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Rebirth From China To Japan In Nara Hagiography: A Reconsideration

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This study takes up a portion of the early hagiography of a Japanese prince who was reputedly a reincarnated Chinese monk, and uses a peculiarity in a colophon dated 718 to argue that though the text may have been composed in China, it must in that case derive from the writing of a Japanese visitor. A possible identification of the visitor is made, and some attention is given to the likely sources he used.

The story of the rebirth of the Chinese monk Huisi 慧思 (515–577) as the Japanese Crown Prince Shōtoku 聖德 (573?–622?), though obviously problematic from the start to anyone with a reasonable grasp of historical dates, seems to have been so alluring that in pre-modern times most Japanese seem to have been prepared to overlook any problem, especially since, from early in the development of the relevant hagiography, the story also involved no less a person than the first East Asian patriarch of Zen, Bodhidharma. This connection with Zen has ensured that it has been treated already to some degree in English, in the work of Bernard Faure.[1] Most recently too, Michael Como has raised its importance once again as part of a thoroughgoing book-length re-examination of the factors influencing the hagiography of Shōtoku.[2] Japanese scholars have of course pored over the surviving evidence for the origins of this story for decades, and Como has had the opportunity to consider all their findings in detail. The following remarks do not derive from any similar perusal in depth of Japanese scholarship, but focus instead on a feature of one of the key sources that — surprisingly, it must be said

1. Faure (1997, 112–113, and notes, 213–214). In view of what follows, it should be remarked that Faure is commenting on a ninth century Japanese source drawing on the earlier materials discussed below.

2. Como (2008, 142–153). In the present study the appearance of Como's work, which touches on far more important and complex issues in the construction of the image of the Japanese prince than are dealt with here, has encouraged me to take up once again a longstanding interest in this tale. The mechanism of rebirth so familiar today from the career over many lives of the Dalai Lama seems in the East Asian cultural sphere never have been put to the ideological use that it might seem to have invited; this tale, however, provides one intriguing exception.

— seems to have elicited no comment so far from any reader, perhaps because it only appears anomalous in the context of eighth century Chinese history and so has not excited the interest of those dedicated to the study of Japan.

The key source in question, which contains the first linkage of the three characters named above, is contained in a work named the *Shichidaiki* 七代記, or *Record of Seven Lifetimes*, usually dated by experts to 771. The origins of that work, and its relationship to any other materials about the Crown Prince, are not at issue here. Rather, it has been recognized by all that the *Shichidaiki* is a composite of various elements, including some in the first half composed in Japan, and others in the latter parts of the text that are presumed to rely on Chinese materials. At the core of the compilation is a passage of slightly over five hundred characters attributed to a source entitled (on the presumption that it is Chinese) *Da Tang guo Hengzhou Hengshan daochang Shi Si chanshi qidai ji* 大唐國衡州衡山道場釋思禪師七代記, or *Record of Seven Lifetimes of Meditation Master Si of the Hengshan Sanctum of Hengzhou in the Land of the Great Tang Dynasty.*[3] Hengshan, the southernmost one of the five sacred peaks of China, is in Hunan, and during the lifetime of Huisi before the reunification of China, it lay within the kingdoms of the south.[4]

The text opens however not with Huisi but with Bodhidharma, who arrives in the land of Han 漢 (i.e. China) in the tenth month of the eighth year of the Dahe 大和 reign period of the Northern Wei (386-534), a *dingwei*丁未 year (i.e. forty-fourth in the sixty year cycle), and goes to Hengshan. There was no Dahe reign period in the Northern Wei, and in fact when precise dates do appear in the surviving Chinese hagiography of Bodhidharma in the early ninth century, his arrival is placed in a *dingwei* year in the ninth month and eighth year of a southern reign period, equivalent to 527.[5] In the course of a conversation with Huisi, he then commends Huisi's dedication to the practice of meditation and suggests that he should choose to be reborn in a land without Buddhism 'east of the sea'. At the end of the conversation he precedes Huisi in heading east himself. There follows a list of six earlier lives of Huisi – a feature no doubt suggested by earlier hagiography of this master in the seventh century *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, of Daoxuan 道宣, which touches on his knowledge of a past existence.[6] The text then turns to his rebirth in the land of Wa 倭, i.e. Japan, as a prince, citing in support a record 'below his epitaph' 碑下題, an odd phrase, since additional information usually was placed on the back.[7] This may however be due to some fault of transmission of the text, which also shows signs of abbreviation at the

3 . In the series of materials edited by Takeuchi , 3 (196, from 893, frame 1, line 10, to 894, frame 1, line 5).

