

Article

The Literati Inflection of Runzhou Buddhist Culture in Tang-Dynasty Jiangnan

Yun Wang 

School of Chinese Language and Literature, Soochow University, Suzhou 215006, China;
sudawangyun@126.com

Abstract

The case of Runzhou shows how Buddhist culture took on a literati inflection within Tang-dynasty Jiangnan. Runzhou, where north–south routes converged with a dense waterway network, served as a major center of mobility and cultural exchange. Since the Wei and Jin periods, the region had also been shaped by aristocratic lineages whose traditions of literary learning and self-cultivation remained influential into the Tang. Drawing on biographical, epigraphic, and literary sources, this article argues that the literati inflection of Runzhou Buddhist culture was not limited to the social origins or literary accomplishments of individual monks and nuns. It also shaped the ways in which monastic identity was remembered, Buddhist space was perceived, and cultivation was interpreted. Mountain dwelling placed Buddhist cultivation in sustained relation with the natural world and brought it close to literati traditions of withdrawal without making the two identical. In Ox-head Chan (Niutou zong 牛頭宗), the Middle Way remained grounded in the Madhyamaka tradition, while in Runzhou it found practical expression in everyday conduct that stood close to literati modes of self-cultivation. This literati inflection did not dissolve Buddhist practice into literati culture; rather, it helped give Runzhou Buddhism its particular local form.

Keywords: Runzhou Buddhist culture; literati inflection; Tang dynasty; Jiangnan Buddhism; Ox-head Chan

1. Introduction

Zhenjiang in present-day Jiangsu, known in antiquity as Runzhou, belonged to Danyang Commandery in the Tang dynasty. During the Kaiyuan 開元 (713–741) and Tianbao 天寶 (742–756) reign periods, it ranked first among the eighteen prefectures of the Jiangnan East Circuit; across the river lay Yangzhou, and nearby stood Jinling. Runzhou’s historical importance rested on its position at Jingkou, where the Grand Canal met the Yangtze and the routes of Jianghuai and Jiangnan converged. Huangfu Ran 皇甫冉 (c. 716–769) wrote, “When did this place first come to be? The great river has flowed since antiquity” (Huangfu 1985, p. 20). This location also made Runzhou a recurrent military objective. It was occupied or contested during the uprisings of Xu Jingye 徐敬業 (d. 684) in 684, Li Lin 李璘 (d. 757) in 756, and Li Qi 李錡 (741–807) in 806, all of which involved attempts to control the routes and fiscal resources connecting the Yangtze with Jiangnan. These conflicts attest to the strategic importance of Runzhou’s position.

Runzhou’s regional position becomes clearer when Tang Jiangnan is viewed through two intersecting routes. One extended across the Jiangdong plain through Runzhou, Changzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Yuezhou; the other followed the Yangtze and its



Academic Editor: Jeffery D. Long

Received: 1 April 2026

Revised: 6 July 2026

Accepted: 8 July 2026

Published: 10 July 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

connected waterways through Yangzhou, Runzhou, Xuanzhou, and Jiangzhou. Within the Jiangnan East Circuit, the neighboring prefectures developed different regional functions. Suzhou was a leading agrarian and fiscal center; Hangzhou benefited from transport through the Qiantang estuary and maritime commerce; Yuezhou served as the principal administrative center of eastern Zhejiang; and Changzhou was noted for craft production. Runzhou's importance lay less in a single form of production than in its position at the intersection of the Jiangnan canal system and the Yangtze corridor. Monks crossed the river from Yangzhou, moved between Runzhou and Jinling, or departed for more distant Buddhist centers; literati and foreign envoys likewise encountered Runzhou monasteries while travelling through the region. The same network connected urban monasteries with the mountain sites around which Ox-head Chan was remembered. Runzhou Buddhist culture therefore took shape through the conjunction of regional mobility, inherited Jiangnan literati culture, and a mountain world that remained accessible from the principal routes of travel.

Buddhist life in Tang Runzhou was marked by a dense local texture. The fate of Buddhism coincides with shifts in politics, economy, and society, and such shifts often take visible geographic form (Jorgensen 2005, p. 474). In Runzhou, this means that Buddhist flourishing cannot be separated from the region's local configuration. The same place that gathered traffic, commerce, and urban life also gathered monasteries. Liu Yanshi 劉言史 (d. 812) of the middle Tang writes in his poem "Mooring by Night at the River Mouth in Runzhou":

秋江欲起白頭波，賈客瞻風無渡河。千船火絕寒宵半，獨聽鐘聲覺寺多。

"On the autumn river, white-crested waves are about to rise; merchants watch the wind and dare not cross. By midnight, the lamps of a thousand boats have gone out. Alone, I hear the monastery bells and realize how many temples there are" (Yanshi Liu 1987, p. 678).

The poem matters here less as a description of river travel than as evidence that Buddhist presence had entered local awareness. The poet does not need to see the monasteries one by one; the bells are enough to make their number felt. Heard at the river mouth, the monastery bells show that Runzhou Buddhism had already become part of the region's lived and remembered environment. It is from this local Buddhist culture, rather than from a separate literary embellishment, that its literati inflection could take shape.

The term "Runzhou Buddhist culture" should be understood as an open regional concept. It concerns not only the native origins of monks and nuns but also the spatial sphere of their activity. One point in particular deserves emphasis: Tang Runzhou did not correspond exactly to present-day Zhenjiang, and its population also participated in processes of overlap, circulation, and incorporation. As *A Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden* (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林) records:

唐潤州攝山棲霞寺釋智聰，未詳何許人。昔，住揚州白馬寺，後度江住揚州安樂寺。……至貞觀二十三年四月八日，小食訖往止觀寺，與衆辭別，還歸本房，安坐而卒，異香充溢丹陽一郭。

"The monk Zhicong of Qixia Monastery on Mount She in Tang Runzhou—his native place is unknown. Formerly he resided at Baima Monastery in Yangzhou; later he crossed the river and stayed at Anle Monastery in Yangzhou. ... On the eighth day of the fourth month in the twenty-third year of Zhenguan (649), after taking a light meal, he went to Zhiguan Monastery, bade farewell to the assembly, returned to his own room, sat upright, and died; a strange fragrance filled the whole district of Danyang" (Daoshi 1991, p. 481).

