the widespread interest in Chan Buddhism both in Taiwan and the West. He was also an intellectual, who was able to articulate difficult Buddhist doctrines in accessible, everyday language for modern people. Shengyan was a very complex person, and he was involved in various activities in modern Taiwan and other Mandarin-speaking locales. People knew him as a Chan master, but he was also known for developing many environmental protection programs. He was a revisionist for many traditional rituals, such as marriage and funerals, so he was known as a modern Buddhist reformer. In scholarly circles, he was known as the first Chinese Buddhist monk to have actually gone through the modern educational system and received a PhD. He was one of the founding members of the International Association for Buddhist Studies in 1976. In the West he was mainly known as a Chan master who led hundreds of intensive Chan retreats in the United States and Europe. He was also a prolific writer, authoring over a dozen books in English and over one hundred books in Chinese, which were translated into many languages, including Korean. He received dharma transmission in both the Linji and Caodong lines of Chan Buddhism, so he combined these two lines to form the Dharma Drum lineage (*Fagu zong* 法鼓宗) of Chan. What historical circumstances forged all of these accomplishments and identities? How did they converge in his life? How did he reconcile them? To answer these questions, we must examine his autobiographies to see how he selectively portrayed his own life experiences within the larger zeitgeist of his time. Stories are the way people make sense of life; they derive meaning that then shapes people's perceptions of themselves and the choices they make.

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1) This paper draws extensively from my recently published book, Yu (2022).

Shengyan's own autographical narratives provide a glimpse of how he made sense of his life – of both the things that happened to him and the internal experiences that created the rich texture of his unique, subjective sense of purpose in relation to his Buddhism.[2)]

My basic argument is that his teachings were contingent upon his own personal crisis (*weiji gan* 危機感) and his perceived global crisis of a war-torn China. His own narration of life events paralleled the tumultuous transition of mid-twentieth-century China. He placed the discourse of modernity at center stage; the time-honored Chan Buddhist tradition, in the tumultuous sociopolitical transition, struggled for a space in the age of reason and rationality. This perceived struggle on the larger religious and sociological scale was encapsulated in Shengyan's own life crises, shaping his personal and religious identities.

A Life Forged through Crises

In his memoirs, Shengyan described a weak, divided, and hopeless China, struggling to survive in the face of foreign invasion and internal division. In the midst of this, the Buddhism he witnessed was likewise fragmented, and it had devolved into ritualism and decadence, with only a few handful of Buddhist clerics seeking to change the situation against all odds. He lived through natural disasters, poverty, deaths, wars, social unrest, and the degeneracy of Buddhism–all before the age of eighteen, when he escaped to Taiwan by joining the Nationalist Guomindang Party (GMD) youth army.

With the repeated flooding of the Yangtze River and the chaos of the

2) This chapter draws mainly on Shengyan's autobiography, Shengyan (1968). Another autobiography I used is Shengyan (1993). I made no use of the third autobiography, Shengyan (2008) because this autobiography is less reliable as it was written by a ghostwriter directly in English after going through a translator to ask Shengyan a series of questions. The answers were transcribed and incorporated, and the ghostwriter also examined other biographical information available in English.

Sino-Japanese War, his family had become extremely poor. In 1931, the year he was born, the Yangtze River flooded the region in which his family lived, and they lost everything they owned. The flood was one of the most devastating disasters in modern history. It had been caused by unsustainable patterns of agricultural expansion, long-term neglect of the dikes during the late Qing and early Republic (1800s to 1928) eras, and extremely high levels of precipitation that year. Scholarly sources disagree about the exact death toll of the Yangtze River flood, but most agree that it killed millions of people, and left approximately forty million people homeless.[3] Shengyan's parents were left with nothing and were forced to migrate more than twenty *li* away from Yangtze to farm for landowners.[4]

Shengyan was the youngest, and the weakest, of six siblings. He had three elder brothers and two elder sisters. Due to his family's financial situation and the fact that he was born prematurely, he had a late start in everything, including talking, walking, and learning. He was malnourished as an infant and young child, and it was not until he reached the age of six that he was able to go outside of the house to play with other children. He had not even been formally named; his mother simply called him Baokang 保康, which literally means "to preserve [your] health," hoping he would grow up to be healthier.

