1. **It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important.**
   The contents of Zen texts should not be evaluated using a simple-minded criterion of journalistic accuracy, that is, “Did it really happen?” For any event or saying to have occurred would be a trivial reality involving a mere handful of people at one imagined point in time, which would be overwhelmed by the thousands of people over the centuries who were involved in the creation of Zen legends. The mythopoeic creation of Zen literature implies the religious imagination of the Chinese people, a phenomenon of vast scale and deep significance.

2. **Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong.**
   Statements of lineage identity and “history” were polemical tools of self-assertion, not critical evaluations of chronological fact according to some modern concept of historical accuracy. To the extent that any lineage assertion is significant, it is also a misrepresentation; lineage assertions that can be shown to be historically accurate are also inevitably inconsequential as statements of religious identity.

3. **Precision implies inaccuracy.**
   Numbers, dates, and other details lend an air of verisimilitude to a story, but the more they accumulate, the more we should recognize them as literary tropes. Especially in Zen studies, greater detail is an artifact of temporal distance, and the vagueness of earlier accounts should be comforting in its integrity. While we should avoid joining a misguided quest for origins, we should also be quick to distinguish between “good data” and ornamental fluff. Even as we ponder the vectors of medieval polemics.

Storytellers inevitably create heroes and villains, and the depiction of Zen’s early patriarchs and icons cripples our understanding of both the Tang “golden age” and the supposedly stagnant formalism of the Song dynasty. If one side is romanticized, the other must be vilified, and both subjects pass incognito. The collusion between Zen romanticists and the apologists for Confucian triumphalism—which has Song Neo-Confucianism climbing to glory on the back of a defeated Buddhism—is an obstacle to the understanding of both Chan and the Chinese civil tradition. The corollary is this: Cold realism eliminates dismissive misapprehension.