The Ox-head school can hardly be understood as a Jiangnan Buddhist phenomenon without considering the sustained traffic and cultural exchange linking Runzhou with Jiangning, Jinling, the Huai–Yang region, and Suzhou. Runzhou Buddhist culture, then, should be treated as an open regional formation rather than a rigid territorial category. The literati inflection examined in this article took shape within this wider regional setting.

Here, “literati” refers not to a fixed social class but to participants in a social and cultural world shaped by classical learning, literary composition and calligraphy, official service, lineage affiliation, and traditions of self-cultivation and reclusion. It is not synonymous with either aristocratic status or a generalized aesthetic temperament. Aristocratic lineage could provide a social basis for participation in this world, while literary accomplishment and cultivated perception were characteristic modes of its expression. “Literati inflection” describes the imprint of this world on Runzhou Buddhist culture without implying that Buddhist life was absorbed into literati culture. This imprint appears in the narration of monks and nuns through lineage and learning, the poetic perception of monasteries and mountain dwelling, and the points of proximity between Ox-head Chan and literati modes of self-cultivation. The term therefore names a cultural process rather than a fixed social identity or a distinct literary genre.

The materials on which this study relies belong to commemorative and narrative genres in which Buddhist lives are made publicly intelligible. However, this article does not take this level of textual convention as its final object of analysis, nor does it treat such conventions as external representations detachable from Buddhist history as a prior social reality. What is at stake are two interrelated moments within the same cultural process, namely representation and the historical intelligibility produced through it. Accordingly, the article uses the notion of “the literati inflection of Buddhism itself,” which designates the historically mediated form that emerges as Buddhist life becomes intelligible through these commemorative and narrative regimes. What is observed in the sources is not Buddhist life in an unmediated form but the formation of Buddhist identity, space, and cultivation as they become legible within a literati world. Such practices constitute the cultural form through which Runzhou Buddhism is articulated.

Literati learning among monks and mountain dwelling belonged to the broader world of Tang Buddhism in both north and south. In Runzhou, these features took shape at the intersection of inherited Jiangnan literary culture and extensive regional mobility, within the same local world in which Ox-head Chan emerged. This historically specific conjunction defines the local scope of the argument developed here. The social ground of this literati inflection lay in lineage and literary formation, which continued to shape the narration of monastic identity after ordination. Nor was their influence confined to the persons who carried them. It also shaped how monasteries were understood, bringing Buddhist meaning into relation with literati perception. Mountain dwelling carried this relation beyond representation, making distance from worldly life a sustained condition of monastic cultivation. Ox-head Chan brought it further inward, to mind and the Middle Way. Freedom from fixed distinctions was given practical form in everyday conduct, bringing Chan cultivation close to literati self-cultivation; yet the Madhyamaka basis of the Middle Way kept the two forms of cultivation from becoming identical. Seen in this progression, the literati inflection was not merely a social background but part of the form in which Runzhou Buddhism was lived and understood.

2. The Literati Background of Runzhou Buddhist Culture

Monastic and literati identities were institutionally distinct, yet in Tang Jiangnan they often occupied overlapping social and cultural worlds. Before Buddhism entered China, the ideal of the Chinese literatus had already moved between two poles: service in of-

fice and withdrawal from public life for private cultivation. Kieschnick's discussion of the "monk-scholar" is important precisely because it places Buddhist monastic distinction within this older Chinese field of value. The monk-scholar was expected to know Buddhist scriptures, but scriptural mastery alone was not enough. He also had to show command of the Chinese classics, literary learning, and the cultivated forms of judgment through which intellectual authority was recognized in medieval China (Kieschnick 1997, pp. 112–13). This point clarifies the sense in which Runzhou Buddhist culture may be described as literati-inflected. It was not simply that some monks came from educated families or happened to write well. Monastic distinction itself could be narrated through values shared with the literati world. Learning, calligraphy, family background, and cultivated withdrawal were not external embellishments of Buddhist life; they helped make Runzhou Buddhist culture socially and culturally legible within a literati world.

Family background remained important in accounts of monks active in Runzhou. The biography of Xuankui 玄逵 of Jiangning offers a revealing case. He died at the age of twenty-six from an illness contracted while returning from his travels in the Western Regions. *The Great Tang Biographies of Eminent Monks Who Sought the Dharma in the Western Regions* (*Da Tang Xiyu qiufa gaoseng zhuan* 大唐西域求法高僧傳) states:

玄逵律師者，潤州江寧人也。俗姓胡，令族高宗，兼文兼史，尚仁貴義，敬法敬僧，枝葉蟬聯。嘉聲靡墜。律師則童子出家，長而欽德。及其進具，卓爾不羣。遍閱律部，偏務禪寂。戒行嚴峻，誠罕其流。聽諸大經，頗究玄義。博玩文什，草隸尤精。

"The Vinaya master Xuankui was a native of Jiangning in Runzhou. His secular surname was Hu. He came from a distinguished aristocratic family, was well versed in letters and history, valued benevolence and righteousness, and revered the Dharma and the sangha. His family line continued in unbroken succession, and its good reputation never declined. He entered monastic life as a child and, as he grew older, came to revere virtue. After receiving full ordination, he stood apart from the common run. He was widely learned in the Vinaya and was especially devoted to Chan stillness. His observance of the precepts was rigorous, and few could compare with him. He listened to the great scriptures and explored their profound meanings. He delighted in literature, and was especially refined in cursive and clerical script" (Yijing 1988, p. 145).