When he was seven, in 1938, he lived through yet another flood during which he saw bloated corpses floating down the Yangtze River for days after the deluge. His father took him to help his distant relatives and other victims who still lived near the Yangtze River. He remembered the sight in vivid detail:

> The corpses of men, women, and children were floating down [the river] … all of them were already decomposing. Typically, the corpse(s) of men floated down the river face down with their backs bloated, arched, protruding out of the water. Perhaps due to their belly fat, the corpses of women always faced upward with

3) See Courtney, DisasterHistory.org (accessed May 27, 2016); Zhang (2014); David (2002, 61-70); Southwick (1983, 565).

4) One *li* is roughly 1/3 of a mile.

> their heads and legs sunken back into the water—this situation was the complete opposite to that of the men—with their hair spread out in the water, along with the corpses, drifting on the water slowly … as for children's corpses, the bellies were blown up like blowfish, just drifting. Once in a while you could see ducks that were hatched after the disaster, without any misgivings, feeding on the eyes of the corpses of children.… Under the scorching sun, the stench from these corpses permeated the area.[5]

The horrific sight was terrifying (*jingju buyi* 驚懼不已) to the young Shengyan. He realized the frailty of life (*shengming weicui* 生命危脆).[6]

This flood was actually the result of China's Nationalist Army leadership's frantic attempt to "use water in place of soldiers" in the Second Sino-Japanese War to slow the Japanese imperial army's advance toward Wuhan, China's temporary wartime capital. The Nationalist Army bombed a major Yellow River dike in Henan Province, and within days this strategic breach widened into a 5,000-foot-wide breakout. It caused the Yellow River to inundate much of eastern Henan and northern Anhui, finally flooding down and wreaking havoc on northern Jiangsu Province and affecting the Yangtze River. This time, the flood killed over 800,000 people, created close to four million refugees, and kept nearly two million acres of good farmland out of dependable production for almost nine years.[7]

Despite the trauma of seeing corpses floating down the river, the young Shengyan considered the Japanese invasions to be far more fearsome. The Japanese imperialist policy to expand its influence in order to secure access to raw materials, food, and labor lasted for decades. For example, in 1931, the year that Shengyan was born, the Japanese invaded Manchuria and created a

5) Shengyan 1968, 16.
6) Shengyan 1968, 16.
7) Edgerton-Tarpley 2016, 94-116.

new puppet Japanese state. From 1931 to 1937, China and Japan continued to skirmish small localized regional battles. Everywhere the Japanese soldiers went, they scored major victories. They captured places like Beijing and Shanghai. And the Japanese soldiers instilled horror in the minds of the people: "The arrival of Japanese soldiers far surpassed the great scourges of floods. Even though the floods were fierce, one could still try to escape or evade them. However, it was useless to try to escape the violence and cruelty of the Japanese."[8]

Shengyan had witnessed this cruelty firsthand. He recounted that during the same year as the flood, wherever the Japanese went, towns would be burned, resources depleted, and the men tortured and killed. But the women, both young and old, were always raped and then killed. He had seen children stabbed and picked up with the Japanese soldiers' bayonets.[9]

Yearning for Education and Monkhood

The Japanese soldiers left Shengyan's family even poorer than before. Shengyan always had a liking for study, but the family was too poor to allow him to go to school beyond fourth grade. He states:

> After the Japanese soldiers arrived, our family became extremely poor. I recall one time when my elementary teacher wanted me to purchase a textbook... we were so poor that even when we gathered up all the coins that we had saved from my parents, we couldn't afford the book. So I stole my sister's saved up new years money but was discovered by her. When my mother found out, she scolded me so harshly. Then we all cried and hugged each other. All I wanted was a textbook.[10]

8) Shengyan 1968, 37.
9) Shengyan 1968, 39.
10) Shengyan 1968, 20.

