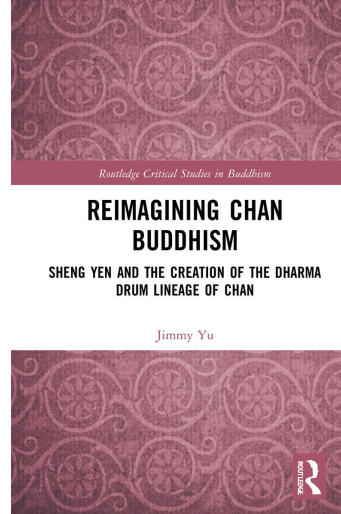


Book Review



Jimmy Yu. *Reimagining Chan Buddhism: Sheng Yen and the Creation of the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 226 pp.

A progressive Buddhist educator, reformer, and historian, Sheng Yen (1931–2009) is one of the most influential Chinese Buddhists in modern China. He not only inherits the lineage of Caodong and Linji schools of Chan, but also creates his own Dharma Drum Lineage. Jimmy Yu's pioneering new monograph *Reimagining Chan Buddhism: Sheng Yen and the Creation of the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan* is the first scholarship in any language of Sheng Yen's life under the historical contexts of modern China. Adroitly interweaving Sheng Yen's personal life and the social-historical backgrounds, *Reimagining Chan* paints a refined picture of the formation of Master Sheng Yen's person and doctrinal formulations at the juncture of critical historical events

What distinguishes this book is that it is more than a biography—Yu's personal connection as Sheng Yen's former attendant and student, while offering an intimate glimpse of Sheng Yen's lived life as a person, does not prevent Yu from historicizing Sheng Yen's life in the contingent historical, political, and religious contexts of his time. Combining etic and emic perspectives, *Reimagining Chan* employs a wide range of sources, including Sheng Yen's autobiographies, the

data collected during fieldwork and interview of Sheng Yen's students, as well as the author's personal recollections and notes of his interactions with Sheng Yen through three decades. Instead of narrating a teleological account of Sheng Yen as a Buddhist sage destined to fulfill his mission in history, this book highlights the historical contingencies that shaped Sheng Yen's development of new doctrines. It paints a vivid picture of how Sheng Yen reconstructed Chan Buddhism by establishing the new Dharma Drum Lineage, which asserted a 'will to orthodoxy' to define the authentic parameter of Chinese Buddhism, clearly differentiated from esoteric Buddhism.

Chapter 1 situates Sheng Yen's life in the tumultuous history of twentieth-century China. As Sheng Yen recollected, China during his youth was divided from within and enfeebled by foreign invasion, the author argues that Sheng Yen was driven by an urgent sense of 'crisis mentality' (*weiji gan* 危機感), which influenced his later formulation of 'orthodox' Chinese Buddhism through the establishment of Dharma Drum Lineage (17). Growing up amid Japanese invasion and natural calamities, Sheng Yen entered monkhood at the age of fourteen and in 1948 enrolled in the Jing'an Buddhist Seminary founded by the Buddhist reformer Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947). There, he inherited Taixu's vision to reform Chinese Buddhism, especially through the educational system.

At a time when Chinese Buddhism was attacked as 'superstition' and Buddhist temples were converted to schools, Sheng Yen perceived Buddhism to be teetering on extinction—while he understood 'authentic' Buddhism as devoted to scholarly learning, the majority of Chinese Buddhists was engaged in performing funerary rituals for profits, which he believed to be a degeneration of Buddhism. As the future of Buddhism seemed dire with the Communist takeover of mainland China after 1945, Sheng Yen fled to Taiwan by joining the GMD army. After Sheng Yen managed to return to monkhood in 1959 with his master Dongchu's 東初 help, he opted to study in Japan for a Master of Arts degree in Buddhist Studies, and subsequently advanced into a doctorate degree. After he returned to Taiwan, Sheng Yen found that the social climate in Taiwan was not receptive to reforms. Therefore, Sheng Yen accepted the invitation to teach Chan Buddhism in America. As his reputation grew as a Chan

master in the U.S., Sheng Yen returned to Taiwan and undertook teaching positions in universities to implement his vision of Buddhist educational reforms.