Although Xuankui was a Vinaya master rather than a member of the Ox-head school, he remains relevant here as a monk whose life and identity were closely tied to Runzhou. As Jacques Gernet observes, Buddhist faith enjoyed its greatest vitality in the upper strata of Chinese society (Gernet 1995, p. 293). In his account, this vitality is not explained by devotion alone. It is tied to the social worlds in which pious works, family prestige, political position, and the wish for lasting merit reinforce one another. Xuankui's biography follows this pattern. His Buddhist distinction is not presented through Vinaya learning alone. The text first situates him within a "distinguished aristocratic family," then adds his command of letters and history, his reverence for the Dharma, his discipline in the precepts, his devotion to Chan stillness, and finally his refinement in cursive and clerical script. These details do not form a loose list of accomplishments. They show how monastic authority could be written through the prestige and cultivation that gave elite life its social weight. Xuankui is presented as an eminent monk not by leaving those resources behind, but by carrying them into the description of Buddhist practice.

The middle-Tang epitaph written by Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818) for Yuanying 元應 of Zhaodai Monastery in Runzhou follows the same pattern:

幼稟公宮之教，早繼德門之室，次有徙宅之訓，終悟舍筏之宗。紀其詳，則俗姓盧氏，世閥華峻，倬於漢魏，以至北齊。黃門侍郎思道，即六代祖也。曾祖悌，隱居不仕。祖暄，皇中散大夫邵王友，贈祕書監。父沄，皇中散大夫婺州刺史，惟先人叔父，迭領名藩，出也作民父母，入也爲王卿士，再世出於裴。而舅族多賢，繼貳六官，聯居九牧，中外纓冕之盛，冠於士林。

"In childhood she received the instruction proper to princely households; early on she married into a family of virtue; later she was shaped by the teachings proper to married life; and finally she awakened to the Buddhist teaching of 'casting off the raft.' To recount it in detail, her secular surname was Lu. Her lineage was eminent and distinguished, illustrious from Han and Wei down to Northern Qi. Her sixth-generation ancestor was Sidao, Gentleman Attendant at the Yellow Gate. Her great-grandfather Ti withdrew from office and lived in seclusion. Her grandfather Xuan served as court gentleman and companion to the Prince of Bin, and was posthumously ennobled as director of the Palace Library. Her father Yun served as court gentleman and prefect of Wuzhou. Her paternal uncles successively governed famous prefectures: when they went out, they acted as fathers and mothers to the people; when they entered the court, they became great ministers. For two generations the family was linked by marriage to the Pei. On her mother's side too, many were worthy: they alternated in the six ministries and appeared in succession among the nine provincial governorships. The splendor of their official caps and tassels, within and without the court, surpassed that of the entire scholar class" (Quan 2013, p. 296).

The epitaph does more than record Yuanying's family background. It places her monastic awakening within a carefully ordered sequence of aristocratic formation, from princely instruction and marriage into a cultivated household to paternal and maternal lineages of officeholding, and finally to the Buddhist teaching of "casting off the raft." Her entry into monastic life is therefore not narrated as a simple rupture with the world from which she came. It is presented as a transformation of the cultural formation that had already shaped her. Aristocratic pedigree, cultivated reclusion, and Buddhist renunciation are made to belong to the same life history. The literati world was therefore not only the background from which monks and nuns emerged but also part of the cultural formation carried into Buddhist life. This formation continued to shape the ways in which monastic identities were narrated after ordination.

The literati inflection of Runzhou Buddhist culture was not limited to the description of monks and nuns; it also appears in the literary presentation of Buddhist sites. Zhang Hu 張祜 (d. 853) writes of this relation in "Ascending the Upper Chamber of Cihe Monastery in Runzhou on an Autumn Night":

清夜浮埃暫歇塵，塔輪金照露華鮮。人行中路月生海，鶴語上方星滿天。樓影半連深岸水，鐘聲寒徹遠林煙。僧房閉盡下樓去，一半夢魂離世緣。

"On a clear autumn night, the dust of the market lanes briefly settles; the golden pagoda wheel gleams fresh with jeweled dew. Along the central path, people walk as the moon rises from the sea; above, cranes call beneath a sky filled with stars. Half the tower's shadow falls across the deep riverbank; the cold sound of the bell reaches the distant woodland mist. When the monks' cells are shut, I descend from the tower, my dream-soul already half released from the bonds of the world" (Zhang 1987, p. 131).

What matters is not the visual range opened by height alone, but the way ascent gives the Buddhist site a momentary distance from worldly entanglement. Cihe Monastery does not become a doctrinal image of liberation, nor does it become scenery detached from worship.

Here poetry and Buddhism proceed, in Stephen Owen's phrase, "side by side rather than in tension" (Owen 2017, p. 400). Its space acquires a literati inflection because the loosening of worldly ties is given form within the Buddhist setting of Tang Runzhou. By a striking coincidence, Cui Zhiyuan 崔致遠 (b. 857), the Silla envoy to Tang China from Gyeongju, also visits Runzhou and composes an almost identically titled poem, "Ascending the Upper Chamber of Cihe Monastery in Runzhou":

登臨暫隔路歧塵，吟想興亡恨益新。畫角聲中朝暮浪，青山影裏古今人。霜摧玉樹花無主，風暖金陵草自春。賴有謝家餘境在，長教詩客爽精神。

"For a moment, as I ascend, I leave the dust of diverging roads behind; chanting as I climb and descend, my sorrow only deepens. Horn-calls and waves sound through dawn and dusk; within the shadow of green hills stand men of past and present. Frost strikes the jade trees, leaving the flowers without a master; warm winds from Jinling let the grasses make their own spring. Thanks to the lingering traces of the Xie family estate, this place forever renews the spirit of poets" (Nan 2008, p. 601).

Cui's poem thus situates Cihe Monastery within a lineage of literati memory extending from the Jin to the Tang. Throughout the Tang, the literary atmosphere of Runzhou was deeply marked by the cultural refinement of Jiangnan. Yin Fan 殷璠, who once held a literary post in Runzhou, is relevant here because his critical activity reveals this atmosphere. His lost *Collection of Poetry from Danyang* (*Danyang ji* 丹陽集), which gathered poets from Yanling, Qu'a, Jurong, Jiangning, and Dantu, suggests that Runzhou was not only a geographical unit but also a literary field in which refined temperament and poetic evaluation were mutually sustained. Within such a field, Buddhist monasteries could be perceived not merely as ritual institutions, but also as places where local memory and literati taste converged.