His opportunity for education continued only when he became a monk. In the summer of 1943, due to poverty or fate, Shengyan was promised to be "given" to Guangjiao Monastery (Guangjiao si 廣教寺) in Nantong district (Nantong 南通) on Mount Lang (Langshan 狼山) to be a novice monk. Nantong was his birthplace, although he had moved away from it with his family after the big flood. The abbot of that monastery was looking for a young acolyte, and through connections with a layperson, Mr. Dai Hanqing 戴漢清, Shengyan's horoscopic details (shengchen bazi 生辰八字),[11] along with those of other young boys, were given to the monastery for divinatory purposes in selecting the acolyte. Through their prognostication, Shengyan's name came up three consecutive times before a statue of Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva (Dashizhi pusa 大勢至菩薩), the patron bodhisattva of the monastery.[12] This method of acquiring acolytes for the abbot appears to have been quite standard. Holmes Welch details the norms and the exceptions in this process.[13]

Shengyan recalled his mother's tears as she held him and blaming herself and his father for being so poor and unable to raise him. He felt that his own willingness to leave had caused her to cry, and thus Shengyan also began to cry. Yet he recalled being excited (*xingfen* 興奮) on the way to the monastery: "Even though I wasn't able to return home again, and would be entering a completely unfamiliar environment, I was not afraid at all. I felt as if this trip was a trip to heaven." In fact, he was happy at the prospect of becoming a monk. He romanticized it as a life free of concerns.[14] In this he was wrong.

Living in the monastery, he thought that he would never have to worry about being hungry or harassed by Japanese soldiers. He was right on the second

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11) *Shengchen bazi* 生辰八字 literally means one's birth details, including the year, month, day, and hour, with each consisting of one heavenly stem and one earthly branch, adding up to eight aspects, for the purposes of prognosticating one's future.

12) For the genesis and legend of Guangjiao Monastery and its patron bodhisattva, see *Song goaseng chuan* 宋高僧傳 [Eminent Monks of the Song] (T no.2061, 50:822a3-823b11).

13) Welch. 1967. 31; 42-43; 127-128.

14) Shengyan, 1968. 48.

part but wrong on the first. Guangjiao Monastery was wealthy by Shengyan's family's standards, but its financial status began to decline shortly after he joined the community. In addition, even though the Japanese soldiers were out of the picture, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) New Fourth Army (Xinsi jun 新四軍) and the GMD Nationalist Army (Guojun 國軍) were constantly battling in that region, and Guangjiao Monastery became an increasingly dangerous place to live.[15] In 1946, Shengyan fled to a branch monastery in Shanghai where he was to perform funeral services every day.

Clash of Ritualism with Modernist Views

Shanghai was a new experience for Shengyan. It was arguably the most modern and Western of all Chinese cities during this time,[16] yet he was there to perform funerary rituals (*zuo jingcan* 做經懺) for the dead. In the beginning, he went along with what he was asked to do, but later he became frustrated that he was not able to indulge his real interest, studying and reading books, both Buddhist and secular. He disdained the rituals themselves, but he acknowledged that people needed them. In one of his memoirs, he recounted how his performances were simply part of what maintained the "empty shell" (*kong jiazi* 空架子) of the Buddhism inherited from the Qing period.[17] It was the commercialization of funerary practices (*shangye hua de foshi* 商業化的佛事), which he attributed to the influence of medieval Daoist and Tantric Buddhism, that was disturbing to

15) See interview of Shengyan in Hu (2010, 339).

16) For a good review of scholarly studies of Shanghai during the years before 1949, see Fogel (2010, 313-33); for Shanghai political or political-economic history, see Coble (1980). This book provides an excellent account of the Shanghai bourgeoisie during the period of Guomindang rule in the city and the relationship between political and commercial leaders, complicating the simplistic idea that the Guomindang and the Shanghai capitalists had completely overlapping interests. Most recently, Coble (2003) picks up the story and examines the years of Japanese occupation, following their landing and assault on Shanghai in the summer of 1937, and the collaboration of China's bourgeoisie.

17) Shengyan 1968, 99.

Shengyan. He believed it concealed the rich doctrinal and practical teaching of the scriptures. He saw these rituals as a sign of Buddhism's deterioration (*liubi de xingcheng* 流弊之形成),[18] absorbing the view shared by progressive Buddhist leaders at the time. It is possible that his disdain toward the commercialization of funerary rituals reflected the attitude he picked up later in his life from people in Taiwan, and he felt disdain toward himself for performing the rituals in Shanghai.

In Shengyan's view, Chinese Buddhism was under the threat of extinction. The sociopolitical and intellectual changes were having a direct impact on the trajectory of Chinese Buddhism's development and the establishment of Buddhist seminary institutions. Shengyan believed that Buddhism at the time had no importance for the society or nation. It was an "empty shell" of rituals.

