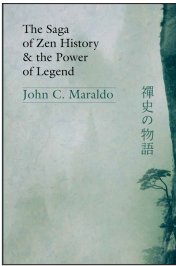


REVIEWS



John C. Maraldo, *The Saga of Zen History & the Power of Legend*

Nagoya: Chisokudō Publications, 2021. 348 pages. Paperback, \$14.00. ISBN 979-8504085470.

SEPARATING legend from real history is, no doubt, an issue for every religion, but it has become a source of much controversy and discussion in the case of Zen Buddhism in the English-speaking world. Perhaps this is due to the nature of Zen Buddhism's actual claims: that Zen is ahistorical, unmediated knowledge of the eternal here and now that is impervious to legend. Zen's only historical claim is that "Zen" has been passed down through direct contact, rather than oral or written teaching, in a line stretching back to Buddha, and any texts about Zen miss the atextual point of Zen and are therefore not qualified to talk about Zen.

The clash between Zen as "Zen" and Zen as the historically-specific religion formally known as "Zen" blew up most famously in the mid-1950s debate between D. T. Suzuki and Hu Shih in the pages of the journal *Philosophy East and West* when Hu Shih accused Suzuki of describing Zen as simply Zen, that is, something beyond historical description. Suzuki retorted that Zen is simply Zen, that is, something beyond historical description, but with the rejoinder that there is no other way to describe Zen accurately. Hu Shih's history of Zen focused on how earlier accounts of Zen were the creation of later Zen adherents. A new generation of Zen historians (such as Bernard Faure, Steven Heine, and John R. McRae, to name just a few) have followed in Hu Shih's footsteps, seeking to pinpoint through close examination of primary texts the moments in time when timeless "Zen" first emerged in Chinese society.

When Heinrich Dumoulin's two-volume masterpiece of Zen history, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, was republished, the editor James Heisig managed to

relight the fuse of the Zen versus “Zen” debates by inviting John R. McRae and Victor Sōgen Hori to write separate introductions to each volume. McRae and Hori, in a much more polite and mature way, echoed much of the Hu Shih versus Suzuki debate over the vexed issue of whether a history of Zen and its social construction in times past negates the message of Zen, which is about awakening from and beyond all social construction. Both sides can only dig their trenches deeper as the common ground for them to fight on is mucked up more with each assertion. And it is here that John Maraldo’s book, *The Saga of Zen History & the Power of Legend*, provides a welcome move forward beyond these entrenched positions.

Maraldo initially follows the march of Hu Shih and McRae and all those others who see Zen as a historically created religion. He states, “For the most part, I find [contemporary Chan historians’] scholarship admirable, trustworthy, and highly relevant. In fact, my reflections are wholly dependent upon their work; their books and articles are my primary sources” (29). But he feels that their analysis of the legends, myths, and perhaps fabrications in past centuries have obliterated too much the unique truths that Zen has passed down through history. “But today’s scholars are united in avoiding belief in some transcendental truth within Chan traditions, and in this book I would meet them on their own ground” (29). Maraldo is not going to reject their findings and sound a retreat back to Suzuki-style ahistorical religious assertions. Instead, he will do battle by firing back the potent argument that modern scholarship has only succeeded in telling Zen something Zen already knew: that its truths are wrapped in legend, the only further argument being that they remain, for Zen, true all the same.

Because Zen is anti-words and because Zen has produced so many words to assert, this anti-word stance means that there will always be something innately ironic about Zen. But a fuller investigation of the texts Zen has produced reveals that Zen was never really so anti-words at all, at least not in the simplistic way it is often stereotyped to be. Moreover, the Zen texts of history were more than often secondary texts quoting and commenting on primary texts in institutional settings that were very much dependent on words. And then, irony of ironies, these primary texts were (maybe) more often than not fabrications, willful or otherwise, of the people and institutions producing the secondary texts. And then there is modern secular scholarship that seeks to unravel the secondary from primary textuality, forensically reconstructing which created which, and which is really primary. But modern scholarship works under the assumption that it is the factual account of these other less-than-factual texts, which then makes the modern scholarship texts themselves the actual post-facto retro-legitimizing primary texts of Zen.