In the Tang, Buddhist monasteries in Runzhou brought together works by celebrated artists and writers of different periods. A fine example is Yuan Huangzhi 元黃之's "Stele on the Vimalakirti Image at Waguan Monastery in Jiangning County, Runzhou," which recounts in richly colored language the origin of the transformation scene (*bianxiang* 變相) at the monastery:

江寧縣瓦棺寺變相者，晉虎頭將軍顧愷之所畫也。爾其上纏珠門，下控金陵，六代爲天子之都，三分入王孫之國，禮讓流行之地，英靈誕秀之鄉，鷲巖分虎踞之山，雁塔枕龍盤之水，總幽間與形勝，則瓦棺之寺焉。

"The transformation scene at Waguan Monastery in Jiangning County was painted by Gu Kaizhi, the Tiger-Head General of the Jin. Above, it entwines the constellations; below, it controls Jinling. Through six dynasties this is the capital of emperors; through three divisions it enters the domains of princely descendants. It is a land in which rites and yielding circulate, a region in which numinous excellence is born. Vulture Peak shares the tiger-crouching mountain; the wild-goose pagoda rests beside dragon-coiling waters. Where hidden profundity and topographic advantage meet, there stands the monastery of Waguan" (Li et al. 1966, pp. 4524–25).

In Yuan Huangzhi's account, Waguan Monastery brings together Buddhist sacred geography, Jinling's historical prestige, and the artistic legacy of Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c. 344–406). Gu's Vimalakirti image makes the monastery a bearer of Jin cultural memory. Here, the literati inflection of Runzhou Buddhist culture takes shape through the incorporation of this inherited memory into the monastery's Buddhist identity.

The literati world from which many monks and nuns emerged remained present within Buddhist life, while the historical and literary memory it sustained became part of

how Runzhou's monasteries were understood. Its continuing presence grounded the literati inflection of Runzhou Buddhism in the social and cultural life of Tang-dynasty Jiangnan.

3. Mountain Dwelling in Runzhou Buddhist Culture

The human body could serve as a measure of architectural space. In Xu Deng's 許登 Tang stele inscription for Fuxing Monastery in Shangyuan County, Runzhou, Chan master Daorong 道融 is said to have measured buildings by reference to his own body. For example, he "measured the hall by placing the heart at the center" (Dong 1983, p. 4497). In this account, the body itself becomes the standard by which architectural space is ordered. Mountain dwelling belongs to a different order of habitation. It does not begin from the measurement of a building, but from the mountain's capacity to hold a life apart from the ordinary world. For Tang literati, that apartness had long been associated with distance from office life; to dwell in the mountains was to turn distance into a cultivated form of life. For monks, the same apartness carried another meaning. It allowed Buddhist practice to take root in a particular place, so that the mountain was no longer only a setting but part of the life of practice itself.

In Runzhou, mountain dwelling took shape within a concrete local landscape. The mountain rose beside the river, controlled routes of passage, and carried local memory; in the case of Ox-head Mountain, it also became the place where a Chan lineage was imagined to begin. For this reason, Buddhist mountain dwelling in Runzhou was not simply a matter of monastic seclusion. It also entered a Jiangnan literati world in which the mountain suggested a life at some distance from official service and worldly ties. Kieschnick notes that conversations between literati and monks often took place in remote mountain monasteries, where Buddhist discussion could coexist with a longing for a quieter and more withdrawn life (Kieschnick 2003, p. 289). In Runzhou Buddhist culture, such overlap did not turn monastic cultivation into literati reclusion. It shows instead how Buddhist mountain dwelling could bear a literati inflection while remaining directed toward Buddhist practice.

Within the Ox-head tradition, mountain dwelling begins with Farong 法融 (594–657). In the "Record of the New Pagoda of Master Rong, First Patriarch of Ox-head Mountain" by Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842), Farong says:

吾志求出世間法，遂入句曲，依僧旻，改蓬掖而緇之。徙居是山，宴坐石室，以慧力感通，故旱麓泉涌，以神功示現。故皓雪蓮生，巨蛇摧伏，羣鹿聽法。貞觀中，雙峯過江，望牛頭，頓錫曰：“此山有道氣，宜有得之者。”乃東，果與大師相遇。性合神契，至於無言。

"My resolve was to seek the Dharma beyond the world; thus I entered Juqu, relied on the monk Jiong, and exchanged the scholar's robe for the black robe of monastic life. I then moved to this mountain, sat in repose in a stone chamber, and through the responsive power of wisdom brought about marvels: springs gushed forth from the dry foothills, and divine powers made themselves manifest. Thus white lotus flowers bloomed in the snow, a giant snake was subdued, and herds of deer came to hear the Dharma. During the Zhenguan reign period (627–649), the monk from Shuangfeng crossed the river, looked toward Ox-head Mountain, and, setting down his staff, said, 'This mountain possesses the qi of the Way; there ought to be one here who has attained it.' He then went east and indeed encountered the Master. Their natures corresponded and their spirits matched, to the point of wordlessness" (Yuxi Liu 1975, p. 42).