Joining the Army and the Flight to Taiwan

In the year leading up to his escape to Taiwan, Shengyan came to realize that Buddhism could no longer survive if it were based only on empty funerary rituals and backward beliefs. The full potential of the Buddhadharma was hopelessly obfuscated by these conditions. Thanks to progressive monks like Taixu (1890-1947), who was the founder of the seminary at which Shengyan was studying, the seed of Buddhist reform had been planted in his imagination. He wanted to focus his life on propagating the Buddhadharma and strengthening his monastic education, but no one at the seminary knew what might happen to them under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

Finally, an opportunity arose for him and his classmates at the seminary to leave China. He was too poor to purchase a boat ride to Hong Kong or

18) Shengyan 1968, 103-104.

elsewhere, so the only option for him was to join the GMD youth army. Shengyan greatly resisted the idea, because he had developed a negative impression of the military based on childhood experiences. In his memoir, he stated, "In our village, whenever soldiers would arrive our lives would always be disrupted. Yet now I'm willing to be one of them."[19] However, he was encouraged by one of his teachers at the Jing'an Seminary (Jing'an fojiao xueyuan 靜安佛教學院), Lin Ziqing 林子青 (1910-2002), who told him that he must go to Taiwan and spread Buddhism there.[20]

Shengyan fled to Taiwan on May 15, 1949. He was among a cohort of young monks from Jing'an Seminary who joined the army and were promised that they would soon return to the mainland to win back China. Naïvely, they believed this promise by the GMD. Shengyan still imagined that his dream of propagating Buddhism in China would be realized. But things did not turn out the way he imagined. In his memoir, Shengyan wrote about his terrifying escape on a GMD ship under gunfire:

> When our small boat arrived near the mouth of the Wusong [the port going out of Shanghai], we saw dense machine guns fire from both sides [GMD and CCP]. The CCP army seemed to have noticed our boat on the Huangpu River [leaving out of Shanghai]. They then targeted us. Bullets were flying over our heads, whistling in the air. An announcement over the loudspeaker ordered us to take shelter below the deck of the cabin. We stayed there until we arrived at the Yellow Sea. Only then were we allowed to catch a breath of fresh air on deck.[21]

They could see Taiwan after two days' sail, but they continued for two more days until they reached the south part of Taiwan, Kaohsiung 高雄. All together

19) Shengyan 1968, 147.

20) Shengyan recounts meeting him again in 1988 when he visited mainland China, after some forty years (Shengyan 1991, 44). Lin Ziqing was an outstanding writer and an authority on the life and work of Master Hongyi's 弘一 (1880-1942). He had also researched many historical, theoretical, and literary aspects of Buddhism. See Lin (2008).

21) Shengyan 1968, 153.

they spent four days on the boat. Reflecting on his predicament, he felt completely lost. His country had fallen, his youthful dream of monkhood was shattered, and he questioned his identity as a soldier. Both the fate of Buddhism and his own future were uncertain.

Shengyan was to spend ten years in the GMD army as a telegraph operator. During this phase of his life, he attempted to keep his vow by dedicating himself to deepening his understanding of both foundational and Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism through reading and publishing. For the first three years, his only solace was in books. He read whatever he could get his hands on, be it political science, literature, philosophy, or law. He read whenever he had free time, which turned out to be in the middle of the night, for the most part. He fashioned a light from an ink jar in which he burned peanut oil. In 1952, he was able to get his hands on some Buddhist scriptures and books that were in circulation. He did all he could to educate himself.[22]

Shengyan began to publish essays in Taiwanese Buddhist periodicals soon after he was able to get hold of reprints of the few Buddhist texts in circulation.[23] In these essays, he was primarily focused on purging Buddhism of its superstitious elements.[24] Yet the more he became immersed in his study

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22) Shengyan read widely and studied all sorts of books, because he always had an interest in education and learning, having been deprived of it at an early age. His Buddhist seminary experience in Shanghai had also established a foundation in learning for him. He noticed as well that anyone in the army who had ambition would always seek out opportunities to learn because it was only through education that they would be promoted up the ranks. His time was thus wisely used. See Shengyan (1968, 197).