In Zen, ironies rub against ironies magnetizing, pulling, and polarizing on fields of latent forces that delay and defer forever the fusion of sign with meaning.

With playful awareness of the further ironies all further books about Zen bring to the field, Maraldo jumps in to add his insights and satori shouts of sagacity. Given the chains of texts and truth claims that Maraldo is adding commentary and observations to, the reader needs to be attentive and keep a very close eye on what is at issue and what Maraldo has to say about it. This is inevitable in any work of serious scholarship, but Maraldo's aim to take on board massive chunks of previous comments and opinions before offering his own additions, critiques, and complications means that the reader can often feel that they are overhearing a very rarefied and hermetic conversation with old arguments taken up and reworded only to be unraveled to reveal mistaken divergences and, of course, unintended ironies. The book takes effort but the rewards are worth it as they push the reader up to the latest words to be had on Zen, with the enticement that there will always be even more to come. The physical format of the book does help the reader somewhat in following the commentaries and opinions. Citations are provided on the facing page and not in the back, and an hourglass **X** and bowtie symbol **►** are used to aid the reader in following when texts are being summarized and when they are being commented on. It is a nice (ironic) reversion to how many ancient Zen texts would have been written in the age before the footnote.

Maraldo gives detailed overviews of all the big claims of Zen and modern Zen's undermining of those claims. But to these Maraldo adds qualifications, pointing out that modern Zen scholarship is repeating rather than refuting Zen truths. Zen claims that it (Zen) has been passed down directly between the patriarchs and that this has involved the actual handing down (ever since Buddha) of an actual robe. Modern scholarship disputes this, of course, but then we learn that this was probably only ever a symbol, a metaphor that Dōgen himself would literally and metaphorically tear to shreds. "Dōgen, for one, reminded his disciples in 1240 of the proper role of the robe when he instructed them on how to fashion their own *kesa* from discarded cloth. Even while he repeated the legend of the robe's transmission from the Buddha on down to Huineng and insisted that there exist but one genuine Tathāgata robe, he taught that monks are to revere their robes as they do the dharma" (61).

But the book is not simply about matching and catching modern scholars with older quotes. Instead, it goes on to be a fascinating meditation on the nature of myth and legend, which are not to be seen as the same thing. Maraldo, one of the great anthologists of Japanese philosophy in the anglophone world, uses the philosopher Miki Kiyoshi to help him distinguish between the two. The discussion is complicated, and at the risk of misinterpretation, it would seem to me that myth is something nobody is expected to believe (although it is a passionate expression of beliefs), historical facts are what we all should believe, and legend is something in between. It does not have the stark veracity of fact but its lack

of loyalty to facts means that it can often express even more truth than mere truth. Bare facts are a hard story to tell—insipid in drama and sparse in information—and every community of believers allows itself a better story through the power of legend. As Maraldo explains, “When legends relegate authorship to the background, the interaction between tale and audience is enhanced and new versions proliferate. Tellers of tales often relish erasing themselves and adapting their version to the circumstances at hand, and they regard this expedient as more truthful—than verbatim reproduction” (229–231). But not only are legends better crowd-pleasers than factual “originals,” they manage to say what an original never says: the real beliefs and understandings that have given rise to the original to begin with and in which the original gets its context and meaning. Legend accesses the wider community understanding of a tradition’s core beliefs and passion. Maraldo makes a very eloquent defense of legend in the Zen tradition in the following succinct summation: “Rather than adopt a cynical attitude and assume that Chan proponents were either duplicitous or deluded, we might invoke Buddhist doctrine and suggest they believed that the truth was more than any single self-consciousness could possess” (221).

The effort needed to read this book is front loaded with the dense intertextual discussions coming at the beginning, followed by the highly theoretical musings on legend. But it finishes gently with some loosely connected ruminations on how Zen history-telling can go from here. The book starts as a steep ascent ending in an easy stroll down as you gaze at new landscapes of Zen understanding that were worth the climb. The English-speaking world received Zen originally bundled in concepts that rhetorically defied unraveling. Very few other religious traditions have come with such intricately inbuilt triggers against outside scholarly unwrapping. This makes the history of Zen, and its telling, all the more fascinating and in need of an intelligently written and provokingly reflective book such as John C. Maraldo’s *The Saga of Zen History & the Power of Legend*.

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