4 . A very detailed survey of the early history of this site by James Robson is at the time of writing these remarks immediately forthcoming from Harvard University Press under the title *Power of Place.*

5 . See the analysis in Sekiguchi (1967, 109).

6 . For a French translation in context, see Magnin (1979, 43); the passage in question is also rendered into English by Como (2008, 144).

7 . The phrase may be taken as attempting to imply that all the preceding text is taken from a source founded on some inscription on a funerary stele, but if so, it would have to be one that goes against all the conventions of the genre. For the origins and early conventions of this form, see Brashier (2005, 249–284).

start of the passage about past lives — whether before or after its incorporation in the *Shichidaiki* it is impossible to say.

But the most useful clue to the composition and significance of this passage of presumed Chinese text now preserved within the *Shichidaiki* comes in a colophon at the end. This reads 李三郎帝即位開元六年歳次戊午二月十五日杭州錢唐館寫竟, 'Finished writing in a Qiantang hostel, Hangzhou, on the fifteenth day of the second month of a *wuwu* year, sixth of the Kaiyuan reign period since the accession of the Emperor Li the Third Gentleman'.[8] The date is accurate enough, and corresponds to a point in the year 718. The reigning emperor of the day, known to history by the posthumous name Xuanzong 玄宗, who reigned from 712 to 756, was also certainly known as Li the Third Gentleman — that is, as it were, 'Tertius' Li, third son of his father. For example Arthur Waley points out that one of his courtiers openly used this very informal mode of address in referring to him in a verse composition, when essaying a little colloquial humour.[9] One very eminent foreign monk, Amoghavajra, is even supposed to have used the expression to his face.[10] Yet perhaps significantly, all the examples of this usage that I have seen, if not posthumous recollections, seem to date to late in the emperor's life, when he had mellowed considerably, rather than to his insecure early days.[11] There is even one instance of its use in a diplomatic context, in a Sino-Tibetan treaty text of 821–823, though interesting enough the formal title conjoined with the colloquialism suggests that they first learned of the Chinese expression during the period 739–742.[12] But even so it would have been sheer folly for any ordinary citizen outside the court to use such an expression in a documentary context, since it would have been considered a profound insult to the imperial person.[13] In the light of this expression, then, we can deduce three things about the writer or writers of 718: that they were foreign; that they intended to impress their fellow-countrymen with their intimate knowledge of Tang court life; and that they were about to leave the country, rather than continue to live in China with such a politically dangerous document in their possession. The contents of the piece of course also strongly suggest that they were Japanese, rather than, say, Korean.

8. Probably not 'The Qiantang Hostel', since we learn from a poem of Bai Juyi of 'a lady of a superior Qiantang hostel', 錢塘勝館娃, suggesting that there were a number of hostelries on the Qiantang River in Hangzhou: cf. Bai, 31 (1979, 715).

9. Waley (1960: 246).

10. For a readily available translation by Chou Yi-Liang of the incident in question, see Payne, ed., (2006, 59). Chou's translation as originally published refers to the collection of materials relating to this nickname gathered in Zhao (1957, 825). For the translation of another highly colloquial, informal court poem using the nickname, mentioned by Zhao, see Eide (1982, 13).

11. For some further references of the posthumous type, see Cen (1963, 34).

12. I thank my colleague Antonello Palumbo for the following reference, and for the suggested first date of the transmission of the colloquialism to Tibet: Li (1956, 68). The later edition and translation of this inscription (East face, line 26) does not alter the wording: Richardson (1978, 141, 145). For the use of the formal title to date materials to 739–742, see also Loewe (1993, 302).

13. Antonello Palumbo points to a later documentary use in a diplomatic document: Li (1956, 68), but in 718 I believe the observation in the preceding note holds good: our source — if the date is genuine — must still be construed as a private document vaunting inside knowledge to outsiders.