23) More research needs to be done on the availability of Buddhist texts, including scriptures and general writings, in Taiwan during the early to mid-twentieth century. Existing scholarship on religious printing during this period suggests that there were more popular religious texts in circulation in Taiwan than Buddhist texts when Shengyan arrived there; see Clart and Scott (2015), specifically the chapters by Rostislav Berezkin and Paul R. Katz.

24) His published essays in various Buddhist journals, from his twenties as a soldier to his late thirties before he went to Japan, focused on popular topics such as the mystical dimensions within Buddhism, which he clarified using Buddhist doctrine. For his early essays, see, for example,

of Buddhism, the more his existential dilemma deepened. He became quite ill from long hours of reading and studying into the night and eventually developed a severe case of insomnia. He was unable to sleep even when he was extremely fatigued. This became a chronic illness of "oversensitive nervous system" (shenjing guomin zheng 神經過敏症). Apparently, this is the Chinese term given to "neurasthenia," a new disease of the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. The name was first coined in America, and later the idea spread to Europe, Japan, and then China.[25] For the sake of his health and mental state, he began to practice quiet meditation (jingzuo 靜坐) to calm his nerves. His fellow soldiers mocked him and tried to disturb him while he was sitting, and because he had no teacher to guide him, his attempts most often led to drowsiness or scattered thoughts.[26] Despite all this, he continued.

In the spring of 1959, at twenty-eight, Shengyan received a six-month leave from the army due to chronic rheumatism, which was most likely related to his chronic neurasthenia. The first thing he did was to visit various monasteries in Taiwan, and in Kaohsiung, at Master Yueji's 月基 (1914-1987) temple, Fojiao tang 佛教堂, he met Chan master Lingyuan Hongmiao 靈源宏妙 (1902-1988).[27] Lingyuan was a dharma heir of the eminent Chan master Empty Cloud, or Xuyun 虛雲 (1839-1959).[28] Their encounter changed the course of Shengyan's

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"Yinguo xianbao lu" 因果現報錄 [Record of instant karma] in *Ciming* 慈明 2 (October 1962, 19); "Guishen de zhonglei" 神鬼的種類 [Typology of spirits and gods] in *Ciming* 2 (date unknown, 16-17); and "Tan shentong" 談神通 [On supernatural abilities] in *Hongkong Buddhist Journal* 香港佛教 35 (April 1963, 2-7).

25) "Neurasthenia" was coined in 1869 by the New York physician George M. Beard (1839-1883). It was thought to be a manifestation of physical and mental exhaustion with symptoms throughout the body. Birnbaum describes how Li Shutong, who later became the famous Buddhist master Hongyi, also suffered from this illness; see Birnbaum (2003, 87-91).

26) Shengyan 1968, 202-3.

27) For Master Lingyuan, see Guan Zhengzong 關正宗 (1996, 121-40). It is written for Master Linyuan.

28) Master Lingyuan was tonsured by Xuyun on behalf of the latter's deceased disciple. Thus, even though Lingyuan was Xuyun's dharma heir, he was technically a grand disciple of Xuyun. For studies and biographies on Xuyun, see Campo (2017, 99-136); Luk, trans. (1974). For an updated English translation of Xuyun's collected writings, see Shengyan (2006, 87-118).

life. His years in the army reading, studying, and writing about Buddhism had culminated in what Chan Buddhism describes as a natural "doubt mass" (yituan 疑團), a great sense of wonderment and existential questioning. Numerous unresolved questions regarding the Buddhadharma, not having a qualified teacher's guidance to manage his own crisis mentality, and his concerns about the viability of the Buddhadharma itself, all coalesced into one single conundrum:

> When I was in my early twenties, I practiced very hard in the army, and as a result had some experiences. In my mind I also made various plans, and had various anxieties and doubts, about how best to further my practice. The recurring thoughts were: "How should I further my practice?" and "What will happen in the future?" I was filled with questions.[29]

