

All of this confirms my old suspicion that there is a fine dividing line between *tú* 荼 and *chá* 茶, between medicinal and refreshing applications. As for the relative instability of the change from *tú* 荼 to *chá* 茶 and the occasional persistence of the former, it most likely had to do with topolectal differences and orthographical habits.

VICTOR H. MAIR  
*University of Pennsylvania*

***Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs in China.*** By Stuart H. Young. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 338. \$60.00.

One can imagine two classes of reader who might believe that they need not make a priority of reading this book. The first class would consist of those with no avowed interest in Indian Buddhist patriarchs, whether in China or anywhere else. The second would consist of experts who consider themselves already well informed on the story of Indian Buddhist patriarchs in China and who have now assured themselves in the first instance that the book promises the introduction of no major new historical sources. Both these imaginary types of reader would err by not paying close attention to *Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs in China*. It is true that much of the material relevant to Chinese conceptions of the Indian patriarchs Nāgārjuna, Aśvagoṣa, and Āryadeva (some prefaces belonging to translations by Kumārajīva, some hagiographies and legends of dharma transmission, a few rather cryptic inscriptions at a medieval cave site, plus a couple of ritual texts) have been well studied in Japan and the West. But Stuart Young uses those sources and the stories they tell to range much further afield than one might expect. In fact, Young maintains a tight and unwavering focus on the literary conception of these three intriguing figures in order to ask some profound and searching questions about East Asian Buddhists and their sense of time and history, about their perceived connections to an Indian tradition, and about the precise timelines of soteriology that those connections might imply. These questions have been raised before, of course, but never so acutely as in this book. With both patience and clarity, and a good deal of empathy for the Buddhist tradition, the author shows us how anxiety about the decline, or the imminent absence of, the teaching of the Buddha, was a real and immediate fear for medieval Buddhists in China. Young further leads us to consider why it was that some medieval Chinese Buddhists lighted upon these three Indian figures as solutions to this urgent problem. The book also explores why the focus on Indian sages was

accompanied, perhaps ironically, by a concurrent insistence on localizing the dharma in China. Having an opinion on Indian Buddhist patriarchs is thus not a requirement for enjoying this important book, which offers a significant contribution to understanding the worldview of medieval Chinese Buddhists that reaches far beyond the hagiographic images of Nāgārjuna, Aśvaghōṣa, and Āryadeva.

The careers of these three bodhisattvas became mirrors for Chinese conceptions of Buddhist history, conceptions that changed a good deal over time. In the hands of medieval Chinese Buddhist authors who were worried about the perilous condition of the Buddha's dharma the images of the three Indian patriarchs were created and deployed in three basic modes. Patriarchs were cast as: (1) paragons of Buddhist virtue in a world from which the Buddha Śākyamuni had long since departed; (2) participants in a line of dharma transmission that ran temporally and geographically from India to China; and (3) supremely skilled exegetical authors who were uniquely able to elucidate the dharma in new ways, thus refreshing or renewing the message of the Buddha. As Young shows, the literary creation and manipulation of the patriarchs in China allowed Buddhist authors and intellectuals to confront some significant questions that faced the medieval Chinese Buddhist tradition: How to go forward without a buddha in the world? Was it possible to revive the dharma, or could nothing be done to reverse or stave off its inevitable decline? How could one know for sure that the dharma had been properly transmitted from India to China in the first place?

But, beyond even these more dharmically-oriented conceptions, two of the three patriarchs, Nāgārjuna and Aśvaghōṣa, went on to become gods in China. These were not just minor deities either: Aśvaghōṣa took on no less a role than that of a Chinese culture-hero—the god of silkworms and sericulture. The book is therefore not confined only to Buddhist conceptions of Buddhist patriarchs, but extends its investigatory reach into the larger Chinese religious sphere.

The bulk of the book is concerned with Chinese hagiographical representations of three Indian Buddhist patriarchs—Aśvaghōṣa (Maming 馬鳴), Nāgārjuna (Longshu 龍樹), and Āryadeva (Tijo 提婆)—from the early fifth to the late tenth centuries, the formative period for the Chinese hagiographies of these figures. The book contains six chapters, plus appendices that focus on some of the more problematic primary sources. The chapters are structurally well integrated and the book's argument develops equally across all of them.