The force of this account does not depend on treating these marvels as verifiable events. Springs, white lotus flowers, snakes, and deer belong to the narrative language through

which Buddhist sacred biography makes sanctity visible. Schama's claim that "landscapes are culture before they are nature" is borne out in the Ox-head Mountain materials (Schama 1995, p. 61). The mountain here is not raw terrain later adorned with Buddhist legend; it is already encountered through meditative practice and responsive signs that make it readable as a Buddhist landscape. What matters here is that these signs arise from the mountain itself. Farong's meditation is not narrated as an inward act detached from place; it causes Ox-head Mountain to respond. The mountain becomes capable of producing water and flowers, subduing snakes, and drawing deer to hear the Dharma. Such religious narration does not merely embellish the biography of a monk. It turns mountain dwelling into the process by which a local landscape becomes a Buddhist place. Farong's biography makes Ox-head Mountain a "gathering" site in Robson's sense, where Farong's practice, the mountain's responsive signs, and later Buddhist memory converge (Robson 2009, pp. 23–24). The mountain's religious character is formed through the signs that gather around Farong's dwelling. As these signs are bound to his practice, Farong becomes inseparable from the place in which his sanctity is made visible. Ox-head Mountain therefore enters Buddhist memory both as the site where Farong dwelt and as the place in which his sanctity became visible and transmissible. The meeting between Daoxin 道信 (580–651) and Farong is also placed within this mountain logic. Daoxin goes east to Ox-head Mountain because he observes the qi of the mountain. In other words, mountain dwelling is the historical and narrative setting in which the Ox-head lineage comes into being. The narrative does not treat the mountain as inert terrain. It attributes qi to the mountain and makes that qi part of the conditions through which the Ox-head lineage comes into being. Nor is dwelling presented as passive confinement. It is a form of awakened understanding, unfolding between experience and transcendence, between the human body and the myriad things, and within the movement of qi that links the cosmos to the master-disciple transmission of the Dharma.

In ancient Chinese Buddhist architectural culture, two poles stand in dynamic tension. One is the hall, conducive to collective worship, though it may also serve individual cultivation. The other is the pagoda, beneficial to individual cultivation, though it too may become an object of collective veneration. By the Tang, cave monasteries had already fused these two dimensions: they possess at once the grand public face of Buddhist propagation visible at sites such as Mogao and Longmen, and the interiorized meditation associated with relic interment and contemplation within the cave itself. In Runzhou, however, the general tendency of cave monasteries differs fundamentally from the independent and complete built structures of temples, mansions, and halls. To choose the mountain as one's abode, to take one's place in a stone chamber, is to enter into an intimate relation with rock and mountain, and thereby to find a space suitable for quiet cultivation. This tendency gives the narrative logic of Runzhou Buddhism its distinctive force. Runzhou "controls" the river, and what makes such control possible is the body of the mountain itself. Mountain dwelling is precisely the special cultural memory of local Buddhism. *The Record of the Search for the Profundities of the Huayan Sutra* (*Huayan jing tanxuan ji* 华严经探玄记) states:

今但潤州江南有牛頭山，彼中現有佛窟寺也，則北印度境。傳雲有四辟支佛影，時時出現。

"At present, in Runzhou south of the Yangtze, there is Ox-head Mountain; within it there now exists a Buddhist cave monastery, corresponding to the northern Indian type. Tradition says that the images of four *pratyekabuddhas* appear there from time to time" (Fazang 1995, p. 61).

The "jing" in Jingkou originally denotes an artificially piled-up high mound. A high mound is not pastoral ground: it may be used for defense, but it may also be used for Chan practice. It must be stressed that the "mountain" of mountain dwelling is not a device for

testing the sangha's will. In this context, mountain dwelling should not be understood as a test of ascetic endurance. Its value lies in providing a protected setting for meditative concentration. It offers distance from heat and cold, wind and rain, and the dust of ordinary life, while allowing practice to remain close to the changing vitality of the mountains.

In the Ox-head tradition, one dwells in the mountains in life and returns to the mountains in death as well. The account of the third-generation master Huifang 慧方 (629–695), a native of Yanling in Runzhou, reads:

將欲滅度，見有五百許人，髻發後垂，狀如菩薩，各持幡華，雲請法師講。又感山神現大蟒身至庭前，如將泣別。師謂侍者洪道曰：“吾去矣，汝爲吾報諸門人。”及門人奔至，師已入滅。時唐天冊元年八月一日，山林變白，溪澗絕流七日，道俗悲慕，聲動山谷。

“When he was about to enter extinction, he saw more than five hundred figures with hair hanging behind their heads like bodhisattvas, each holding banners and flowers and asking the Dharma master to preach. He also sensed that the mountain deity appeared before the courtyard in the form of a great python, as if about to weep in farewell. The master said to his attendant Hongdao, ‘I am leaving; report this to my disciples.’ By the time the disciples came running, the master had already passed away. It was the first day of the eighth month in the first year of Tiance (695). The forests and groves turned white, the streams ceased flowing for seven days, and both monks and laymen mourned him; the sound of grief shook the valleys” (Daoyuan 2000, p. 52).

The steps by which a monk enters final extinction seem unable to escape a certain pattern, beginning with the vision of sentient beings, then that of self-nature, and finally that of disciples. Sentient beings are thereby delivered and appear in the form of bodhisattvas; the python-body points to self-nature; the disciples who arrive in the third encounter always come too late and cannot receive the final charge. All of this takes place in the mountains. The whitening woods and the grief echoing through the valleys make the landscape part of the master's final passage. The Ox-head masters are thus remembered through their continued relation to the mountain. Nor is this way of leaving the world a one-time event. The fourth-generation master Fachi 法持 (635–702), also a native of Jiangning in Runzhou, transmitted the Dharma to master Zhiwei 智威 (653–729). The account of his death reads:

於唐長安二年九月五日，終於金陵延祚寺無常院。遺囑令露骸松下，飼諸鳥獸。迎出日，空中有神幡從西而來，繞山數匝，所居故院竹林變白，七日而止。

“On the fifth day of the ninth month in the second year of Chang'an (702), he died in the Wuchang Cloister of Yanzuo Monastery in Jinling. He left instructions that his exposed bones be placed beneath a pine so that birds and beasts might feed upon them. On the day his remains were carried out, divine banners came through the sky from the west and circled the mountain several times; the bamboo grove of the former courtyard where he had lived turned white for seven days” (Daoyuan 2000, p. 52).