He experienced a sense of doubt for months, which finally led him to take a leave from the army in order to rest. When he visited Fojiao tang, he was placed in the same room to sleep as Chan master Lingyuan. Seeing Lingyuan in seated meditation all night on the platform, Shengyan was inspired to seek some instruction from him, though he did not know who he was. Shengyan said that he poured out the questions that had been burning in his mind, one after another, for two or three hours, but all Lingyuan said was, "Any more? Any more?" (*haiyou ma* 還有嗎?) without answering any of them. It was as if he was adding fuel to the fire. As Shengyan spoke, the momentum of his wonderment and questioning grew stronger and more intense. All of a sudden, Lingyuan slammed his palm on the platform bed and shouted: "Put them down!" (*fangxia* 放下!). The whole platform shook. Then Lingyuan exclaimed: "Who has all these questions?!" (*sheiyou namoduo wenti* 誰有那麼多問題?!). At this, the great ball of doubt that had built up in Shengyan's mind completely shattered. He let go of everything. Like clouds suddenly dispersing

29) See Shengyan (2002, 99).

from the clear sky, all of his thoughts and questions and his urge to seek answers instantly vanished.[30] He later wrote, "I felt a great weight being suddenly lifted from me. … The whole world was fresh, as though I were seeing it for the first time."[31] Elsewhere he stated, "This experience released me, like jumping out of a metal cocoon constructed by myself." He realized that from that point onward, his life "no longer belonged to himself, nor was there a need to say that his life was used to benefit the world or sentient beings. What remained was simply to do and learn what needed to be done in the Buddhadharma and for sentient beings."[32]

A year after this awakening experience, with the help of many people and their connections, Shengyan was officially released from the army due to "illness." He was able to become a monk again in 1959 with the support of Master Dongchu.[33] His frustration with his station in life, Buddhism, and his inability to leave the army finally receded. He was a monk again. In his own words, "I finally returned home" (*huijia le* 回家了). Within a year after full ordination, he entered a six-year solitary practice in the mountains of Taiwan to deepen his experience and to study the Buddhist canon.

A Chinese Buddhism in Crisis

When he came out of the retreat, he felt there was too much intermingling of Chinese Buddhism with superstitious beliefs. He taught himself Japanese and went to Japan to advance his education, wanting to revive Chinese

30) This was his initial awakening and is recounted in various writings. See, for example, Shengyan (1982, 4-5); Shengyan (1993, 51-54); the interview and article by Chen Huijian 陳慧劍 (1925-2001) included in the online appendix to *Guicheng*, 290-292; ShengyanYu (1993, 99).

31) Shengyan. 1982, 5.

32) Shengyan. 1993, 51.

33) See Shengyan (1963a, 15); Shengyan (1993, 51). Shengyan was tonsured on Wednesday, December 31, 1959 (which is "一九五九年農曆十二月初一日").

Buddhism. After another six years, he received a PhD in Buddhist literature from Rissho university. But it was not just the higher degree that he wanted. He carefully studied Japanese Buddhist traditions and forms, as well as the systems of higher education, which he replicated years later in Taiwan in the form of a Buddhist college, seminary, and graduate Buddhist school.

Observing the international Buddhist conferences, he noticed that there were never any Chinese Buddhist representatives, only representatives from South Asia, Japan, and the West. He felt that Buddhism in the 21st century must be concretely engaged with society, as Japanese Buddhism had done. Chinese Buddhism could not be isolated to self-cultivation. Otherwise, Buddhism would eventually be eliminated by society. His modernist ideals were fortified by what he had witnessed in Japan.