Now as it happens we do know of one Japanese who was very much interested in the story of Shōtoku who was in China in 718 and about to go home, and he is furthermore identified by Como as an important influence on the subsequent development of the Shōtoku cult. His name was Dōji 道慈 (?–744), and the materials collected for his biography by Marcus Bingenheimer include significantly enough his English translation of a poem about the prince written when this monk was in China.[14] Dōji had reached China with the seventh embassy from Japan in 701, and got back to the Japanese capital in the tenth month of 718 with the eighth embassy, which had set out early in 717 and arrived in the Chinese capital in the eighth month of the same year.[15] In early 718, then, his thoughts would certainly have been turning to his post-China career, and what he could do politically to promote the Buddhist cause once back home. It is of course impossible to tell if the text concerning Huisi and Bodhidharma was entirely composed by him, but the historical mistakes in the body of the work do suggest a foreigner also, so to pin the whole text on Dōji seems not unreasonable, especially when the colophon plainly protests too much the Chinese origins of the manuscript. The *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biography of Huisi available in Dōji's day did contain as well as a reference to knowledge of one earlier life a threat on his part to be reincarnated 'far away', so perhaps he felt justified on this basis in interpreting matters in the fashion displayed in the manuscript of 718.[16]

But there is no guarantee that Dōji (or any other Japanese colleague of the time) would have read that source, and the sudden jump from some recollection of a past life to six tends to make one believe that they did not, or did not solely rely on it. There was, however, another biography of Husi that was probably already in circulation at the time, though its writer today best known for his account of Bodhidharma and his heirs, a brief work retrieved from copies preserved among the Dunhuang archives which scholars believe was composed about five years before the Hangzhou manuscript. This was the *Chuan fabao ji* 傳法寶紀 of Du Fei 杜朏, who is pointedly described with regard to his hagiographical creativity as 'an author to be reckoned with' in Alan Cole's recent recapitulation of his work.[17] That Du should have turned his hand also to depicting the other great meditation master of the sixth century, even if in a separate composition, may well have given Dōji (if he was the author of the 718 manuscript) the notion of incorporating both men into Shōtoku's spiritual background. We should in any case bear in mind that the distinction between Zen and Tendai Buddhism, so clear in recent centuries, was in early times far from rigidly observed, or originally even clearly formulated. While in Japan the initial attempt to include all in Bodhidharma's line into the Tendai fold may in part be attributed to the long term influence, through later writers, of the very document before us, there is plenty of material in China to show that there the compliment was (as it were) reversed, and efforts were made to incorporate Huisi into the lineage of Chan Buddhism, and indeed to make him speak like a Chan master. This much is plain

14. Bingenheimer (2001, 87): the entire entry runs from pages 85–93.

15. Japanese sources on their departure are translated in von Verschuer (1985, 264), and see, for their arrival according to a Chinese documentary compilation of the early eleventh century, Wang (1989, 971.2a).

16. Magnin (1979, 47; cf. 43).

17. Cole (2009, 116, and see 118, n.3, for earlier scholarship on this text).

from a text, the *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記, a work on Bodhidharma's spiritual heirs written shortly before 716, which already contains material derived from or also attributed to Huisi that is put into the mouths of persons associated with the former figure.[18] The same process may be observed still in action as late as the eleventh century, if not later.[19] Du was, in short, not being unusually eclectic in writing of both figures, nor would Dōji have been any more eclectic in combining his two pieces.

Du's biography of Husi, *Nanyue Si chanshi famen zhuan* 南岳思禪師法門傳, is unfortunately completely lost, save for various passages quoted in early fourteenth century Japanese commentary on the biography of Shōtoku. From these it is nevertheless possible to tell that Husi was seen by Du as a master especially outstanding in his practice of meditation, possessing the knowledge of at least three past lives, who intends to be reborn in a land without the Buddha's *Dharma*.[20] It may be then that Dōji or some unknown compatriot saw their own text as no more than a simple evolution of an already unfolding hagiography. Interest during this period in the ability of those with advanced skills in meditation to transcend the normal bounds of time and space are evidenced not only by the story of Huisi having been present with his chief disciple in the audience at the preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* that is also in the *Shichidaiki* — which in this case derives, as Como shows, from a Tiantai source.[21] At about the same time as Dōji's visit to China, an unknown enthusiast for the Fifth Patriarch wrote a short piece retrieved from Dunhuang that has a couple of Indian patriarchs, the Second and Sixth Patriarchs of Chinese Chan, and several other figures, all meeting in a sort of otherworldly 'communion of saints' at the burial place of the Fifth Patriarch and pronouncing a few words each.[22] By comparison with such feats of the imagination, having Bodhidharma suggest rebirth from China to Japan looks relatively restrained.

