

Book Review

Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs, by Stuart H. Young. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2015. ix + 338 pp., \$60.00 (hb). ISBN 9780824841201.

Reviewed by: Herman Tull, Lafayette College, USA.
hermantull@gmail.com

Keywords: Buddhism; India; China; Aśvaghōṣa; Nāgārjuna; Āryadeva

Stuart Young's richly detailed study, *Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs*, focuses on the Chinese Buddhist representation of the three central Indian Buddhist figures of Aśvaghōṣa, Nāgārjuna, and Āryadeva (c. second to third centuries CE). Although there is no dearth of studies of these figures, as Young points out, earlier works (many by the 'towering patriarchs of our own academic tradition') focus on 'elucidating [their] doctrinal systems and historicity' (p. 5). Young, on the other hand, seeks to uncover how, in Chinese Buddhism, these figures were used to advance sectarian programs 'aimed at developing avowedly Indian models of Buddhist sanctity that would integrate and supplant local Chinese religious traditions' (p. 3). According to Young (and central to his thesis), the Chinese assimilation of these figures depended upon a seemingly paradoxical emphasis on their 'Indianness' (p. 12). This tension informs Young's broad methodological supposition that the Chinese attraction to these figures was built upon an opportunity for cultural flexibility; that is, a pliability wrought by their identities as both Indian exemplars and founders of Chinese Buddhism, lending them an adaptability that far exceeded any historically-tethered narrative accounts of their lives. Young follows this thread both chronologically and thematically, starting with the earliest Chinese representations of Aśvaghōṣa, Nāgārjuna, and Āryadeva as the true representatives of the Buddha-dharma in the post-nirvāṇa period (c. fifth century), and leading centuries later, in the late Tang period, to their utterly assimilated forms, seen, for example, in an extensive mythology that depicts Aśvaghōṣa as a Chinese silkworm god.

Young's exploration of Aśvaghōṣa, Nāgārjuna, and Āryadeva begins with the work of the famed fifth-century Indian Buddhist monk, missionary, and translator (known for his revolutionary style of translating from Sanskrit to Chinese) Kumārajīva. Whether it was Kumārajīva's own perspective, or that of his disciples and associates, the works that appeared from his school emphasized the notion that following the Buddha's nirvāṇa the dharma slid

into a period of sharp decline. It was amidst this decline that in the early Chinese imagination Āśvaghoṣa, Nāgārjuna, and Āryadeva arose as proponents of the Buddha's true law, which, as Young observes, recalls in Chinese thought the 'way that Confucian sage-kings or Daoist messiahs arose ... when the Way was weak and the masses in peril' (p. 41). Along with this broad representation, Young delves into several detailed examples that show how Kumārajīva's school positioned the three patriarchs within the broader frame of Chinese culture, such as having them engage in debate (a favoured tool of the Chinese literati), or travel to the world of the dragon kings of Daoist myth. Yet, through all this, the 'Indianness' of these figures continues to play a significant role, as suggested in this early period by an emphasis on their mastery of meditation (*dhyaṇa*), a tradition which, as Young shows, the Chinese then considered to be deficient in Buddhism as practiced in China.

In chapter 2, Young turns to a later Chinese representation of the patriarchs as part of an uninterrupted Indian succession, a notion that would seem to run counter to the image of the patriarchs as revivifying the law after its decline in India. Here, Young argues that the promotion of an uninterrupted lineage was fashioned to highlight Indian Buddhism as a non-subversive tradition, suggesting it 'was grounded in the same patriarchal principles as Chinese society' (p. 85). Although Young's argument throughout this work is overwhelmingly textual in nature, as part of this discussion, he brings to the fore descriptions of images found in a fifth- to sixth-century Chinese Buddhist monastery, describing them as part of a ritual nexus that lend further support to the interweaving of the Buddhist patriarchs with Chinese notions of hierarchy. In chapter 3, Young shows how this understanding of a Buddhism acceptable to the Chinese state is pushed to a wholesale assimilation in which the truth of Indian Buddhism is seen as arising not in India but only in latter-day China (p. 141).

In chapters 4 and 5, Young confronts the full Chinese assimilation of the Indian patriarchs, focusing on the Chinese transformation of Nāgārjuna into a god-like figure (something akin to, but more than a *bodhisattva*) possessing great skills in the Chinese alchemical arts. This is followed with a detailed discussion of Āśvaghoṣa's emergence as a silkworm god. Noteworthy here is Young's fascinating description of the history of sericulture in China, and the myths and rituals that bracketed this uniquely Chinese art.

In a final chapter, Young reprises the varied Chinese representations of the Indian patriarchs. Although, as Young notes, these representations suggest the patriarchs might be 'many things to many people' (p. 217), they are clearly not 'all things to all people'; that is, both their essential Indianness and their assimilation into China serve as solid grounding points for these figures. Following this chapter are three appendices; the first two are English translations of hagiographies of Āśvaghoṣa (with references to Nāgārjuna) and Āryadeva respectively that are likely the earliest Chinese works of their kind works, and are bracketed by significant text-historical analysis; the third

is an English translation of the Chinese Ritual Manuals of Aśvaghōṣa. These appended texts add substantial support to the arguments Young adduces throughout his overall discussion.

In the interests of full disclosure, the author of this review is not a Sinologist, but a South Asianist, and has only a passing familiarity with the traditions of China. Despite this limitation, Young's *Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs* clearly presents itself as a work of deep scholarship throughout, its arguments presented with great clarity of thought (and a certain exuberance in expression), and supported at all turns with substantial textual evidence. Young's book will undoubtedly take its place as a (if not *the*) standard work in the field, and is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in the formation and growth of Buddhism in China as well as the penetration and enduring influence of Indian culture in East Asia.