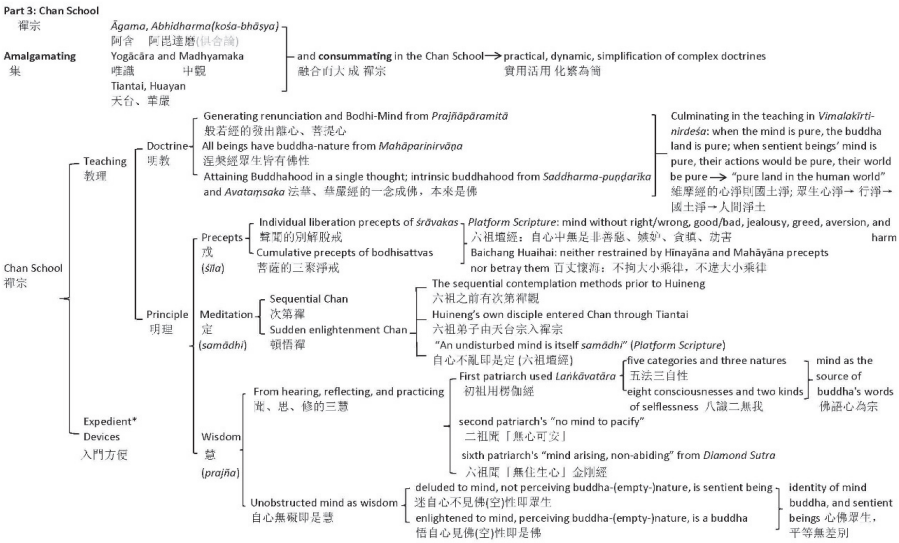
When he returned to Taiwan with his PhD in 1975, he found that he was not welcomed by the Chinese Buddhist community. The colonial tensions that the Chinese felt toward the Japanese were still strong, and Chinese Buddhists were suspicious of his PhD. Thus, when he was invited to teach in New York later that year, he accepted. There, catching the tail end of the "beat generation" of Americans, he began to teach Chan to them and lead intensive Chan retreats. Eventually, he gained some notoriety, and when his teacher in Taiwan passed away 1977, he went back to Taiwan to take care of the monastery and lead intensive retreats for Taiwanese college students too.

During the 1990s, Taiwan became extremely wealthy and became one of the main funders for His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Dharamsala project for the Tibetan refugees in India. As a result, Taiwan became a must-stop for all the fundraising Tibetan monks. They converted many Chinese monastics to Tibetan Buddhism, including one of Shengyan's own monks. The surge of interest in Tibetan Buddhism and South Asian vipassana Buddhism was rising. From Shengyan's perspective, these trends threatened the validity of Chinese

Buddhism.

In his view, Chinese orthodox Buddhism was internally deteriorating, mixing with folk superstitious practices. Externally and globally, it was threatened by the aggressive proselytization of Tibetan Buddhism and vipassana Buddhism. The picture was bleak. It was during this time that he began to reinterpret Chan Buddhism as a force to preserve the richness of the whole of Chinese Buddhism in response to the threats he perceived.

In his 1998 dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in New York, he prepared an innovative doctrinal classification chart demonstrating how Chan was the culmination and amalgamation of the richness of the whole of Buddhism:



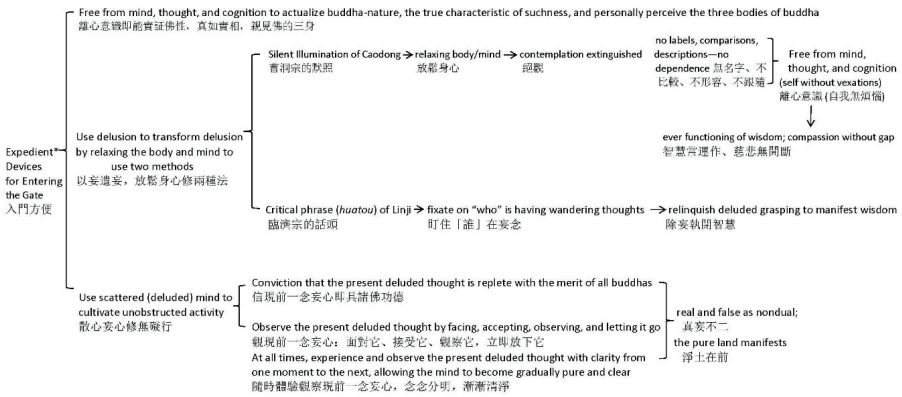
This chart is reproduced from Chapter 3 of my book Re-Imagining Chan (Rutledge 2022); the full chart, which consists of several parts can be found on pp. 102-108.

Here you see his Chan is divided into "teaching" and "expedient devices." He further divides "teaching," into "doctrine" and "principle." Doctrinally, he shows

that Chan was founded on the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, the buddha-nature theory in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, and the *Vimalakīrti* and *Lotus* sūtras.

Under "principle," he shows that Chan is founded on the three higher learnings of precepts, meditation, and wisdom. However, the contents of these three higher learnings are not those of the Early Buddhist texts but are from the *Platform Scripture* and other Chinese Buddhist teachings. For example, he inclusively draws from the sequential *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* (or calming and contemplative) practice of Tiantai, as well as the sudden practices of them expounded in the *Platform Scripture* into his chart. The same is true for wisdom.