Chapter 2 zooms in on Sheng Yen's construction of the new Dharma Drum Lineage in 1998 in response to new developments in Taiwan's religious market. With its booming economy in the 1980s, Taiwan saw the rise of local popular religious cults, which are profit-oriented and sometimes cater to performing rituals for politicians and even criminals for material ends. At the same time, Theravāda Buddhism gained popularity, which could have threatened the legitimacy of Chinese Buddhism, given the common perception that Theravāda represents a pure, original form of Buddhism. Meanwhile, Tibetan Buddhists also drew large followings with its exotic and mystic aura and claims of ritual efficacy. In addition, Sheng Yen's Dharma Drum Lineage was founded at a time when universalist organizations such as the Buddha Light Mountain (Foguangshan 佛光山) and Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association (Ciji Gongdehui 慈濟功德會) were flourishing in Taiwan since the 1980s.

Under these new social conditions, Sheng Yen was concerned with preserving the authenticity of Chinese Buddhism and was hence motivated to formulate a Buddhist orthodoxy that was based on foundational Buddhist teachings. Starting from 1998, Sheng Yen developed a doctrinal classification and used the term *hanchuan* 漢傳—a term that is loaded with ethnic and nationalistic significance—to carve the boundary of Chinese Buddhism as clearly distinct from Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhism (81). He created the Dharma Drum Lineage (*fagu zong* 法鼓宗) in 2014 by uniting Caodong and Linji Chan lineages and traced its origin to the Han transmission of Chinese Buddhism. This imagined line of inheritance allowed Sheng Yen to unify the Chan tradition to transcend sectarian divisions and institutionalize Chan Buddhism, which Sheng Yen envisioned to be the apotheosis of Chinese Buddhism.

The latter half of the book delves into Sheng Yen's doctrinal classification chart formulated in 1998, which integrates various Chinese Buddhist traditions into a single coherent Chan teaching. The author's knowledge of premodern doctrinal classification situates Sheng Yen's thoughts on a historical continuum, and the author

highlights both Sheng Yen's appropriations and individual innovations. By comparing Sheng Yen's accommodation of the thoughts of medieval Chinese Buddhist masters such as Zhiyi and Fazang, the author reveals how Sheng Yen creatively amalgamated and harmonized previously exclusive doctrinal classifications within the Chan tradition.

Sheng Yen challenged the commonly held view that Chan is solely concerned with the realization of the ineffable truth and detached from doctrines, i.e., a 'separate transmission apart from doctrinal learning' (*jiaowai biechuan* 教外別傳) (101). The author carefully points that this perception originated from the twentieth-century Japanese Buddhist sectarian scholarship and was further developed in the U.S. with D. T. Suzuki's writings. To illustrate how Sheng Yen debunked this view, chapter 3 focuses on its doctrinal aspects, and chapter 4 scrutinizes the aspect of practices.

On the doctrinal side (chapter 3), Sheng Yen's chart starts with Indian Buddhism and moves on to the Chinese Tiantai and Huayan traditions, which he demonstrates to inherit the transmission of Indian Buddhism. This chart ends with Sheng Yen's analysis of how the former traditions are subsumed and culminate in Chan Buddhism. For Sheng Yen, it is Chan Buddhism that integrates the essence of all schools of thoughts in Chinese Buddhism and realizes the richness of Han transmission. As the author argues, rather than an attempt to objectively encapsulating Buddhist thoughts, this chart is Sheng Yen's attempt to 'reimagine tradition' and promote his own lineage as the orthodoxy (109). Sheng Yen particularly takes pains to dispel the common characterization of Chan as dispensed with doctrinal learning. To do so, he demonstrates how the teachings of foundational Buddhism could fit into Chan's doctrine of sudden enlightenment. In other words, Chan Buddhism, though 'wordless' in the sense that it does not have a teaching of its own, encompasses the essence of Tiantai, Huayan, and the early Buddhist thoughts such as the *Āgamas*.