Chapter one is entitled “Buddhist Sainthood in Dharmic History.” Here, he explains from first principles the attempts of Chinese Buddhist hagiographers to account for the history of their religious tradition. He shows how the three patriarchs appeared in the writings of authors associated with the translator Kumārajīva (344–413 or 350–409) as rescuers of a decaying dharma in a world that no longer had access to the source of that dharma—a Buddha. Three monastic authors in

particular, Sengzhao 僧肇 (c. 374–414), Sengrui 僧叡 (c. 352–436), and Huiyuan 慧遠 (c. 334–416), favoured constructing the images of the patriarchs using sets of religious “repertoires” (a key term for this book) that made them conform to stereotypes of early-medieval Chinese literati. The hybrid nature of the Indian patriarchs in China—partly Indian, partly Chinese—is a theme that the book continues to circle around.

“Rescuing” the dharma, however, was not the only manner in which patriarchs might be thought to operate. An alternative model of dharma-transmission through the dark days of the era after the Buddha’s nirvāṇa favoured an image of the Indian patriarchs as transmitters of an unbroken lineage of wisdom that safeguarded the precious truth of his teaching undiminished down to the present. This model is the subject of chapter two, “An Indian Lineage Severed.” Here, Young demonstrates how the hagiographical sources such as *Fu fazang yinyuan zhuan* 付法藏因緣傳 (a title he renders as “Tradition of the Causes and Conditions of the Dharma-Treasury Transmission”) argued in favour of a redefinition of Buddhist sainthood in terms of a transmission from master to disciple rather than present the patriarchs as isolated revivers of the teaching.

In Sui and Tang times, Chinese Buddhist authors and exegetes wove accounts of the three patriarchs into even more extended narrative scenarios in which China was increasingly cast both as the centre of the Buddhist world, and the (new) axis of Buddhist sainthood. Hagiographies composed during the period from the seventh to ninth centuries highlighted the roles of Aśvagoṣa, Nāgārjuna, and Āryadeva primarily as expounders of doctrines. Schools of interpretation within Sui-Tang China, such as Tiantai 天台 and Huayan 華嚴, adopted the patriarchs into their own larger lineage histories that included illustrious figures from both China and India.

Previous studies of patriarchs and lineage construction have tended to stop at this point, but there is much more to the story of Indian patriarchs than their co-option into legitimating lineages of awakened masters. In later chapters of the book, Young shows how Indian patriarchs were rooted into Chinese cultural soil in rather unexpected ways. Chapter four, “Nāgārjuna Divine and the Alchemy of Hagiography,” explores how the Indian Buddhist patriarch Nāgārjuna was recast in China as a master of alchemy, thaumaturgy, and spellcraft. Similarly, in Tang times, Aśvagoṣa became identified as a deity of silkworms and sericulture. The story of this surprising transformation is told in chapter five, “An Indian Silkworm God in China.” As Young shows, this re-imagining of Aśvagoṣa provided a key element in making sericulture—an industry that relied on killing silkworms for their cocoons and should therefore have been beyond the pale for the devout—a legitimate livelihood for Buddhists.

In the last chapter, “Buddhist Saints to Bridge the Sino-Indian Divide,” Young reflects on the various modes in which Chinese Buddhist authors conceived of the

three patriarchs and were successful in creating saints who remained Indian but with significant Chinese characteristics. The book also contains a conclusion and three appendices that offer annotated translations and discussions of some shorter primary sources relevant to the stories of Aśvaghōṣa and Āryadeva in China.