The whitening of the grove may almost be regarded as a sign of the nirvana of Ox-head masters. This recurrent association between mountain dwelling and death appears as a constructed narrative within Ox-head sources, rather than a direct reflection of historical practice. The fifth-generation master Zhiwei, likewise a native of Jiangning in Runzhou, gave similar instructions before passing away at the age of seventy-seven: “Place my corpse in the forest and offer it to the birds and beasts” (Daoyuan 2000, p. 53).

Viewed in this light, mountain dwelling is not an isolated gesture of quietist self-cultivation. In Runzhou Buddhist culture, mountain dwelling becomes possible not simply because there are mountains in which to dwell, but because a whole set of practices unfolds

around them, including cultivation, habitation, travel, and exchange. Mountain dwelling thus constitutes a distinctive mode of Buddhist life in Runzhou. This mode of life gives Runzhou Buddhism its local character and shows how it became literati-inflected.

4. Ox-Head Chan and the Practice of the Middle Way

Runzhou Buddhist culture was also marked by a strong reputation for Chan practice. According to *The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Jingde chuandeng lu* 德傳燈錄), Chan master Zhizhen 智真 of Guishan in Fuzhou, whose training began at Hualin Monastery in Fuzhou, went specifically to Tianxiang Monastery in Dantu: “In the first year of Yuanhe 元和 (806) of the Tang, he received the precepts at Tianxiang Monastery in Dantu, Runzhou. He did not study sutras and treatises, but longed only for *dhyana*” (Daoyuan 2000, p. 153). Zhizhen’s journey suggests that Runzhou had acquired a reputation for Chan practice.

The Ox-head school stood between Northern and Southern Chan and was closer to the Southern current. In Runzhou, its approach to cultivation took shape through a sustained concern with xin 心 (mind). This orientation sought a non-extreme form of Chan awakening, avoiding partiality and pursuing the Middle Way (zhongdao 中道). The Middle Way was of course not unique to Ox-head Chan. From Nagarjuna onward, Madhyamaka reasoning used negation to loosen attachment to fixed views, and through the translations of Kumarajiva (344–413), this language of emptiness and nonduality entered Chinese Buddhist discourse. In the Sanlun tradition, especially in the work of Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), it was developed into a refined method of doctrinal analysis, directed toward dismantling attachment not only to being and nonbeing, but also to emptiness and the Middle itself. Ox-head Chan inherits this broader problem of nonattachment, but it shifts the emphasis from doctrinal exposition to the realization of nonattachment in practice. Its concern with mind places the Middle Way within the concrete work of cultivation, where freedom from fixed distinctions is enacted differently according to persons, situations, and encounters.

This inward orientation brought Ox-head Chan close to forms of cultivation associated with literati reclusion and Daoist practice, but the three should not be collapsed into one another. The literati recluse turns withdrawal into a cultivated way of inhabiting the world beyond office. The Daoist practitioner seeks attunement to the movement of nature and the Dao, often through practices such as xinzhai 心齋 and zuowang 坐忘. The Buddhist monk, by contrast, remains directed toward liberation from karmic existence through the loosening of attachment and the clarification of mind and nature. The literati inflection of Ox-head Chan therefore lies in proximity rather than identity. Buddhist liberation could be expressed in a language and manner recognizable within a literati world, while still preserving its specifically Buddhist aim.

The “Stele Inscription for the Great Master of Jingshan at Helin Monastery in Runzhou” presents a retrospectively constructed transmission sequence, running from Farong through Zhiyan 智嚴 (600–677), Huifang, Fachi, and Zhiwei to Xuansu 玄素 (668–752). This sequence can be read as an inscriptional framing of Ox-head identity as a continuous lineage of transmission, rather than as a historical genealogy. The inscription situates Xuansu within this lineage. The inscription states:

大師悉以菩薩呼之。教習大乘。戒妄調伏。自性還源。無漸而可隨。無頓而可入。……當悟者內珠雖隱，猶作來因。藥草萬殊，根莖等潤。貌和言寡，飢至飽歸，或有聞尊稱而遷善，現色身而獨得。我無示念，道溥慈圓，食不問鹹酸，口不言寒暑，身同池水，飽蚊蚋之飢渴。道離人我，順衆生之往來，貴賤怨親，是法平等。故饋甘味而不辭，同於糗糒；奉上服而不拒，齊於弊褐。

“The Great Master addressed them all as bodhisattvas. He taught the Great Vehicle, restrained falsity, and brought self-nature back to its source. There is no

gradualness one may merely follow, and no suddenness one may simply enter. ... For those who are to awaken, the inner pearl, though hidden, still serves as a prior cause. The medicinal herbs are ten thousand in kind, yet root and stem alike receive the same moisture. His bearing was gentle and his speech sparse; when hunger came he ate, and when full he withdrew. Some, on hearing his honored title, turned toward the good; some, on seeing his manifest bodily form, attained alone. I harbor no discriminating thought; the Way is vast and compassion complete. He did not ask whether food was salty or sour; his mouth did not speak of heat or cold. His body was like the water of a pond, satisfying the hunger and thirst of mosquitoes and gnats. The Way departs from self and other and accords with the comings and goings of sentient beings. Noble and base, resentful and intimate—this Dharma is equal to all. Thus when sweet delicacies were offered he did not refuse them, treating them no differently from coarse food; when fine garments were presented he did not reject them, holding them equal to ragged robes” (Dong 1983, p. 4497).

The distinctive contribution of Ox-head Chan lies in its transcendence of the opposition between sudden and gradual awakening. The phrase “there is no gradualness one may merely follow, and no suddenness one may simply enter” should therefore not be read only as a doctrinal compromise between gradual and sudden awakening. It points instead to a distinctive Ox-head refusal to settle awakening within a fixed polarity. In this sense, the Middle Way is not a neutral midpoint, but a way of loosening attachment to the very alternatives through which practice is usually conceptualized. This is why Xuansu’s conduct is described not through scholastic exposition, but through ordinary acts: eating when hungry, withdrawing when full, receiving fine food without delight, and accepting coarse fare without resentment. Ox-head Chan does not reject the world; rather, it responds to the world without allowing distinction, preference, or aversion to harden into attachment. In this form of accord, equality and ultimacy meet at the level of mind.

