

New Information on the Date of the Third Patriarch Sengcan's Death

The study of the history and doctrines of Chinese Chan Buddhism is among the most flourishing areas of research within the sphere of East Asian religions. Works produced within the past two decades by primarily Japanese, French, and American scholars have caused a general revision of the history and development of the early Chan tradition. Although a thorough understanding and mapping of the early schools is still to come, the recent

monographs by John McRae and Bernhard Faure¹ are each in their own ways important contributions towards the realization of this.

One of the chief issues in our understanding of the early Chan tradition pertains to the development of the lines of transmission and the so-called “Patriarchal succession” from mind to mind (*xinchuan*). Hitherto, the history of Chan Buddhism prior to the Fourth Patriarch Daoxin (580–651)² has been largely in the dark, as the sources are meagre at best. However, in the following we can provide an “old piece” of news, which for various reasons has been overlooked by contemporary scholarship, and which I believe will throw light on an important date in early Chan, namely the date of the death of Sengcan, the Third Patriarch (d. 602).³

As early as 1982 a Chinese team of archeologists from Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, PRC, found parts of the Third Patriarch Sengcan’s *stūpa*, including two short inscriptions believed to give the date of the death of the master. As is usual with many archeological finds in the PRC, the discovery was not published until 1985, and then only as a brief notice in *Wenwu*.⁴ The inscriptions are written on a clay tile in the type of clerical calligraphy which was in vogue during the Sui Dynasty (598–618), and there is no doubt that the inscriptions are from the period as stated.

The first inscription reads, “Made in the twelfth year of Kaixing in the Great Sui.” The second inscription reads,

In the seventh month, in the twelfth year of Kaixing in the Great Sui, the Great Master Sengcan passed away [lit. was mysteriously transformed] in a cave on Mt. Huanggong in Shu[zhou]. Having built a *stūpa* and made offerings, Daoxin recorded [this].

The importance of these inscriptions for the revision and verification of this important historical date can hardly be over-estimated. Furthermore, the very fact that the name of Daoxin occurs together with that of Sengcan establishes beyond any doubt a historical link between the two men. However, since the date of Sengcan can now be established as AD 692, it is uncertain whether the inscriptions are as old as that. If the traditional date for the birth of Daoxin is correct, i.e. 580, it follows that according to the inscription he would only have been twelve at the time of Sengcan’s

¹ John McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Chan Buddhism*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism, No. 3, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986; Bernhard Faure, *La volonté d’orthodoxie dans le bouddhisme chinoise*, Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 1988, and *Le bouddhisme Ch’an en mal d’histoire: Genèse d’une tradition religieuse dans la Chine des Tang*, Paris: École Française d’Extrême Orient, 1989.

² In the light of what follows below, it is more than likely that these dates should be revised as well as those traditionally held for Sengcan.

³ This figure is given according to the traditional Chan material from the Tang and Song.

⁴ Chen Hao, “Sui Chanzong sanzhu Sengcan taming zhuan” [The Tile Stupa Inscription of the Third Patriarch Sengcan of the Chan School under the Sui], *Wenwu*, No. 4 (1985), p. 8.

death (AD 592). It is highly unlikely that a twelve year old boy would receive transmission from a Chan master and equally unlikely that he would set up an inscription for his deceased mentor. Hence, we may either conclude that Daoxin was older at the time of Sengcan's death than the tradition holds, or that the inscription is of a later date and, furthermore, at variance with the established tradition. In the latter case it is of course possible that Daoxin or his followers set up the inscription and fabricated a link between Sengcan and himself. Whatever the case, it is still important, as it establishes the connection, whether based on a historical transmission or not, between the two men.

I am inclined to accept the new date for Sengcan, and I believe that we are now able to take the patriarchal line succession in early Chan Buddhism back to Sengcan and revise the previous date of his death, i.e. AD 602, to AD 592. At the same time we are forced to revise the date of the birth of Daoxin, or otherwise consider the relationship between the two patriarchs as yet another example of pious fabrication. The life of Sengcan is still largely unknown, but at least we have a reasonably solid piece of evidence which shows that he was a historical figure, and that he should indeed be considered the master of Daoxin, the Fourth Patriarch of Chinese Chan. Another important piece of information is the place where he is said to have passed away, and which tallies with the tradition. Shuzhou was located in present day Anhui Province and Mt. Huanggong is in Huaining County. This mountain is also known as "The Third Patriarch's Mountain".⁵

Both inscriptions are presently kept at the Provincial Museum in Hangzhou, where they can be seen.

⁵ Cf. *Zengaku daijiten*, Vol. 1, Tokyo: Komazawa Daigaku, 1978, p. 178c.