A great many books in East Asian Studies or Asian Religions these days seem to begin with the ritual invocation of the high gods of French theory (Bourdieu, Foucault, etc.) and the promise that their insights will be applied to the topic under consideration. Quite often, having been introduced, our theorists then promptly evaporate from the book, leaving no trace in the subsequent chapters, and their promised contributions to the book never materialize. Stuart Young makes no such pretence at establishing his theoretical credentials, but in fact the book is far from a dry reportage of the textual traces of Indian patriarchs in Chinese Buddhist literature. Instead, Young deploys with some sophistication throughout the book an interpretive model that speaks of a cultural “toolkit” or “repertoire.” This model derives ultimately from the sociologist Ann Swidler, but has already been applied to the religions of China, and particularly to medieval hagiography, by Robert F. Campany in recent works such as his *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China*.<sup>1</sup> Young has drawn intelligently on both Swidler’s theory and Campany’s application of it, and tested it against rather different material than that analysed by Campany—Chinese hagiographies of Indian Buddhist patriarchs rather than Chinese hagiographies of transcendents or Chinese miracle tales. Certainly, in Young’s hands Swidler’s theory works well to analyse and explain the literature, but of course it has its limits. In particular, the language of toolkits and repertoires tends to flatten out the uneven geo-political realities that surely must have lain beneath the production of texts about Indian patriarchs. Readers may thus feel that questions of individual agency in the creation of legend are bypassed in favour of a smoother and more abstract narrative that often makes the texts themselves the primary actors.

Overall, the book takes rather a bold approach with regard to the empirical knowability of any reality that might underlie these patriarchs’ tales. For this study, the text is paramount, and anything beyond the text remains essentially unknowable. “India,” for example, becomes no more than a repertoire element within the hagiographic corpus, and nothing meaningful can be said about how these Indian patriarchs might have appeared within the Indian tradition. The hagiographies are thus read essentially as collections of claims or arguments in which “China” and “India” appear as no more than virtual entities. The book’s analysis remains determinedly and consciously centred upon China and Chinese texts, even when there are possible points of contact between Indian and Chinese images of the patriarchs. Nāgārjuna, for

---

<sup>1</sup> Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009.

example, is known as alchemist in both traditions, but Young declines to pursue the connection (p. 183, n. 85). The author's refusal to be drawn on such issues is admirably consistent and explicitly acknowledged, although one can imagine that some readers might find it frustrating. But in fact, the success of the book is in large part due to its carefully circumscribed area of inquiry.

This is a very thought-provoking book. Many of the questions it raises, either directly or by association, will continue to haunt the reader and cannot be answered within its pages. Below, I would like to indicate some of the productive directions that the book opens up for further inquiry. The questions I raise here should not be understood as indicative of shortcomings of the book, which actually delivers answers to the questions it promises to solve. Instead, these are issues that need to be taken up and worked out elsewhere—perhaps with different materials and methodologies.

Even if we stay within the bounds established by Young with regard to Chinese sources, there are places where the enquiry could have been pushed a little further. Would it have been helpful, for example, to compare at greater length the figures of the patriarchs with those of the arhats (the immediate disciples of the Buddha), who also became the focus of a special kind of attention in the Chinese Buddhist tradition? Young does have some discussion of the arhat paradigm in chapter six, but perhaps the comparison could have been introduced earlier and developed at greater length? The patriarchs were different from the arhats because of the place they occupied in time—post-Śākyamuni and pre-medieval China, so how and why did the arhats win the space that they did in the Chinese Buddhist *imaginaire*? A related question would be: when did the Chinese fascination with patriarchs end? And why? Aside from arhats, another potential point of comparison could be with some of the major bodhisattvas who had cults in China. Some of the narratives seem to place the patriarchs on something of a continuum with popular bodhisattvas such as Mañjuśrī or Samantabhadra. Were the patriarchs that distinct from those figures? If they were clearly seen as not that advanced, then at what stage on the bodhisattva path were the patriarchs considered to be?

Young gives a good account of the mechanics of how the patriarchs were conceived, but it would be interesting to step even further beyond that process and ask some larger questions about the greater cultural dynamics at play. If the Indian patriarchs in China were thought of as culturally Indian but with recognisably Chinese characteristics, what exactly was “Chinese” about them? What kinds of decisions were being made (and by whom) about which cultural markers from the Indian and Chinese sides should be preserved and which discarded? How did the particular characteristics or repertoires identified in the study come to be projected onto these particular figures? It is possible that the answer to these questions requires not just a change in perspective, but a different methodology. For instance, much of the

empirical information in the book comes from following a single name—Aśvaghōṣa for example—through the sources. But perhaps widening the search beyond that one name would turn up even more useful information on a wider pattern of superscription or on the writing of historical narrative in medieval Chinese Buddhism.