Concentrated contemplation is crucial to the life experience of the founding patriarch of the Ox-head lineage. In describing Farong’s first entry into the Buddhist path, *The Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan* 续高僧传) states:

遂入茅山，依吳法師剃除周羅，服勤請道。吳譽動江海，德誘幾神，妙理真筌，無所遺隱。融縱神挹酌，情有所緣，以爲慧發亂縱，定開心府，如不凝想，妄慮難摧。乃凝心宴默於空靜林。二十年中，專精匪懈，遂大入妙門。……貞觀十七年，於牛頭山幽棲寺北巖下，別立茅茨禪室，日夕思擇，無缺寸陰。

“He then entered Maoshan, relied on Master Jiong, shaved off the topknot, and diligently sought the Way. Jiong’s reputation moved the rivers and seas; his virtue drew even spirits. In subtle principle and in the true canons, nothing remained hidden. Farong gave his spirit over to deep savoring, yet his mind still had objects to which it clung. He took it that wisdom, once stirred, easily runs into disorder, whereas concentration opens the palace of the mind. If one does not gather one’s thoughts, delusive concerns are hard to destroy. He therefore concentrated his mind and sat in silent repose in the empty and quiet woods. For twenty years he pursued this with unwavering dedication and at last entered deeply into the wondrous gate. ... In the seventeenth year of Zhenguan (643), beneath the northern cliff of Youqi Monastery on Ox-head Mountain, he separately built a thatched meditation hut and, day and evening, pondered and chose, letting not an inch of time go to waste” (Daoxuan 2004, p. 798).

In Farong’s earliest view, “wisdom, once stirred, easily runs into disorder; concentration opens the palace of the mind.” Concentration provides the stability through which wisdom

can become effective. His twenty years of silent repose and unremitting practice demonstrate the discipline required to sustain this cultivation. Such concentrated contemplation prepared him for his encounter with Daoxin and became formative in his development as a Chan master. To interpret Buddhism through concentration and wisdom is to enact an active form of transcendence centered on the *pratyekabuddha*-like practitioner, whose solitary and disciplined cultivation bears a distinctly elite character. The rational structure of this contemplative practice steadies emotion, grounds belief beyond subjective impulse, and lends credibility to religious speech.

Daoxin's guidance to Farong is preserved in a passage that moves from the equality of beings to the freedom of mind. Daoxin says:

人與非人，性相平等。大道虛曠，絕思絕慮。如是之法，汝今已得，更無闕少，與佛何殊？更無別法。汝但任心自在，莫作觀行，亦莫澄心，莫起貪瞋，莫懷愁慮，蕩蕩無礙，任意縱橫。不作諸善，不作諸惡。行住坐臥，觸目遇緣，總是佛之妙用，快樂無憂，故名爲佛。

“Humans and nonhumans are equal in nature and appearance. The Great Way is empty and vast, beyond thought and beyond anxiety. You have already attained such a Dharma; nothing is lacking in you—how are you different from the Buddha? There is no other Dharma. Simply let mind be free. Do not manufacture contemplative practice, and do not forcibly still the mind. Do not arouse greed and anger; do not harbor sorrow and care. Vast and unobstructed, let it range wherever it will. Do not make the various good, and do not make the various evil. Whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, whenever conditions meet the eye, all of it is the Buddha's wondrous function—joyful and without care; therefore it is called Buddha” (Daoyuan 2000, p. 48).

Daoxin's instruction gives practical shape to this concern with mind. Its emphasis is not on abandoning cultivation, but on changing the way cultivation is held. Farong's earlier practice still assumes that the mind must be steadied through concentrated effort. Daoxin does not reject discipline outright; he loosens its tendency to become another object of attachment. To “let mind be free” is therefore not literati ease, nor absorption into the natural course of the Dao. It is a Chan movement away from contrived practice. The mind is not clarified by forced stillness, since forced stillness may itself become a new form of grasping. The same logic applies to “not making good and evil.” The point is not that ethical distinctions disappear. What is refused is the act of “making,” by which good and evil, practice and attainment, purity and impurity are turned into fixed grounds for attachment. Daoxin's teaching thus remains directed toward Buddhist liberation: it loosens the attachment to a self to be purified, a practice to be possessed, and an awakening to be secured. Only in this sense can walking, standing, sitting, and lying down be described as the Buddha's wondrous function.

Addressing Zhiwei, the fifth patriarch of the Ox-head lineage, Huizhong 慧忠 (683–769) once said: “Emptiness is the true body—where then do self and other remain? Deluded feeling need not be stilled; simply float the boat of *prajna*.” “Deluded feeling” is neither something that can nor should be extinguished by force. How, then, is it to be faced? By “floating the boat of *prajna*,” by setting out upon the sea—the sea of desire. Huizhong also composed a *gatha* on “settling the mind”: “When person and dharmas are both purified, good and evil are both forgotten. Let the straight mind be true: that is the bodhi place of practice” (Daoyuan 2000, p. 53). Good and evil remain distinguishable; what is forgotten is the act of fixing upon them. This is much like the exchange recorded of Chan master Kuangda 匡达 of Ciyun in Runzhou. A monk asked, “The Buddha appears in the world because of one great causal affair. How then does the Master appear in the world?” The master replied, “Qià hǎo 恰好—just so.” The monk asked, “What does that

mean?" The master said, "Bù hào 不好—not to be caught in likes and dislikes" (Daoyuan 2000, p. 539). Here, hào functions adjectivally in qià hào, suggesting contingency and the unpremeditated, whereas in bù hào it functions verbally and turns attention back to the instability of preference and aversion. The same point appears in Xuansu's exchange:

潤州鶴林玄素禪師見四祖下牛頭宗威禪師，有僧扣門，師問：“什麼人？”曰：“是僧。”師曰：“非但是僧，佛來亦不着。”曰：“佛來爲什麼不着？”師曰：“無汝止泊處。”

"Master Xuansu of Helin in Runzhou, on seeing master Wei of the Ox-head line under the Fourth Patriarch, was approached by a monk knocking at the gate. The master asked, 'Who is it?' The monk replied, 'It is a monk.' The master said, 'Not only a monk—even if the Buddha came, he would not be admitted.' The monk asked, 'Why would the Buddha not be admitted?' The master said, 'There is no place for you to stop and lodge'" (Chen 1990, p. 1401).