It may of course be objected that if the story of Bodhidharma, Huisi and Shōtoku from the Hangzhou manucript of 718 in the *Shichidaiki* was really by Dōji, why did he not take the opportunities apparently afforded to him on his return to include some mention of it in the official history of Japan, the *Nihongi* 日本紀, of 720? That source, however, has very little overt truck with Chinese materials, preserving an ostensibly completely insular viewpoint in which names like Bodhidharma and Husi would have appeared quite intrusive. I have, however, argued elsewhere that at least one theophany in this work was probably tacitly modelled on a Chinese original, and covert Chinese influences on the text

18. For the date of the text, see Faure (1997, 172), for identification of Huisi-related passages, see Faure (1989, 92–93, n.23; 105–106, n.24).

19. For one such example, see Welter (2006, 159-160). For a passage preserved in a Chan compilation of the preceding century that seems to make Huisi a spokesman for a Chan and Tiantai doctrine of the late eighth century, compare Taishō Canon, XLVIII, 941a13, and the references in Barrett (1992, 85).

20. These passages are quoted in Hōkū, (c. 1314) 1, 248, lower frame, and 254, upper frame; cf. 225, lower frame, and 361, lower frame, for other quotations from Du Fei by the same commentator, whose approximate date I take from a work of his compiled in 1314, as noted by one of Como's authorities, Tanaka (1983, 67, n.8).

21. Como (2008, 151) — this incident was also in Du Fei, as shown by the reference by Hōkū in a passage quoted on page 225 of the source given in the preceding note.

22. This rather odd piece is translated and commented on in Broughton, (1999, 108–109).

certainly do not end there.[23] It may well be that the *Nihongi* record of an encounter between Shōtoku and a mysterious beggar at Kataoka, identified already in a gloss in the *Shichidaiki* as perhaps Bodhidharma in disguise, was from the start designed to hint *inter alia* at some karmic connection made plainer elsewhere in Buddhist materials.[24] At the very least the manuscript of 718, on what I take to be the quite likely assumption that it did go to Japan with the returning eighth embassy, would readily explain what has been hitherto puzzling, the apparent familiarity with the rebirth story of a mid-century Chinese master invited to voyage to Japan by Japanese monks originally attached to another embassy that arrived in 733. For on the understanding outlined above, the story of Husi's Japanese rebirth would have been in circulation in Japan for a decade and a half, and the two new visitors to China would doubtless have mentioned it to their intended guest.[25]

It is possible that other hypotheses besides authorship by Dōji or someone close to him could be entertained concerning the manuscript of 718. After all, the entire colophon could have been added to a text produced entirely in Japan to make it appear to have been transcribed in China, in which case the date, even if not the true date of composition, would represent the earliest point after which the story could have been fabricated. On this understanding the curious way of referring to a reigning Chinese emperor would represent the work of someone trying to vaunt a familiarity with China in order to add credence to the Chinese origins of the manuscript whilst actually working in Japan from beginning to end. The materials noted above on the appearance of this distinctive usage in other sources would then suggest a date of composition perhaps round about 740 or slightly earlier, given its apparent spread beyond court circles only at this later point. But the fact remains that Dōji seems to have had a special interest in the cult of Shōtoku, and he may well have been at the place indicated in the colophon at the time indicated — and, furthermore, may well have been thinking about how to use his experience in China to promote the cult. No doubt future research into the fascinating materials reviewed here will be able to clarify matters further.

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23. See Barrett (2000, 21).

24. On the incident in question, see Como (2008, 102, and 132 and note).

25. See Como (2008, 143), for scholarly debate over the Chinese master's knowledge of the story, and von Verschuer (1985, 125, notes 5 and 6), for the two Japanese monks.

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