The book for the most part leaves aside the actual historical processes of textual production, preferring to focus on the texts themselves. But in itself, this is not actually a shortcoming. There has been so much work in our field in recent years that tries to recover the social history of medieval Chinese religions that it is a refreshing change to devote some appreciation to the rich and fascinating literature of the period. Even so, one has to admit that the book does not cast a lot of light even on the actual people who are credited with making the texts. Do we learn much more from this study about the motivations of Kumārajīva—the translator who first promoted Aśvaghōṣa, Nāgārjuna, and Āryadeva—for example? As I have already noted, a question of agency hovers over the book and it is sometimes hard to tell who is doing what to whom and with what intention. At times agency seems to reside with the three patriarchs themselves—which might offer an interesting perspective on their history if the author wanted to push it that far. A version of *Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* written from the point of view of the three patriarchs might make an interesting piece of “alternative historiography.” At other times, the texts appear to exercise an agency of their own, or a catch-all category called “Chinese Buddhists” seems to be credited with conscious intentional action. On yet other occasions, no one has agency, as all are swept along by impersonal historical forces.

Given that *Conceiving the Indian Patriarchs* is very much a literary study, there might be some comparative literature questions to be asked with regard to its subjects. There is certainly an opportunity to reflect upon what we know about Indian literary practice that probably favoured versification and style in contrast with the literary practice of the patriarchs’ biographers which was strongly conditioned by the conventions of medieval Chinese historiography. Ultimately, however, that kind of comparison may not be of as much value as an extended consideration of the type of literature that these patriarchs were credited with writing, and how the works attributed to them were understood to participate in the larger commentarial tradition in China—an important but still very poorly understood body of literature. This book has laid the essential groundwork for just such a study.

Thinking beyond the medieval Buddhist world, the issues of history and soteriology surely have implications for the larger Chinese intellectual world in medieval times. How did other medieval Chinese authors think about time, the past, and their relation to the sages and to the truth? Are there implications in this study for non-Buddhist images of the sage as found in the works of Tang intellectuals such as Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and others?



Finally, a couple of other questions occurred to me as I read the book. One of the key features attributed to the patriarchs is “skill in debate” (pp. 43–50) but do we know enough about the characteristics of debate in India, or China (especially in non-Buddhist contexts) to know what such skill might have looked like? With regard to the role of Aśvaghōṣa as god of sericulture, I wondered when exactly the argument about silkworm murder got settled in favour of sericulture as a legitimate occupation for Buddhists.

Focusing on these three Indian patriarchs, as Young does, allows an in-depth exploration of some significant fault-lines in medieval Chinese Buddhism that otherwise would be invisible. No one has ever brought all these materials together in order to tell a number of interconnected stories that are actually quite fascinating in themselves. The book is about China, and only really medieval China at that. It does not attempt to draw any conclusions about India, but there really is no problem with leaving India as a virtual entity for the purposes of this exploration. I believe that most readers will find this a much more thought-provoking book than they might expect, so while the specialist who works on Chinese conceptions of India, or on sericulture in the Chinese imagination, will get plenty from it, this work is especially recommended for those who enjoy thinking in very broad cultural terms across the *longue durée*. The tone and approach is a very scholarly throughout. The arguments are both well referenced and intelligently embedded in larger scholarly discourses not only in North America and Europe but also in East Asia. The source material about the patriarchs is also inherently fascinating. One hopes that this excellent study will stimulate a host of new scholarship on Chinese Buddhist historiography and cosmological speculation with regard to India.

This excellent book serves as an important reminder that new sources are not always required in order to come up with new paradigms; sometimes all we need is the vision to see through the sources we have. There is certainly much to be done with new sources, but so much should be redone with old ones. In this case, reading old sources carefully and reflecting upon them seriously has produced a radically different perspective on the Chinese Buddhist project in medieval times. This is a thought-provoking book. It will likely change the way we think about medieval Chinese Buddhism, and its radical shift in perspective will continue to inspire readers long after they have put the book down. It should be required reading for all in the field of East Asian Religions and everyone with an interest in how ideas and religious figures move from one culture to another.

JAMES A. BENN  
*McMaster University*