For the expedient devices of Chan practice, he developed the following:



In terms of expedient devices or means, we see there are three tiers to his model. At the top is the sudden approach, which consists of the sudden relinquishment of delusion and realization of buddha-nature. At the intermediate level is the practice of using delusion to eradicate delusion, using poison against poison. The two Chan methods of silent illumination and critical phrase are incorporated into this section of the chart. The third tier is Chan practice in daily life, which emphasizes the importance of the present moment

of the single thought, as encompassing all the world systems, a concept he appropriates from Tiantai Buddhism. The practice is to face, accept, observe, and let go of whatever thought arises in any given moment.

The details of these practices are laid out in my book Reimagining Chan, so I will not go into details about them here. Readers are encouraged to consult that book. The main point of this essay is to show that Shengyan formulated Chan in this way as a response to his perceived threat of non-Chinese forms of Buddhism and cultic traditions of folk religions, threats that were mirrored in the whole of his life experience. He wanted to show that Chan was actually the doctrinal culmination and the experiential fulfillment of the whole of Buddhism.

Conclusion

Shengyan presented his life as having been forged in crises and traumas, but they did not handicap him. Rather, he found strength and meaning to direct his life's mission: the continuation of the transmission of Chinese Buddhism. He wanted to make Buddhism relevant in an ever-changing, pluralistic world. After reordination into monasticism, he sought to deepen his practice and realization by undertaking a six-year solitary retreat. At that time, he also studied Japanese in preparation for advanced Buddhist studies that he hoped might help him to reform Chinese Buddhist education. He solidified his Tiantai Buddhist studies during this time, which later helped in his own formulations of Chan. The experience in Japan provided him with a model for reforming Chinese Buddhist education. Yet, when he finished his doctorate, the Taiwanese Buddhist community did not welcome his ideas. He left for the United States and began his career as a Chan master. Serendipitously, he garnered international attention for his teachings, which resulted in his return to Taiwan to realize his vision of Dharma Drum Mountain as an educational institution and allowed him to

create a new Chan lineage to integrate doctrine and practice.

Shengyan's life work was also presented as a series of fortuitous contingencies and responses to external challenges. His formulation of a doctrinally informed Chan was his way to demonstrate the relevance of the Buddhadharma to the world. His institutionalization of the Dharma Drum Lineage was his response to Taiwanese popular religions and the impact of non-Han Buddhist traditions in Taiwan. His Chan was also an indirect critique of the popular Westernized Zen that focused on awakening but lacked a solid understanding of Buddhist principles. I have shown how his outlook shifted from a nonsectarian approach to an innovative understanding whereby he created a new lineage, not for the purpose of advancing yet another "sect" within Chinese Buddhism, but as a way to preserve and foster the richness of the Han transmission of Chinese Buddhism.

History, whether biographical or autobiographical, individual or social, is always narrative in nature, with a neat beginning, middle, and end. But life is never neat. Many of the facts of our lives have no clear beginning, middle, or end. There are simultaneous contingencies of occurrences and events, which can be quite messy in practice. Hence, narratives are selective in nature. They are selected with a particular agenda in mind, to provide a neat summary of facts from which the desired conclusion can be drawn. Thus, all narratives are forms of persuasion. They come to us already theologized and theorized. This paper drew on Shengyan's own narratives to show how his selectivity in the description of the events in his life paralleled the sociopolitical turmoil of twentieth-century China. His life, as he narrated it, was a life of crises and triumph, not so different than traditional narratives of eminent monks.

Historically, if we look at *Hagiographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳), the typical trope used by compilers is to emphasize spiritual monastic ideals: the importance of early affinity with buddhadharma; precocious childhood; subsequent renunciation of lay life; spiritual awakening; some form of asceticism; and often miracles, etc. In other words, they portray the extraordinariness of the "great person theory of history," where the protagonists'

lives are always teleologically narrated: through their own charisma and intelligence, they forge the course of events in history. Shengyan's autobiographies are without miracles, and he portrayed himself as being at the mercy of external challenges and threats that impinged on his life. While he may not have been the sole determinant and initiator of his own choices, actions, and life, the pattern of triumph is nonetheless the same as the great person theory of history. His life traumas, struggles, and the seeming historical accidents all share the retrospective lens of hagiography.

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宋高僧傳 T.50

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