A place of arrival is also a place in which to stop and lodge. Xuansu's reply turns this spatial image into a critique of fixation. To distinguish Buddha, monk, and layman as stable identities is still to seek a final position at which one may settle. The claim that there is "no place to stop and lodge" therefore denies that awakening can be secured as a fixed destination.

These exchanges present awakening as freedom from fixed distinctions and from the search for a final ground of attainment. Their proximity to literati reflection lies in this loosening of worldly attachments and settled positions. Yet the underlying logic remains specifically Buddhist: when self and other, good and evil, practice and attainment cease to function as objects of grasping, ordinary conduct becomes the site in which nonattachment is realized. The literati inflection of Ox-head Chan therefore lies not in converting awakening into aesthetic experience, but in giving Buddhist nonattachment a form legible within the cultivated world of Tang Jiangnan.

5. Conclusions

The significance of Runzhou Buddhist culture lies in the close integration of Buddhist life with the cultural history of the region. Within the wider world of Tang Buddhism, this integration took a historically specific form where inherited Jiangnan literary culture and extensive regional mobility met the emergence of Ox-head Chan. The literati inflection examined here was not an external coloring of Runzhou Buddhism but part of the local form assumed by Buddhist life.

Lineage and literary formation remained active after ordination, shaping the remembrance of monastic identity. The historical and literary memory of Jiangnan also entered the religious meanings attached to monasteries. Mountain dwelling gave this relation a lived form, bringing Buddhist cultivation close to literati traditions of withdrawal. Ox-head Chan shows most clearly how this literati inflection entered the understanding of cultivation. In the Runzhou materials, the Middle Way is presented not as a midpoint between alternatives, but as freedom from attachment to the distinctions through which cultivation was defined. This freedom took form in ordinary conduct ungoverned by fixed preference or aversion, bringing Chan cultivation close to literati self-cultivation. The conjunction traced here shows that the local development of Buddhism in Runzhou was itself transformative, as the region's literati culture came to shape the ways in which Buddhist life was understood and practiced.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Chen, Shi 陳實, comp. 1990. *Dazang Yilan Ji* 大藏一覽集. Juan 10. In *Taisho shinshu daizokyo* 大正新修大藏經. Edited and Collated by Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo Kankokai 大正新脩大藏經刊行會. Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation 財團法人佛陀教育基金會, vol. 100, p. 1401.
- Daoshi 道世. 1991. *Fayuan Zhulin* 法苑珠林. Juan 65. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House 上海古籍出版社, p. 481.
- Daoxuan 道宣. 2004. *Xu Gaoseng Zhuan* 續高僧傳. Juan 21. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, p. 798.
- Daoyuan 道原. 2000. *Jingde Chuandeng Lu* 景德傳燈錄. Chengdu: Chengdu Ancient Books Bookstore 成都古籍書店, pp. 48, 52–53, 153, 539.
- Dong, Gao 董誥, comp. 1983. *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文. Juan 320. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, p. 4497.
- Fazang 法藏. 1995. *Huayanjing Tanxuan Ji* 華嚴經探玄記. Juan 7. Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation 財團法人佛陀教育基金會, p. 61.
- Gernet, Jacques. 1995. *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*. Translated by Franciscus Verellen. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 293.
- Huangfu, Ran 皇甫冉. 1985. *Tang Huangfu Ran Shiji* 唐皇甫冉詩集. Juan 3. In *Sibu Congkan Sanbian* 四部叢刊三編. Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore 上海書店, vol. 60, p. 20.
- Jorgensen, John. 2005. *Inventing Hui-Neng, the Sixth Patriarch: Hagiography and Biography in Early Ch'an*. Leiden: Brill, p. 474.
- Kieschnick, John. 1997. *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 112–13.
- Kieschnick, John. 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 289.
- Li, Fang 李昉, Hu Meng, Xu Xuan, Song Bai, Jia Huangzhong, Lv Mengzheng, Li Zhi, Li Mu, Yang Huizhi, Li Fan, and et al., comps. 1966. *Wenyuan Yinghua* 文苑英華. Juan 857. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, pp. 4524–25.
- Liu, Yanshi 劉言史. 1987. *Poems in Yuding Quantangshi* 御定全唐詩. Juan 468. In *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House 上海古籍出版社, vol. 1427, p. 678.
- Liu, Yuxi 劉禹錫. 1975. *Liu Yuxi Ji* 劉禹錫集. Juan 30. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House 上海人民出版社, p. 42.
- Nan, Longyi 南龍翼, comp. 2008. *Jiya* 箕雅. Juan 7. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, p. 601.
- Owen, Stephen. 2017. How Did Buddhism Matter in Tang Poetry? *T'oung Pao* 103: 388–406. [CrossRef]
- Quan, Deyu 權德輿. 2013. *Xinkan Quan Zaizhi Wenji* 新刊權載之文集. Juan 27. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House 上海古籍出版社, p. 296.
- Robson, James. 2009. *Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue) in Medieval China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, pp. 23–24.
- Schama, Simon. 1995. *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 61.
- Yijing 義淨. 1988. *Datang Xiyu Qiufa Gaoseng Zhuan Jiaozhu* 大唐西域求法高僧傳校注. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, p. 145.
- Zhang, Hu 張祜. 1987. *Poems in Yuding Quantangshi* 御定全唐詩. Juan 510. In *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House 上海古籍出版社, vol. 1428, p. 131.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.