From the perspective of practice (chapter 4), Sheng Yen came up with threefold expedient devices to practice, articulating a sudden path to enlightenment without gradual stages. As Sheng Yen's audience changed through his life phases, his teachings on practices also evolved: in the first period, when Sheng Yen was mainly teaching

Americans, his approach is the most ‘direct’ and spontaneous without fixed methods on how to abandon delusion by avoiding discriminating thoughts and attachment to concepts (155). In the second period beginning from the 1980s, Sheng Yen made use of *mozbao* 默照 (silent illumination) and *huatou* 話頭 (meditation on critical phrases) as expedience devices to use ‘delusion to transform delusion’ (167). The last phase of Sheng Yen’s thoughts is centered on the union between Tiantai and Huayan thoughts that delusion and awakening are mutually constituted and contained in each other. He also expounds on the building of ‘pure land’ on earth—in his vision of socially engaged Buddhism, the ‘pure land’ is no different from the human realm.

Reimagining Chan not only historicizes Sheng Yen’s life and thoughts in the religious currents of the modern time, but also places him in the transmission of the long Chan tradition. I now proceed to highlight the original thesis and contributions of each chapter. Since it is hard to find faults for such an ambitious and informative book, I came up with themes that the author might want to expand for a longer project.

Chapter 1 provides a detailed account of the social backgrounds which influenced the Sheng Yen’s thoughts on the modernization of Chinese Buddhism. It correlates Sheng Yen’s religious and personal life with the major themes of the twentieth century such as modernity and nationalism. Through the case of Sheng Yen, this chapter paints the larger picture of how Buddhism was ‘lived’ in modern China, as its intimate narrative brings us back to the challenges and difficulties faced by a Buddhist monk amid national crises. It focuses on how Sheng Yen was driven by a ‘sense of crisis’, as situated the tumultuous history of modern China when Chinese Buddhism was threatened by large scale confiscation and destruction. As the author demonstrates, this mentality was formative of Sheng Yen’s later thoughts and indispensable to understanding his founding of a new lineage.

Chapter 2 creatively uses the concept of ‘imagined community’ to capture Sheng Yen’s founding the Dharma Drum Lineage as ‘a new tradition based on an imagined sense of heritage’. (82). Sheng Yen sought to establish it as the orthodox school inheriting the rich Han transmission of Chinese Buddhism. Since this innovative attempt to create

new lineage is unparalleled, if the author would like to further develop this part, he might want to investigate how Sheng Yen made use of this sense of community toward his goals to rectify the order of Chinese Buddhism. Besides, given that premodern Chan masters passed on lamp transmission records to establish their legitimacy in the Chan heritage, a curious reader might want to know more about how Sheng Yen creatively experimented with the transmission lines to *make* this 'imagined community'. In addition to Sheng Yen's own vision of his lineage, it would also be interesting to see how the community members such as Sheng Yen's disciples themselves availed of their membership and participated in the communal construction of the imagined identity. Since Sheng Yen was aligned with Taixu's mission to reform and modernize Chinese Buddhism, the reader might also wonder how his imagined orthodoxy fulfilled and implemented that vision.

The latter half of the book is devoted to Sheng Yen's doctrinal classification chart formulated in 1998. I am awed by the author's comprehensive analysis of how Sheng Yen inherited and at the same time innovated the medieval Tiantai and Huayan thoughts. As the author mentions, Sheng Yen pinned down this chart to prepare for a dialogue with the fourteenth Dalai Lama (77). Significantly, it was aimed at setting Chinese Buddhism apart from esoteric teachings as a school devoid of esoteric elements, particularly the gradual approach in Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, aside from the contents of Sheng Yen's doctrinal classification, the reader might be curious about how Dalai Lama responded to Sheng Yen's chart, and how the larger international Buddhist community received Sheng Yen's attempt to forge orthodoxy.

In all, this book is a pioneering study of an eminent monk in modern China, who contributed to our conceptions of the place of Buddhism in the contemporary world. I recommend this book to those interested in modern Buddhism and biography of modern Buddhist masters.

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